

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH COBB COUNTY COMMISSIONER JERICA M. RICHARDSON

CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

COBB COUNTY ORAL HISTORY SERIES, NO. 99

SATURDAY, 22 JANUARY 2022

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
Cobb County Oral History Series, No. 99
Interview with Cobb County Commissioner Jerica M. Richardson
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
Saturday, 22 January 2022
Location: Department of Museums, Archives and Rare Books, KSU Center, Kennesaw State University

TS: Let's start Commissioner Richardson with your background. I know you're from New Orleans. Could you talk some about growing up there and what your parents did for a living? I understand you came from a large family. Maybe you can tell us about some of your ancestors or whatever you would like about your family and who had influence on you.

JR: Absolutely. I'm a child of a lot of American history, I guess you can say; but in New Orleans, I was born in Charity Hospital, right in downtown New Orleans. My mother was still in school; my father was still in school. He played basketball at UNO, University of New Orleans. That's where they met. They were runaway lovers to a certain extent, but they set up a family. When I was about three years old, we moved to North Carolina. My father became a coach at Western Carolina University. And at about seven or so, we actually moved here to Cobb County. I was here when the Olympic torch passed in '96. I went to Kincaid Elementary [near Sandy Plains Road in northeast Cobb]. We also lived in Alpharetta at one point as well ... we were looking for a place. But about a year and a half later, we moved back to New Orleans, and that's where my father—he had a few different jobs, and my mother had a job as a front desk receptionist at a company. My father coached basketball, and then he also wound up being the assistant secretary of labor in Louisiana. So, that was his perspective on politics, but we didn't really talk that much about it. After that, he wound up becoming the head coach for a basketball team in Qatar. We stayed in New Orleans.

TS: You didn't go?

JR: Well, he went overseas for eight months and coached and had an incredible season, but it was just too hard for him to be overseas away from his family. So, he moved back to New Orleans. I'm truncating this story to just tell you what my parents' occupations were, but certainly ...

TS: By the way, you had some connections with our former president, Betty Siegel, because she came from Western Carolina to Kennesaw. She'd been dean of the School of Education and Psychology. But also while she was at Kennesaw, I think they tried to recruit her as president of University of New Orleans. She withdrew her name, but she was one of the finalists for the presidency there at one time.

JR: That's fascinating. I will keep that in mind so I can bring that up in conversation. To the Western Carolina story, I had my little cheerleader outfit, and I would run up and down the court—a little four-year-old running up and down the court, cheering on the basketball

team. As I grew up, I played basketball myself, because it was a passion in the family. That didn't come until middle school. I trained with my father.

TS: So, you played through high school?

JR: I did. I played through high school, but I stopped ...

TS: You didn't play at Georgia Tech?

JR: No, I did not. I stopped playing my senior year, actually.

TS: You were probably a point guard.

JR: I was actually on the block. You couldn't rebound over me. I was going to fight you for it.

TS: So you were taller than everybody?

JR: At one point I was taller than everybody, but I was certainly scrappier than everyone when it came to catching the rebounds.

TS: Now, your father, you say he was an assistant coach at Western Carolina, and then when he came back to New Orleans University ...

JR: He was an assistant there as well. Then went to Qatar and got a chance to be the headman in charge.

TS: But he didn't want to stay there.

JR: It was just too much for him. I remember at that time, the Internet was happening, and we had the dial up. If you remember the little sound—everyone remembers that sound—but we had the webcam, and he would come on the webcam. Because of the time difference, we would all huddle around the computer and, “Hey, Dad, how's it going?” My parents have held different roles, but community was always big. Specifically, you referenced me having a large family, very true. I don't think there was a time when we didn't have someone else living in the house while I was growing up, whether it was a cousin or something or a close family friend. I can say I grew up in a two-bedroom apartment. I had my two brothers and a guest, and we would all stay in one room. And then my parents were in the other.

TS: Were these little brothers?

JR: We're all five years apart. So, everyone was in a different stage, I guess. But it was really great, and a lot of valuable lessons in that, certainly. So, those were my parents. But they would share with me. They were always honest with what was going on in their

lives as I was growing up. We joke we grew up together to a certain degree because they were still in college when they had me.

TS: So, you're the oldest child?

JR: I am.

TS: Now, why would I not have thought that anyway?

JR: My father would tell stories about when he would go on the road. I remember he was talking about a Mississippi game where they had people with torches walking on the side of the bus. They didn't want them to play at the Coliseum there.

TS: This was in the 1990s?

JR: It was in the 1980s, mid-eighties.

TS: And they were still walking around with torches in the 1980s?

JR: They didn't want you to go to play on the court. My mom, when she was in high school, her senior prom was still segregated—Black, white prom. I remember, they joke around with what happened when they integrated the schools. That's why in that area of New Orleans proper ...

TS: New Orleans was very early, wasn't it for integration [in 1960, under court order and despite intense resistance]?

JR: Sure [with sarcasm]. You had New Orleans and you had the river road. If you ever go down there and you hear Schexnayder and Sorapuru—that's my family names. Family names are really important in New Orleans, but on the river road, there are a lot of Sorapurus and Schexnayders. Probably, if you knock on the door, they're related to me in some fashion.

TS: Where did those names come from?

JR: Schexnayder is Dutch, and then Sorapuru is French Canadian. My mother was adopted by her uncle. She was young. I think it was finalized when she was three or they told her when she was three. She grew up with nine brothers and sisters. She was the youngest of ten. So that's the large family side. I'll get to my father's family, but on my mom's side, I think I have three hundred or so [relatives]. I have about one hundred or so third cousins that I'm close with. And within my generation, there are about forty of us because all of the children had two to three children or more. Some of them have more.

TS: Now, if you've got Dutch and French Canadian, where do the African Americans fit into the family?

JR: That's the thing about being a Black person. You know more about all of your other origins than you do about your African origin.

TS: Oh, really?

JR: I'm Cherokee; I'm "Xeno Indian"; I am French Canadian; I am Dutch to a certain degree, a little bit of German, Cuban, and Black.

TS: So, you knew everything about diversity by the time you were one year old.

JR: That is what comprised it. You wonder, because my mother is very, very fair skinned. When you think about passing and the light skin versus dark skin—W. E. B. DuBois and all the different studies that came after that—and who escalated to power in terms of they tended to be lighter shade and how that discrepancy started with who could read and who couldn't read and who was allowed to and who wasn't, you can find all that history in my family. That's why that part of the journey became very intimate for me and knowing to jump forward here when people talk about white privilege. It's like, yes, it is a thing, but it doesn't mean that your life was easy. It just means I have good mental health privilege.

There are certain privileges that come along with that, that have nothing to do with anything I did or nothing to do with anything I was given. It is everything to do with how others perceive me and what they expect from me. I have light-skinned people privilege. So, the question is, what do you do with privilege—is do you use that as a platform to understand and extend your privileges so that others don't have lower expectations?

TS: "If you're white, it's all right; if you're brown, stick around; but if you're black, get back" [from *Black, Brown and White Big Bill Blues* by William Lee Conley Broonzy (1947)].

JR: To not have that, but yes. It's how you build those types of bridges, how do you make sure that everyone is represented in the conversation. Because, once you have that knowledge that you have that privilege, that's where you have the choice to say, what am I going to do with it? Back to my family, fair shade. So, I always say, that side, they're the descendants of the raped slaves. That's the origin there, when you have this huge, beautiful rainbow of different shades and different lights and everything. When you think about American immigration and all of the different groups that were involved, that is what we are an expression as a heritage.

But, certainly, the slave houses are still back there. You can go see them. The plantations are tourist attractions. On my mom's side, by blood, my Papa is my great uncle. But, my family, as far as I know, and as far as my mom knows, she was never treated any differently when it came to her adoption [by] Papa. Growing up, he would work in the fields and he had to wear jeans in the fields. He remembered, the day he didn't have to anymore, he vowed, he would never ever wear jeans again until the day he died. He actually passed away when I was walking across the stage to get one of my awards at Georgia Tech, my senior year. But to the day he died, he did not wear jeans

TS: Well, good for him.

JR: Again, he was always in dress pants. His parents had started a school down there so that Black children could read. He became, I believe, assistant superintendent for that area towards the end of his life. They were just trailblazers. And Mama, she helped keep the family together—ten kids and all of the craziness that goes along with that. I think he went to Southern [University] for college, but he had a really big impact on my life. Towards the end of his life he had pretty strong dementia. I remember sitting with him. We were just talking. He would tell the same stories, but at one point he couldn't really remember who I was. It was Thanksgiving, and I went around and gave him a kiss, "Hey, Papa." And he says, "Pretty girl." I said, "Okay." He said, "You went to Tech. You're finishing at Tech, right? Rambling wreck from Georgia Tech and a hell of an engineer!"

I said, "Why do you know that?" And he said, "Well, when I was in Germany during World War II, I was at one of the railroad switch stations, and all the guys in the crew were Georgia Tech grads. They would sing that song. And that was the finest group of men I'd ever met in my life." He said so. That's one thing I won't forget. I had to give a speech at Tech. We had his funeral, and I had a speech that was scheduled around the same time. So, I wound up flying back to Atlanta, so I could fly back in time to go there. But the speech I gave was all about what he said—that you never know who sees you, but everywhere you go, this is the pride you should carry. I said, "My grandfather couldn't remember my name, but he remembered Georgia Tech." And it meant a lot more for me in that moment. Honestly, when I look at my ancestors who have passed, that is how they lived, through their stories. It's through me carrying that legacy because for so many people, I was their greatest dream. So, that's Papa.

TS: Tell me about Hurricane Katrina and how that affected your family.

JR: I can tell you about Hurricane Katrina. There are even more stories on my father's side because he is the Tuskegee, Alabama side.

TS: Talk about what you want.

JR: Either way. But, yes, all those things just feed who I am today. But for Hurricane Katrina, we're jumping a lot of years there. I'll tell you the story starting the day before sixth grade.

TS: And you would be about 15 or 16 at the time of Katrina?

JR: I was about 16 at the time, but day before sixth grade is relevant to the story. So, crazy storm, crazy thunderstorm. I was scared. I go to my mom, and I say, "I'm never going to make it to middle school, because we're going to die tonight." She said, "Jerica, go to sleep, shut up and go to sleep." And when I woke up, it was gorgeous outside. I said, "Well, how did that happen?" So, every year I would ask that question. I wound up reading a lot about the weather—meteorological studies—and watching the Weather

Channel. You would think I was obsessed with the Weather Channel. And every science fair project I did, I would ask a question that I wanted solved and then come up with something to demonstrate the solution to my question. But I would never like to refer to other studies. So, anyway, fast forward—I'm now 16. We have a science fair again, and I get inspired with a new question. So, I run a test, and the test, which was just beautiful, the R-value was zero. It was just the lines, like a direct relationship. And I was really confused, because I'm, like, "You're supposed to have variants when you have just some tap water, some cups, and a microwave, that you're using as your test equipment." But it wasn't, it was beautiful.

I was a procrastinator. I didn't want to do my bibliography in time. I waited until the last day and rushed to try to put it together. Well, I couldn't find anything that confirmed my results. Couldn't find anything to back it up. So, I went to my teacher and said, "What do I do? I tried, but I can't find anything to confirm what I found. I can't find another study like this." She said, "Cite yourself; cite your previous iterations." I said, "Okay." So, I coined this thing called hydro theory, which was a theory where I could predict weather really accurately based upon this theory based upon that trend. I also figured, if it were correct, then hypothetically, I could build this invention that would actually reduce the potency of storms, meaning a hurricane Category 5 might be a hurricane Cat 2. A severe thunderstorm might just be a heavy rainstorm. It would slow down the pace and it would cover more area in which rain would fall, but you have less volume in a specific area, which means flash floods might not even have to be an issue.

So I was like, "Well, this is exciting." And the way that I could design the invention would be that it wouldn't require humans in the loop. I could use biological inspiration to actually build it where it would reduce the amount of carbon emissions in the atmosphere. At this time Agora was pretty big on climate change. My philosophy around politics, which actually came about during 9/11 when the twin towers fell—that was my thrust in—I knew that government can either create red tape or cut red tape. So, I wrote a letter to Senator [Mary L.] Landrieu [Democrat, Louisiana, 1997-2015] and Congressman [William J.] Jefferson [Democrat, 2nd Congressional District, Louisiana, 1991-2009]. Congressman Jefferson became infamous [for a corruption scandal and conviction], but I wrote a letter to both of them. I also wrote a letter to Liz Reyes at the local news [ABC26/WGNO]. I also just finished writing a book as well. I remember we were watching the BET awards. I had a cell phone. It rang, and I answered the phone. "Hi, this is Liz Reyes. Is this Jerica Richardson?" I said, "This is she." "We would like to interview you. Can you come down?"

So, I went and did an interview on the local news about this. There's actually footage of me. They asked about the research, and I talk about the book. Michael Hill was the one doing the interview. He's up in New York now. But he said, "Why should we care about this?" And I looked at the picture, the background where they have all the buildings. I said, "Well, you don't want a storm to come and destroy all this, right? You want all this still here." He said, "I guess so." So, I left there, but he said, "Just hold on because the producers are coming down." They came down and talked to me. They said, "You're great on camera. Do you want to tell the weather for us?" I was like, "Y'all are kidding,

right? I'm like 16! I think I'm good at this, but I'm not an expert by any objective means." And they said, "Well, why don't you come back in and meet with our meteorologist? If he likes you, you've got the job." So I had that interview coming up. I remember I was coming home from school. This was now t-minus 4 on Hurricane Katrina.

TS: But you could have prevented Hurricane Katrina.

JR: Hypothetically. T-minus 4 on Hurricane Katrina—this was maybe a week after my interview on TV. My mom says, "I got a call today. I spoke with Congressman Jefferson. What he said was, 'I'm reading your daughter's letter, and this sounds great. I would love to help her.'" Because I was asking for a lot of things in my letter—I said, "I want good equipment because tap water cups in a microwave aren't going to get us there. And I want someone who has a PhD in chemistry, in biology, and environmental sciences, because I have none. I need grant money, because you need to pay for it." And so he's going through the list. He says, "Grant money—we can take care of that. Professor is cool. The location—I can make a call at Tulane, and we can set up a space for you to do the research." He said, "There's one thing she didn't ask for though—a patent attorney. She needs one of those too."

And so I'm over the moon. My mom's telling me about this conversation. I had a crazy week that week, because I had just started several clubs at school. I had done all my homework two weeks in advance. So, I hadn't had a chance to indulge in my obsession of watching the Weather Channel. So, I go to sleep that night. Actually, I was 16; so, guys were starting to think I was kind of cute. I had my first invitation to go to this football game. So I was contemplating on whether or not I would go. I went to sleep that night. Long story short, it was a full week is my point. And my father, I remember his voice. He wakes me up early in the morning, "Jerica!" I climb out of my bed, and I say, "Yes?" He says, "What's that?" And he points to whatever's going on over Florida. I just said, "Give me a moment." So, I go downstairs. I pull up my computer. I open up the hydrology maps. I look again. I said, "We've got to go." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "This isn't going to be here anymore. We've got to go." I said, "I'm going to try to tell as many people as I can." I had just gone school shopping. So, I put all my new clothes in a bag. The books were expensive at my school, so I was taking them. I said, "You guys, we're not coming back here."

I printed out their resumes. I said, "Y'all are going to need new jobs." We sat in the living room, and they're like, "Well, where are we going to go? Are we going to go to Shreveport?" And I was like, "No, nothing is in Shreveport." Atlanta was the last time our family was doing okay. Daddy had a good job; Mama had a good job. It wasn't as racist there. There were a lot of issues there, but it wasn't as crazy. It was like Atlanta, there are still issues, but people got paid. You got money so you could survive. And Mom's like, "Well, you're going to college. Maybe we should look at colleges." "You're not understanding what I'm saying. I'm saying you're going to need new jobs. We have to go." I'd reached out to some of my friends who I knew were in more precarious living conditions. It's like, "You need to leave. The water's going to be here."

The wind's going to be here. Go! Like, don't do it." And we got in the car and headed on up to Atlanta by way of Birmingham.

TS: So you got out just in time.

JR: Yes, I was ten miles off from my prediction. That's it.

TS: So whatever happened to your research?

JR: Well, when I got here, we took it as a sign. My brothers—we're five years apart. I was 16. So, one was 11, and one was 6. We're driving around. They come across this park, and football is the thing for them. We get to this park, and the name of the team was the Saints. I guess this is where we were supposed to be. And there's a lot going on with the trek here with Katrina and living in the hotels and staying with people and trying to make things work and all that, but the Saints.... There was a reporter that also had a child on the team. I forgot how it came about, but he learned about it, and they wound up interviewing me at the hotel on this same topic. So, yes, there's footage somewhere of some Atlanta coverage of me talking about this exact research. But it was more catered around, "Look, there are people in New Orleans who we shouldn't be afraid of." Because there were a lot of really great responses during Hurricane Katrina, but there was also a lot of fear and a lot of negativity said by people. So, I think that newscast was more so to show, "Hey, look, everybody's not trying to kill you," some type of flavor to that degree.

So, I was upset about that, but wound up connecting with another person who knew Theron Johnson, and that was my first interaction with John Lewis, Congressman Lewis, to try to get the same type of arrangement. But, it just kind of died on the vine at that point. It went from an "everything is going well, and you've got this 16-year-old who we can hype up in the state of Louisiana," to "oh my gosh, we have this crazy crisis." No one was thinking about what this 16-year-old is saying. Hey, maybe, sort of, kind of. I did use it for my college entrance essay for Georgia Tech. I did talk about the research in that.

TS: I bet that helped.

JR: Yes, it did. It did.

TS: Well now, where did you go to high school in Cobb County?

JR: I actually didn't go to high school in Cobb County. I went to North Springs [High School] in Sandy Springs, which was in Fulton County.

TS: So you were not living in Cobb County?

JR: We were living in hotels, and my parents were trying to create a sense of normalcy. At one point we wound up moving to the southern side of Fulton County. When we had

lived here before, my mom had a coworker who lived in College Park. So, we actually stayed in her house for a little bit as well. She told us about North Springs. The school I was attending in New Orleans had a ton of AP [Advanced Placement] classes. I'm technically talented in art and in music, and they offered those special classes. So, they were looking for a match here, and North Springs ... as you know, [R & B singer] Usher [Usher Raymond IV] went to North Springs. [The singer and actress] Raven-Symone went to North Springs. They are a magnet for the arts, for music, for dance, and for math and science. So, it was the closest match of what was available. It wasn't the same. All of my teachers at my school in New Orleans had written books in their professions. But when I came here, that was the closest match we could find. My brothers went to Dickerson [Middle School] and Mt. Bethel [Elementary School] though.

TS: Your mother must have found a job pretty soon. There's a story about people at her workplace helping you all settle in. Could you talk about that a little bit?

JR: I sure can. She was looking for a job. They had a sister company here, so she wrote a letter to them saying, "I'm here from New Orleans. I've been with the company ten years. I'm looking for a job. Would be so grateful if there was an opportunity." And they responded back with, "Yes, and we want to adopt your family." And so, they committed to hiring her, but also putting \$1000 towards the rent every month for a year. That was how we were able to settle in Cobb County in a home. They also threw a little housewarming shower for us as well. We had furnishings and all types of things, and it was just really one of the highlights.

TS: What part of Cobb County?

JR: Right across the street from The Avenue [mall/shopping center, 4475 Roswell Road, Marietta].

TS: Really?

JR: Hampton Chase.

TS: So you were in East Cobb, then.

JR: East Cobb. And in East Cobb for that whole morphing that it was going through.

TS: With your brothers attending Dickerson Middle School, that makes sense, doesn't it? East Cobb was still overwhelmingly white at that time, but the county was becoming more diverse. What was your impression of the county when you got here in 2005 or 2006, whenever you moved to Hampton Chase?

JR: All the above. Everything you could imagine. All the above. And there's still traces of it. Even when my youngest brother was going through high school, there were some unequivocally racist comments. This is not that long ago. This is maybe five years ago. But unequivocal. Just for history's sake, I'll leave it at that.

TS: Well how typical was that?

JR: It wasn't that frequent, but it's enough where he felt like he had a certain place, if that makes sense. They kind of came around to liking him a little bit more towards the end of his time at school. But, certainly, when he got picked to go to Alabama, it was more like, "Okay, come speak to the kids," or, "We missed you," that type of stuff. But I feel for him, because he definitely didn't know how to talk about it or how to accept it. I mean, I grew up in New Orleans. So, it was just, "Okay, that's where we are." And my middle brother, we all have very different personalities. He just does what he does. He has his own kind of world that he builds for himself, and it's kind of take it or leave it. But, certainly, the youngest one, he's more into the community and into people. So, it had a stronger impact on him.

TS: Did you experience anything?

JR: Personally?

TS: Yes, personally.

JR: Sure.

TS: I guess everybody has a story.

JR: Yes. At North Springs, frankly, I just was so trying to get back to my normal rhythm. When I came here with Katrina, I was on track to being valedictorian at one of the top schools, not in just Louisiana, but in the country.

TS: Was this a private school?

JR: No, public school, but for the gifted, like they had their own matrix. It was number four in the country depending on what scale you want to look at—a really great school! It facilitated you trying things and asking questions about things. I am a complete product of the public school system though. But when I came here, all the servers had been washed out. So, none of my grades could be found. I remember sitting in the counselor's office with my parents, and they were just trying to figure out what to do with me. They didn't have all the classes that I could take, so, I wound up taking an on-level class and an AP class at the same time. It was just weird.

They said, "Since we can't find your grades, we're just going to give you grades." So, I didn't even graduate in the top 10 percent at my high school. But I tried to just rebuild normalcy. I was active. I was doing so many things. There were so many things that were on the horizon, and it was just gone. And so, that's a life lesson. I already felt that way about grades, that grades didn't matter, but I was even more so. They don't. They matter, but not really. What matters more is what you do with the knowledge that you get. And it became more real at that point. So, I joined a bunch of things. I made friends. But my hair turned gray and fell out. Fell out! And I was trying to just still be

what I was, if that makes sense, but my body had to be expressed somewhere. I guess it expressed that way.

TS: That would be a shocker for any 16-year-old to have one's life totally uprooted and having to start over with a new set of friends and new everything.

JR: Well, it's the future too. I remember when my mom told me about Georgia Tech. At the time, I didn't know anything about Georgia Tech. I only knew Princeton, Yale, and Harvard.

TS: I was going to ask you why you went to Georgia Tech.

JR: I was looking at biology because I was going to go for neurosurgery. I wanted to go that route.

TS: So the closest at Georgia Tech was biomedical engineering?

JR: What happened was she was speaking with another parent who said, "Don't let her go into biology. Don't let her do that. Because if she goes into biology, she can either be a teacher or she has to be a doctor. Do biomedical engineering because then you have so many more options." And so Mom told me that. I said, "I do like options." I looked into Georgia Tech, and with the Hope scholarship, I was like, "Okay, that makes sense." I remember when I got the acceptance letter, it said, "Congratulations, Yellow Jacket." And I said, "Something feels right about that. It feels like where I'm supposed to go." And then it came full circle of course with my grandfather when he sang the "Ramblin' Wreck" song.

TS: I have a nephew who has a degree in biomedical engineering from Georgia Tech.

JR: Jack of all trades.

TS: He works in a hospital now in Virginia. It doesn't sound like you took that career path.

JR: Well, a lot of biomedes go into consulting. They're really great consultants because you get a little bit of Double E [electrical engineering], Chem E [chemical engineering], and ME [mechanical engineering], and a lot of social skills too.

TS: You had said something earlier about an award at Georgia Tech. Talk about that. Your grades must have been stellar at Georgia Tech.

JR: No, they were all right. I got by.

TS: Well, it's an engineering curriculum.

JR: I enjoyed every moment of it. Of course, I still use pretty much every aspect of what I learned because that's all I really care out. The award that I was referring to is not the

same award as the big one that I got. But the other one that was really important when my grandfather passed was one of the Tower Awards.

TS: Explain that.

JR: The Office of Minority Educational Development gives out things called Tower Awards to minority students that are doing well in academic ways. I started off at Tech super strong. Super strong. I started in several different organizations because that's my personality. I got to do a bunch of things. I had a lot of counselors come to me and say, "You really shouldn't do all that because George Tech's hard." And other students would come to me and say, "Why are you doing all this? You're just going to fail." A lot of upperclassmen. And I said, "Okay, maybe I'll cut back." That was a bad idea. All of my grades plummeted when I cut back, and it took about a year and a half for me to regain my sense of confidence and go back to how I do things. And my grades went right back up.

TS: So, you should've followed your own advice all along, I guess.

JR: Followed my own advice. That award was important because I had done really well. Then I couldn't get the award. And then my last year I got it, and I'm pretty sure [my grandfather] passed away the very moment I was walking across stage because I got the text right when I sat back down.

TS: Now, you say there was a bigger award that you got too?

JR: Yes, the Ferst [Leadership and Entrepreneur] Award [for 2011]. They say, it's never about your grades, right? No one wrote a book about how well our famous figures did in class. But the things that we really commemorate are what they did while they were there in that particular position while they were here on this planet. I don't know what my grandfather's grades were, but I know what his character was. I know what he did. The Ferst Award was a leadership award that Georgia Tech gives to really one student as a testament to your body of work. I had started this organization that did a lot at Tech actually. It morphed into GT Startup, because I saw that Tech students could be the next generation of leaders for the 21st century in technology, that we could lead technology ways because that is the world we live in now. The new president [G. P. "Bud" Peterson, 2009-2019] that had come in at the time... that was one of the mantles that he claims. I was like, "Put your money where your mouth is." And I came up with this whole plan to put in place the leadership initiative and was the undergraduate that got paid to work on putting it in. I worked a lot of different angles to arrange that. We got the pilot writing, and the pilot was so successful and there were so many other leaders that I had pulled into that program. Three other people also got the Ferst Award that year [Christopher Blackburn, Corey T. Boone, Melissa Loreice McCoy, and Jerica M. Richardson]. It was just awesome. Now, the leadership initiative grew into all of the different components, and it still runs. I actually ran across a student that was like, "Yes, I'm part of the such and such." And I was like, "Aw, that's my legacy."

TS: So, is the Ferst Award named for Monie [Alan] Ferst, the Jewish businessman in Atlanta who founded the Scripto pen company?

R: Not Monie Ferst. It was a different name: Alvin M. Ferst [Leadership and Entrepreneur Award]. And so, my name is engraved in the Flag Building [Smithgall Student Services Building on Ferst Drive] as part of that Ferst Award, along with other fantastic leaders that are doing wonderful things in the world now.

TS: Well, that's quite an honor. Did you think about going to graduate school?

JR: I thought about it.

TS: But just thought about it?

JR: Just thought about it.

TS: You had other things to do. But now you had enough courses for a complete pre-med too. Did you think about going to medical school?

JR: I did, I did. I thought about that. I thought about going JD/MD, because part of what I wanted to do, if I did neurosurgery, was I had also had theories on curing Huntington's disease that I could patent my own solutions, devices, what have you. JD/MD could allow me to do that, but I haven't indulged in that route.

TS: What do you do once you got out of Georgia Tech? This would be about 2011 or 2012, I guess.

JR: It was 2012. Just so it wasn't just a whim, I did shadow several doctors in order to confirm my decision. I sat with the Emory admissions office as well, because that's where I was looking at. But when I shadowed [the doctors], I enjoyed it, but it was just not the right fit for what I could do. It was not the best usage of my energy. I could do it, but I had other things that I wanted to bring to the table that profession doesn't allow for.

TS: You've done an incredible amount in the last ten years. Why don't we talk about what did you do once you graduated from Georgia Tech?

JR: I was sitting one of my public policy classes, because I was working on the pre-law. And hopefully this doesn't bite me. LexisNexis is a great company. We have to use LexisNexis to do all the research. If you're in your blue books, and you're coming up with which case law to cite, we had to do all of our research out of there. The interface to me... I was like, "This is horrible! This is a horrible interface. It's not intuitive. You can't find what you're looking for. You can't." "There are so many opportunities for that software," was basically what I was thinking in my head. And so I was like, "I could build something better than this." I couldn't code worth a lick. That was the joke though, that I could code something better. And so, I said, "I'm going to build something

better, because it's an important need in the community to be able to know what the case law is and understand your standing, etc.”

I found a company that actually was a competitor to LexisNexis and applied to go work at that company because their position was very interesting. It was a younger company, startup type, but it wasn't a true startup. They had been around for a little bit. They had set up this program where they looked for high potential recent college grads that they could bring in, expose them to everything about business, and then they would go into sales. But it was a software company. So, it was like, “This is interesting. And it's a pretty good starting salary. Let me try my hand at that.” I figured it would also help me with my selling skills, and I could probably expand my network of attorneys in the process too. I applied for it, got in, and that was my first job. I got exposed to everything in the business, from products to marketing, to strategy, to even customer satisfaction and all of it. I loved it! I loved it. I loved every aspect of business, corporate, how you streamline resources and how you deliver something of value to a customer. So, that was how I had applied my background in that space was all of those different pieces and life experiences.

I wound up having sales for about eleven states in the Midwest. I was flying out about three times a week and became the top salesperson. Wound up making all kinds of internal changes and recommendations, about how we package things this way and coming up with all types of research profiles for my clients, because when you know more than the industry, when you bring that value to the industry, they learn more about themselves, and you can do really great things. So, that was just super exciting. And then it was time for my review. At that time my boss goes, “Why are you doing all this? Your job doesn't [demand it]. You just need to stick to [your job].”

TS: “Your job?”

JR: I said, “Well, it wasn't selling before I got in the position. I figured out why it wasn't selling and came up with this whole program, got it to sell, cleared out all the cases, so things that had been sitting there for five years—we had lawsuits with some of our clients—those are now dropped. They're paying for more things now.” And he's like, “Just do these things.” I said, “Well, it's not about...” He's like, “You don't care about money?” I said, “Money's not the thing. It's about delivering value.” I said, “I'm going to make money, but if I sold every client, I'd have, what, \$5,000,000? I think I'm worth more than \$5,000,000 just in general. I'm doing this because I came here because of the product, because of the industry, and I'm doing it because I'm delivering value.” That Monday, he called me into the conference room, and he says, “We've got to let you go.” And the other comment he hands me is, “We don't need problem solvers on the team.”

That was devastating for my psyche. When you get fired from a job, you feel like... I did have severances, whether it was a true firing, but it makes you really question, “Am I doing it right? Am I doing it wrong? Is it me? What did I do?” And that's another lesson that I've learned, how do I internalize versus blaming someone else? Because there are a lot of others around me that will say because of this or because of that.

TS: You were intimidating to him. You must have been a twenty-something running the company, it sounds like.

JR: It was just exciting for me. I like problem solving and it doesn't matter what.

TS: So, you solved all their problems, and they didn't need you anymore.

JR: I don't think I solved all their problems.

TS: Well, no. The problem may have been themselves.

JR: But it was so valuable. I mean I was sitting in rooms with CTOs and CMOs and CEOs and telling them about their industry and their business and things that they [could do], sitting with managing partners and understanding how you manage a law firm. You know how, when you live through changes, you never notice the change? That is so persistent within industries. They live through it, but they don't really understand what change they're undergoing. Being able to just be around that type of environment was educational. But at that time, I was writing my third book. This is before I got fired. One of my coworkers had read the book, the unedited version, and would debate me every day on it. But, he was inspired by the content. He had a very different upbringing than I had, but he wanted to...

TS: What was the book? What was the title?

JR: It's called *Influence: [A Philosophical Guide to Success]*. I used to teach it at Tech when I was at Tech. It is the curriculum. I developed this 25-week curriculum, so you can determine your own personal value and your own personal sphere of influence, so that you could do something about it. It takes you on a whole journey, twenty-five weeks of a journey. He read it and was inspired to start a company called PEAR'd. So, when I got fired from that company, we basically focused on this business concept and traveled around the country, helping different organizations, trying to get the business off the ground. It morphed into something called HackOut Ninja.

That's where I learned how to code. I taught myself how to code and became a software engineer. I could make pretty things online and got immersed within the hackathon community and what that meant and became what I refer to as a self-proclaimed expert on collaboration, bringing people together and administering things effectively. That's that part of the journey. We had mild success, mild success. When you're trying to get off the ground and it's a bunch of young people, it comes with a lot of internal things. But we had some mild success and certainly developed a lot of relationships around the country and around the world. That just led into a whole new realm of technology. So, now I can take the technology and juxtapose that with the business. Politics is always kind of in the fray. I haven't brought it up in this conversation, but it was always in the background. So, now I had that opportunity to merge all three: the technology, the business, and the politics, the policy, the people aspect of it.

TS: Now what is Friendly Advice?

JR: So that was my consultancy. You've got to make ends meet. I did a lot of different projects. One was a Cobb business owner. He has a paper production company, and they had all these paper cores they didn't know what to do with. So, I went to their factories and walked the floors, talked to their personnel, and put together this presentation for what they could do with all their cores and how they could use it to affect their bottom line. Basically, bottom line.

TS: Now what is PEAR'd?

JR: PEAR'd is the company. That was the first iteration before it became HackOut. For Friendly Advice, I also worked on a lot of different consultancies. I had another software company that did a lot of contracting with different cities and counties. I did some automation work for them and some business development work. Another one was this IP one. I got to really use my engineering here. A friend had come up with a design for a new high heel shoe that was carbon fiber and used completely different physics than what the high heel shoes have today. So, we brought in a 3D printer, had them do the stress tests on them, and then help get the patent set up. So, there was a patent on that high heel.

TS: So you paid the bills with consulting work for a number of years. How did the Equifax job come about? And when did you started working for them?

JR: Between HackOut and Equifax is a company called Exploring. With HackOut I was learning how to be a software engineer. Juxtapose that with some internal stuff. I'm looking for a full-time job to help me not survive off a startup. So, Exploring hired me, and I came in as a project manager/scrum queen. If you're familiar with Agile, that is just the person that organizes all the developers and the database engineers and stuff like that. The scrum person does that. And then just some other auditing things. So, I did that role and a lot of different pieces within that, and my role expanded. We rolled out the product, but the person I was reporting to at one point was one of the CIOs at IHG InterContinental. He had just jumped into startup to get his feet wet, but we were a team of five or six of us. He was the person I reported to on this team. And when we finished that product, he wound up going to another company, Equifax. Bryson [Koehler, Chief Technology Officer, Equifax] was also the CTO, CIO at IBM, The Weather Channel, sounds like full circle again, but Bryson brought Alex on, and then Alex called me on his day one, and was like, "I need you on my team." So, through lots of different hoops, I wound up working at Equifax. Initially, I was doing some project management aspects, then started doing some enterprise level programs. Now, that's primarily what I'm doing, enterprise level program management.

TS: Isn't your title at Equifax, Technology Strategic Program Manager?

JR: Yes.

- TS: Okay. I was going to ask you what that meant, but I think you've explained it already.
- JR: I tell people, "You know that thing that happened a couple years ago, and there had to be all types of changes? I'm part of that change."
- TS: Have you continued to do your consulting business on the side?
- JR: Not as much. No.
- TS: You've mentioned some of the books that you've written. Maybe, let's do a transition to politics. How did you end up as campaign manager for Erick Allen?
- JR: That's starting halfway through my politics because that was right before I ran.
- TS: Let's go to the beginning then of your politics.
- JR: The beginning was the Twin Towers falling. I had a lot of friends that were Muslim. I watched how students in middle school turned against each other. I would ask questions, because there was so much in the media, but there were things that were just not nice. So, I just went knee deep into politics, international foreign policy, international politics, asking how do we get to where we were? What are these things? I didn't even know where the Twin Towers were at the time. I remember I was in sixth grade. I was sitting in science class, and this kid runs down the hallway. He opens the doors, and he says, "The Twin Towers are falling." They had those TVs in the corner of the classroom, and so, they turned on the TV. We're just watching smoke coming out of it. They had us all go into my English classroom. Her classroom was the biggest size. We all sit in there, and we're just watching on TV, watching this all day.

The weeks that ensued and the words that were used through media and the impact that it had on kids and how kids relate it to one another—that has way more influence than just the policy, than just, what are we going to do? Every word said by our president has impact that is extremely impressionable for kids. They do what they see. So, that kicked off this whole thing, just learning about it and then my interaction when it came down to do my research. I was like, "All right, I'm going to use that." Al Gore's talking about climate change—to some degree I understood politics that if something amps up your platform, you're going to want to support it. So, that was why I took that whole route going through with the research that way. So, how I got into politics once I came here—two ways. I was actually trying to break into the music industry. So, by daytime, I was this student, and by nighttime, I was a music artist named Jem, from Jem and the Holograms. I was trying to start my music career, and I actually sang at Apache before they tore it down. I had this whole stage thing going.

- TS: What kind of music were you singing?
- JR: I had R&B, hip-hop, rap and opera. I was trained in opera. As a matter of fact, I was invited to go sing for it...there was a merger happening between two medical companies.

I went up and sang some opera tunes, so I had this little career I was trying to start. But also when I was at North Springs, I met this guy. His father was [the radio personality and philanthropist] Frank Ski. I didn't know who Frank Ski was at the time. Then I go over to his house to meet his family, and I'm like, "Okay, this is a little different." Frank had his wine tasting. I say both of those things, because I say the entertainment community and political community are almost identical here in Atlanta. When it comes to Atlanta politics, a lot of entertainment attorneys run for office. So, I had a chance to meet a lot of people running for office and trying to do different things. I also met [former Atlanta council member] Kwanza Hall pretty early on and talked to him. Since Georgia Tech was in his district, I talked to him about Georgia Tech being an innovation district and the importance of that. Then, he would give me exposure to different things going on at the city. I'd be at City Hall at one point with the hackathons. I worked on something nearby the Braves stadium. They were gentrifying the area. I worked with the community and trying to do something around that.

TS: You're talking about Turner Field and the Summerhill Community?

JR: Yes, I went to their community meeting and gave them a pitch on something we could do, because I had also done stuff with Kasim Reed [Atlanta mayor 2010-2018] when I was at Tech. I was going to AUC [Atlanta University Center] once a week. I was a part of an organization at Atlanta University Center. So, yes, I did stuff on Kasim Reed's campaign. That's where I got involved with APAC [Asia-Pacific], traveled to Israel, was part of all types of things in DC. It's like a separate life, but that was the bubbling up of politics, the exposure to those different personalities and seeing where all the connection points were. At the time [Georgia attorney] Charles [A.] Mathis [Jr.] was still alive. He was a force in that space. So, once Kwanza decided he was going to run for mayor [in 2017], he asked if I would help on the strategy and such.

He sent me to this political bootcamp, and at this bootcamp, I met [Dr.] Jaha Howard and Erick Allen who were interested in running for office. I spoke with both of them after I was trained to be campaign whatever for Kwanza. Jaha was like, "I want you to be my campaign manager." And Erick was like, "I want you to be my communications director." So, I called Kwanza. He said, "No, I think that's a great idea for you to get some more experience." I thought I could do both. I was okay with doing both because that's like my life. I do well when I do more things, not too many things, but more things. And he was like, "No, no, no, do it. Just go ahead." And I said, "Okay." So, I had to decide. I went with Jaha Howard for that first time he went in, if you remember.

TS: He lost one race, didn't he?

JR: State senate. Yes. Well, he lost two, but the first was for state senate. At that time, Cobb's politics were very different. We had decided we were going to run a campaign that was solely about the community, solely about getting people engaged and interested. We came very close that year. Very close. The following time he ran, he picked someone else to be his campaign manager, and he had a very tenuous campaign. And so, I came at the end after his staff had left to just try to rebuild what was there prior.

And then Erick was running. I had already spoken in Erick's place for something else. And so, we caught up, and he was like, "Why don't you be my campaign manager now? At that point it was his third time [to run for a seat in the Georgia House of Representatives, after losing to Republican legislator Rick Golick in 2014 and 2016]. He had had things just going really well. This was that weird election too with Sandra Bullock [who won the Democratic primary in 2018 for House District 40 but withdrew from the race shortly after her primary victory; Allen had finished second with 42 percent of the vote, and under Georgia law was therefore certified to be the Democratic candidate].

I came after that decision but helped him just cross the finish line [defeating Republican opponent Matt Bentley in the general election]. I joke a lot of my friends are elected officials. It makes it easy. [Current Atlanta mayor] Andre Dickens was one of my mentors at Tech. He was one of the mentors at OMED, the Office of Minority Educational Development. So, that relationship is there, and it's just really let a couple of months pass by. Someone had floated this idea of looking at the [District 2] county commission seat, and I was like, "Let me see. I'll see if it works with what I'm trying to get done. Because I'm trying to get some really significant things done in the community and the larger community. We have serious issues to address." And so, I read our enabling legislation and pulled up the county code. I read through it, and I was so inspired. I was like, "We can do so much. We can do so many great things." And I decided to run.

TS: I understand that Reverend [Steven L.] Mints advised you against it.

JR: Did you advise me against it?

SM: No. You encouraged me to support you. She encouraged me to support her, and I was Republican, and she was Democrat.

TS: Well, now I was thinking you said that you thought she was too young.

SM: No. I said that she encouraged me to support her. She was a Democrat; I was a Republican. And I said, "I don't know about that." So, she encouraged me to support her.

TS: So, you decided to run, and of course [District 2 Commissioner] Bob Ott [a Republican] was retiring. What's been your relationship with him?

JR: It's been great. We would interact every now and then before I had decided to run. And he was like, "Why do you want to be in this anyway?"

TS: After you got elected, he said some nice things about supporting you in the transition.

JR: He's been incredible. He was there for my inauguration and said great words. We had the transition of the keys. Like I said, the words of elected officials go beyond just the

policy. There's a reason for the decorum. There's a reason for that. It's to show how we can be civilized and how we can appreciate [one another]. I think one of the things former commissioner Ott would say was, "Potholes don't have parties." They don't. There are real challenges. How do you solve them? We may disagree on the best way how, but we get to the best answer when we engage each other. And so, no, the relationship has been great, and whenever there are different decisions, he reaches out to me, or I'll reach out to him. Maybe I'll want background on something that he may have had a decision on. He's just been very supportive in that.

TS: I forgot to check. Did you have any opponents in the Democratic primary?

JR: No.

TS: You were the only candidate, and then you ran against Fitz Johnson in the general election.

JR: Yes. I call him the Cobb County success story.

TS: Fitz Johnson has a relationship with Kennesaw State and Fifth Third Bank Stadium. They, basically, built the stadium for his professional women's soccer team [the Atlanta Beat]. So, that's interesting. I guess it's an indication too of how demographics are changing, that you had two African American candidates running in the general election, one as a Democrat and one as a Republican.

JR: It's a testament to how diverse this district is. I tell people, diversity is not just race. It's educationally speaking, economically, political affections. It is such a blessing to represent this district.

TS: I think one of the things that's interested me about Cobb County, and maybe you could reflect on this, but we have obviously grown more diverse ethnically, but in terms of economics the county is just as affluent as it ever was. So, we're diverse and affluent. I don't know how typical that is. I don't think that's the perception of most people that a county can grow more diverse and more affluent at the same time. But it seems to be the Cobb County story to me. [Editor's note: The 2021 U.S. Census for Cobb County estimated a non-Hispanic white population of 51.1 percent, Hispanic population of 13.3 percent, and Black population of 28.8 percent, with a median household income in 2020 dollars of \$80,830; thus, Cobb was much more diverse than the nation as a whole, and almost \$16,000 above the national median family income of \$64,994].

JR: Absolutely. Like I said, this county is amazing for so many reasons, such as the stewardship of the finances. Yes there are some major challenges that we have to address; but, all in all, those that are here love the county. They want to give back to the county; they want to see the best for the county. I think it's absolutely incredible to have that type of relationship. People are willing to get involved and engaged. People are willing to talk across the aisle. I always talk about it being a great model for

bipartisanship. I don't want that to change. It's needed. We need diverse voices in the conversation.

That's the only way you get great ideas. When I was running for office, I would tell a story. I served on the last SPLOST [Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax] oversight committee. They were talking about funding allocations. We had a presentation that was done, and in these areas, they were basically just saying, this is the funding. I asked a question, and they made the comment, "People in apartments don't have kids."

TS: People in apartments don't have kids?

JR: On average, and I said, "Did you break that down by zip code?" Because I would think there are different trends that show up when you break that down by zip code.

TS: I would think so.

JR: Because they're like, "When you take the county average people in apartments don't have kids."

TS: Is that true?

JR: That was what was stated. And so, I pushed back with saying, "Let's look at it by zip code."

TS: Right.

JR: But my point is, had I not been sitting there and asked that, who was going to ask that question? That's the importance of diverse voices, diverse backgrounds. If that voice is not represented, you're going to ask the wrong questions. That's true for corporate. If you're not thinking about your customer, you're going to ask the wrong questions, and you're not going to sell. Same is true for delivering services.

TS: Well, I would think even regardless of zip code, there are plenty of apartment dwellers that have kids.

JR: Yes. I take the average because they're looking at it at projections for [public school] class sizes.

TS: I see.

JR: Right, so in order to do those types of predictions, you take averages, which means you're always going to be over capacity in areas that have higher density, if you don't factor in zip code, which was my whole point.

TS: Well, you have a district that is very different in the northern and southern parts, don't you?

JR: I do.

TS: The northern parts is still pretty typically Republican around Johnson Ferry Road and Roswell and Lower Roswell Roads, while the southern part includes Mableton and Smyrna. I've been here long enough to think it's amazing to talk about Smyrna as being diverse. Its reputation was redneck city at one time.

JR: Yes. It definitely has a reputation for diversity now. And the biggest thing about this district is that people pride themselves on being highly educated on average, highly educated and nuanced. And for that reason, you have a lot of self-proclaimed Independents.

TS: I think, in Cobb County some 48.4 percent of the population age 25 and older have bachelor's degrees or higher. That's just amazing. There aren't too many places in the country that can say that [national average of 32.9 percent].

JR: So, for all of those reasons, [District 2] can be seen as red in the north and blue in the south, but it's really very purple. It's really very purple.

TS: Do you think it's going to stay that way or are we transitioning now from red to blue?

JR: Time will tell. I mean, certainly, the portions that touch up on Atlanta, closer to Atlanta, south of the Sandy Springs side, are probably going to stay of a more blue characteristic. But time will tell. There was a lot of flux during the pandemic. I knew people coming in from the West Coast and from the Northeast as well with [cheaper] housing prices and a certain flexibility in the South. But time will tell.

TS: Why don't you talk about campaign issues. How did you and Fitz Johnson differ in the election? What were you for that he was against and vice versa?

JR: Fitz, I have so much respect for him. The campaign we ran, I thought, was representative of how campaigns should be run. When people would ask, I said, "I'm not running against Fitz. I'm running for Cobb County." It sounds political, but I actually mean that. I had a set of forty-nine things that I want to do

TS: Forty-nine things?

JR: Forty-nine things over the course of four years. I wrote entire pages on them, available to people, and would talk about each of the issues in detail. I made it a campaign about vision. And that was it.

TS: So, what's your vision?

JR: Connecting Cobb was my vision. The way that I would tell my story, I would tie in, of course, Hurricane Katrina as a part of that, but that through love—that was how you could accomplish anything. In any issue that you face, you have a choice. I compared

how the feeling is between COVID and Katrina. When we first came here, I told you there were people that were not that kind, and there were people that were incredibly gracious. I remember we were in the checkout line one time, and somehow the lady behind us knew that we were from New Orleans. She looked at the cashier, and she said, “Just put it on my tab.” Those types of things. That’s what builds a community. To put words to it, call it stability, safety, and lead a life of significance. My whole purpose in life is to create a world where people love one another, which is liberty, opportunity, value, and empathy. That’s it; it’s that simple. Anything else is not really love.

So, all of my policies are derived out of love as choice. Given a challenge, choose love, and you create stability, safety, and a sense of significance. That is it. And so, that was where I saw Cobb County. I said, “We have all of these different things going on, where we are changing as a county. There are new challenges. We should choose love.” And these are the forty-nine things. I did break it down into categories. You want to make sure when you’re talking to people about what you’re trying to do, that you’re not talking over them. You’re actually saying, “This is what I want to do, and I want your feedback. I want your input. Do you agree? You don’t have to agree, but you can be a part of, how do we build this together.” So, those were innovation; live, work, play; and empowerment.

TS: I have a quotation from you that appeared in the *Cobb County Courier* in April 2020: “You can overcome any kind of fear and any kind of division by connecting through empathy, through understanding other people and understanding how we can all work together to accomplish something.”

JR: That’s right. That’s it. I am like a broken record.

TS: Okay. And what was Fitz Johnson saying?

JR: Fitz had his own way of delivering his message. It was not against him at all. It was just, “This is how I see the community. This is where I’m coming from, and this is what I want to do.”

TS: Well, when you state it the way you did, who could be against it? One of the things I’d like to talk about is your advisory cabinet. To me, it sounds very unique. Do you agree it’s unique?

JR: I agree. Something borrowed, something new.

TS: Well, you have liaisons to all the different communities in the county. You’ve got Reverend Mints doing vulnerable populations. You’ve got people on sustainability and on transportation and veterans affairs. You have representatives from faith-based communities and nonprofits. It’s pretty much the waterfront in a way, including economic development and entrepreneurship. Let me just ask you, how do you use the cabinet? What it does for you, I guess, to understand the issues?

JR: Absolutely, lots of different ways—four. One of the promises that I made was that I wanted everyone to have a seat at the table. I represent almost two hundred thousand people. I can't have a table that big. I'm not that rich. There's not enough space for that. But the point of the cabinet is meant to extend the powers that I have legislatively. It's to extend that to the people by way of the cabinet members. So, monthly, we meet as a cabinet. Each cabinet member can represent the voice of that particular area or expertise or constituency or what have you. That's one of the roles that they play. The other role is, as they're out and about in the community and talking to people and learning all the different groups that fall under their particular category, they come up with programs, ideas, things that can be rolled out for policies, things that could be rolled out that solve a problem.

And so, at our monthly cabinet meetings, they present projects. As a cabinet, when we all come together, let's say Reverend Mints here proposes something. Everyone in the cabinet will chime in on where there might be a gap. Maybe there's a blind spot, or maybe it can be improved this way because different communities are represented. He's doing vulnerable populations. Someone's doing public safety. Someone's doing the courts, veteran affairs, sustainability, East Cobb, Vinings, and so on. Everyone's able to chime in, so that we can make the best program that covers the most people and asks the right questions.

Then we all vote after we've given our suggestions, and we've modified it. We all take a vote, and the ayes have it. Any program that then gets approved gets the full power and backing of my office. So, they have access to any person, any resource that I have access to. Whatever they need to make it happen, they have the power of my office to do that. And so that has been one of the most fulfilling things, because I think last year we rolled out maybe four or five programs a month.

TS: Wow.

JR: And these are things that I wouldn't have time to be able to in the midst of doing the agendas and doing this; and they're still happening in the community based upon what's needed for that community. So, that's another role. And then the last role is to basically stand in for me if I can't make it. I've had some people go to a press conference for me and speak on behalf of what it was that I'm trying to do or trying to say. It has just been so rewarding, so rewarding.

TS: Well, another thing that to me sounds unique—and maybe you can set me straight if it's not—but it sounds like you have a meeting to go over the agenda with anybody that wants to participate before every county commission meeting or every zoning meeting. Is this a virtual meeting or in person?

JR: It's virtual.

TS: Well, we've been in a pandemic. So, it's on Zoom in other words?

JR: Yes.

TS: I guess, presumably, anyone in the world that wanted to sit in could do so, but I'm sure that if somebody's representing a neighborhood association or what have you, they would be especially interested. Do you go through the agenda items? How do those meetings work? Do you tell them what you think about an issue, or do they tell you what they think?

JR: All the above, if they have a comment, but I'm really there to try to dispel anything that might be confusing, right? Because, when you see some of the agenda items, you see these large numbers. You're like, "How did they pick those people?" You'll see questions like that. I'm just addressing it, because I think our republic depends on an educated community. It doesn't sustain itself otherwise. So, people need to know how these things work, how they come about, because it's empowering. They can influence it. They can participate in the right way if they know how it works.

TS: Of course, you're doing your county commission meetings virtually now, too [during the pandemic]. How long do these agenda meetings generally go?

JR: The agenda previews last until they finish. Sometimes I'll tell them things, because we have the agenda work session before then. So, I'll tell them what they're probably going to hear from certain commissioners, as well, if they're really interested in this, you're going to hear this debate. This is what we're debating, and this is where it comes from. This is what we're considering.

TS: I know there was a time when they didn't really want the public to show up at work sessions. Is that still true?

JR: I mean, it's because of COVID now. We are all in that room. But, certainly, for their agenda preview, it's open to anyone. I'd tell them what was said in those meetings, but those meetings are virtual. The work sessions are virtual too. They're broadcast.

TS: That sounds unique to me. Is anybody else doing agenda previews?

JR: I think for the zoning ones. I know other commissioners will hold zoning town halls when there is a big case, or they'll walk through all the cases in the docket. So, that part might not be as unique, but certainly the agenda preview about what's coming, why is this in there? If there's something new added to the agenda, that's new, and the community huddles. So, I do every two weeks community huddles where, literally, I just get on the call and people ask me about anything they want an answer to—anything. And that's meant to connect different communities. You'll have people from East Cobb, from Vinings, from Smyrna, from just different places, and cabinet members were on there as well.

TS: Well, almost a lifetime ago, my wife was president of the Bells Ferry Civic Association. We haven't lived out that way in thirty years, but she would go to all the county commission meetings.

JR: That's cool.

TS: I've heard some stories from her about trying to get things done in Cobb County. But I would think from the neighborhood associations, it's wonderful that you can have an agenda preview.

JR: Yes. For the associations there is a bit more of a routine conversation that I have with them though. So, they're not necessarily waiting.

TS: They already know?

JR: Right. We're talking about things prior to because I really rely on them. Basically, if the association is against it, for the most part, it has to be something egregious or sinister for me to say, "Okay, let's take a look at it." I rely on what that community is saying for a particular zoning case.

TS: The East Cobb Civic Association used to be really powerful in Cobb County. What about today?

JR: Yes. That's who I lean on. If they say, "No," I say, "No." If they say, "This is what we should do," that's what I say we should do. The same goes for Vinings and Powers Ferry. I want to make sure that each community has that type of collective voice. They get to see my OB [operating budget] before I get it, and I ask for them to work it all out. We're working on several others as well, because I want each community to have a collective voice.

TS: And you do hold a lot of town hall meetings too, don't you?

JR: Yes.

TS: It's incredible that you do so much. You, obviously, spend a great deal of time on this job, as well as having a full-time job at Equifax.

JR: Yes. Yes. I'd still put in all my hours at Equifax. More than all my hours at Equifax.

TS: So, you work twenty hours a day it sounds like?

JR: I work at least seventy hours a week, yes, yes, yes, yes, a [lot every] day. Do you want to know my secret?

TS: Okay. What is it?

JR: I have a fantastic team. I couldn't do it without a team at all. I've got my cabinet members. I've got my office interns. We have eight or so office interns, and I believe in investing in people.

TS: Okay. I know you don't want to stay here all day, but I did have a few more questions I'd like to ask you. I guess the biggest controversy in this last year has been over the potential crash zone for Dobbins and the zoning for what would have been thirty-eight condos. Could you talk about that and what your position is on that? And, also, what was in the paper just this morning about the land swap that's underway.

JR: Sure. A case came up. Part of the property was located in that zone that is restricted. In zoning hearings, it'd be nice if I were a queen, but I'm not, and I'm not trying to be either. But I don't have those powers is my point. I have to balance property rights and precedents to what the community wants. Every case has to be looked at with that lens and through just so much dialogue. The [Dobbins Air Reserve] base is very important to me and very important to the community. Just understanding holistically what's going on and the history—because you've got twenty years of development happening all around the base. I was not happy about this case. But when it came time for it, we looked at it through the lens of, "Okay, if I have to balance these things, precedents points to the fact that something goes there. So, if something goes there, how can we...

TS: Precedents meaning everything else is developed in that area?

JR: Yes. And so, my thing is, "All right, so what can we do to create the least amount of impact as possible?" Because the case went through the planning commission board first, and there were a lot of conversations that I had in terms of how it approached it. "Okay, here is the analysis. Here's what all of these studies have said." We actually found this obscure thing that the Department of Defense had created, some extra stipulations that could be put on residential properties in order to reduce risk around safety, noise, etc. So, I'm like, "All right, I guess if we can put the stips [stipulations] on, then that can establish the new precedent that anything else would have to at least abide by what the DOD is prescribing here.

No other property has that, but in order to further force that negotiation for those stips to be accepted, it was, "Let's add the pressure with a 'no' vote." So, the no vote came. It could have gone either way. The no vote came and added the pressure. I put in the stips. The stips were like, "Okay, great, great, thanks." And they weren't news for anyone. That was all a part of the same conversation. But one of the things that came of that was really the opportunity to look at all the pieces. Of course, there were individuals that threw out the realignment assessment, for example. So, I had a chance to get some expert evaluation on what that was and what goes into it. I saw all of these different pieces that as a county we have an opportunity to address moving forward.

One of those things it looks like will be coming through the code amendments as well, which is the removal of a certain discretion. It's like a discretion clause that's within how zoning is done around military hazard districts. So, I'm grateful to see that. That

was something [District 3] Commissioner [JoAnn K.] Birrell had found and pushed for. It's something I had [asked] staff: "What can we do? Where is something I can latch onto that we can restrict it even more, because any discretion means I have to take into account precedents. So, that's something that is being proposed right now for this year's code amendments to actually take that part out. There are about thirteen other things that we can do as a county that I'm hoping we can do. And I'm just trying to be very careful because this issue has slightly become politicized.

TS: Slightly?

JR: But it's going to require us to not be as political about it if we're going to address some of these other things. There are some real opportunities that we can take advantage of in order to make sure that it's here and that it's strategic for our military, not just from a federal strategic aspect, to make sure that's the position that we're holding.

TS: But Dobbins was against the zoning to allow those condos.

JR: This is where certain things can be sensitive. The military has to be against it. They have to because anything in that zone, they would not agree to. So, they have to be. That being said, there are still conversations that, given the situation, what could be done?

TS: You also had the Chamber of Commerce against you.

JR: I had conversations with the Chamber as well, gave them the same opportunity, but there were some that were more involved in the negotiation such as Dobbins. They were more involved in the conversation.

TS: Well, there was at least the threat of closing down Dobbins, wasn't there?

JR: No. That's just what I'm trying to tell you. You're talking about the realignment assessment. That's not...

TS: It's not going to happen?

JR: It's not that it's not going to happen. It's that it's related but not related. That's what I'm trying to tell you, that there are about thirteen other things that we need to do as a county to make sure that that relationship is fortified. Because I got expert analysis on what goes into that assessment.

TS: Okay. So, you had a divided vote on the commission, and the three Democrats voted one way, and the two Republicans voted the other.

JR: Yes.

TS: I'm not sure that there's a question in that, but, I guess, from a public point of view, it sounds on the face of it that you wouldn't want to build anything where a plane might crash.

JR: No, but there are a lot of other things that are there. That's my point.

TS: A lot of other [developed] places the planes could crash too?

JR: In that same area.

TS: In terms of property rights, I think what they put in the paper was the four acres are worth about \$1.7 million, something like that. It's really expensive property.

JR: Yes.

TS: And it's not making anybody any money if it's not developed. Okay. So, the county and the landowners are thinking about a property swap now?

JR: Right. Staff worked very hard, and it just worked. The stars aligned on this one. Stars don't always align. The stars aligned on this one where there is property of similar value that can help assuage this. Again, this is a drop in the bucket for the larger concern.

TS: Okay. So, lots of conversations about stipulations and what have you to take care of problems like this for the future. Do you want to say a word about the SPLOST that is going to be coming up or possibly coming up? The Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax. Transportation is one of the things where you have an advisor on your cabinet. What do you see as the future for Cobb County: more light rail, more buses, more road improvements? What does Cobb need?

JR: My opinion on this has been consistent throughout, which is, I do believe in increasing connectivity, but I care more about the analysis. I think there is more analysis to be done on who are we connecting, why are we connecting, and how are we connecting. I think right now we're trying to solve how we're connecting without determining who we're connecting and why we're connecting. So, I've articulated this in different ways. There's a lot that's missing from the analysis at this point. As for the potential SPLOST that might come up, there have been a lot of concerns that have been shared by members of my district, and I do share those same concerns. I do understand the opportunity that we have, but I also want to make sure that we are making good decisions for the future of Cobb County, which means you have to have the right inputs. I have yet to see that robust of a vision laid out when it comes to it.

TS: So, we're not there, yet?

JR: Here's the thing. I would be supportive of the community providing their opinion through a vote. But I don't think we've asked all the right questions yet.

TS: I guess we should say that the [Atlanta] Braves stadium [Truist Park] is in your district, and they won the World Series this year. You've said some things about the Battery and development around it before. What do you see as the future for the Battery area? What does it need from the county commission?

JR: The only thing I've said about the Battery, and I look at the CID [Cumberland Community Improvement District] in total, is when I went to Sweden, you walk for miles and miles, and you don't realize it. What I see for that area from a tourist perspective is a real opportunity for us to create a walkability, just a fully walkable area that has that same feel and that connects to the rest of the county through some other [things], like an arts district, the Art Triangle district, that we're working on. So, it kind of filters the economic activity through those different points. But I see it as a walkable area.

TS: When I think of Cobb, we have lots of walking trails now.

JR: We do.

TS: The Silver Comet trail and so on.

JR: We do. That's right.

TS: So, you envision some of that for around the Battery area?

JR: Yes.

TS0: That's one of the areas the young folks are really flocking to, isn't it, the young couples and what have you?

JR: Yes.

TS: If young people don't have children, that's where they seem to be going.

JR: Absolutely. Pedestrian bridges, safer intersection studies, those types of things.

TS: Okay. What's your vision for Cobb County in the future? Where would you like Cobb County to be ten years from now?

JR: It's kind of what I've shared, just that connectivity piece, right? I want to make sure our budget is sustainable. That we do face some realities around our budget. Make those decisions and then make sure it's sustainable for longevity and then...

TS: Well, you can always raise taxes to make it sustainable, but's that's not too popular.

JR: No, that one is not. My thing is more so having a conversation with what services do you want and how much of that service do you want? Then what are some creative ways that we can accomplish that? And then that will include a lot of different things.

TS: What's your vision in terms of affordable housing for Cobb County? We're going away from the time when all the young couples were flocking to Cobb County because land was so cheap comparatively.

JR: Yes, we don't have that anymore. Affordable housing always depends on the definition of what affordable housing is and who it's for, and just housing in general. When people think of the homeless. I'm like, "Yes, but you've got all types of categories of homelessness, and there needs to be different solutions for all the different categories. So, when it comes to affordable housing, one of my commitments was to have the affordable housing initiative, which is tied to my master planning initiative this year. In the affordable housing initiative, there are about fourteen different models that I want to have analyzed. I'm sure there will be some mixture of those different models that would be right or perfect for Cobb County. I don't know what they are yet, but some of my favorites include things like lifecycle housing, where there's some type of pathway to ownership, to then lease to that ownership so that you wind up with recurring wealth for those individuals as well as a step into different phases of their housing journey, because housing means different things to you at different life stages as well.

TS: Sure.

JR: But there are lots of models. So, getting to what's the right mixture, some people say, "Well, it's more density." "Well, not really." People say it's tiny housing. Maybe, maybe not. That's just a model. There are a lot of different models. It could mean workforce housing. When you looked at original public housing in the Northeast prism, that was tied to a company that was the sustainability factor. Once the company didn't need those houses anymore, that's where they started to decline. Not to mention, we had the war on drugs and such that factored into that too. But the point is, there are lots of ways to get there. It's just being mindful about the different options and finding the best one.

TS: Yes. Well, what are the plans for you for the future? Do you want to be a lifetime commissioner of Cobb County? What is your dream of how you can be of the greatest service for the future?

JR: The other lesson I learned with Katrina is no matter what the situation is, I'll be ready for it, but that I can't predict what the future holds. I can't. The only thing I can prepare is myself, is to continuously improve myself, learn more, meet more people, become more educated about different issues, and that's the best I can do.

TS: Well, maybe you can go back and solve all of our environmental problems like you were doing as a high schooler.

JR: Maybe I will go back into research, but it just depends.

TS: Well, that's the end of my questions. I could ask a million more, but I think we've probably covered enough of the waterfront. Is there anything that you'd like to talk about that we haven't?

JR: I think we covered a lot of ground. I would say we covered a lot of ground.

TS: So, you'll go with this?

JR: I'll go with this.

TS: Great. Well, thank you very much.

JR: Thank you. Thank you.

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