KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGIA STATE SENATOR MICHAEL A. RHETT

CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT

for the

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Kennesaw State University Oral History Project
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Interview with Georgia State Senator Michael A. Rhett
Conducted, edited, and indexed by Thomas A. Scott
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TS: The interview today is with Senator Michael Rhett, Doc Rhett as he's known in the community. And you've got a middle name. I found it just one place. You don't use it very much, but it's Michael A…

MR: Anthony.

TS: Anthony?

MR: Yes. When I was small, my mother used to watch *The Millionaire* show [CBS television January 1955 to June 1960], and Michael Anthony [played by Marvin Miller] was the one who delivered one million dollar checks to people. They had to sign that they couldn't disclose where they got it from. He said, "Hi. I'm Michael Anthony. I have a one million dollar check for you, from a benefactor, but you can't disclose who that person is."

TS: I remember that show.

MR: Yes. She got it there.

TS: How about that!

MR: Except I don't have the one million dollars. I'm still waiting on it.

TS: Well, I thought it might be a good place to start with your background. I know you grew up in public housing in New York on 125th Street. I saw a picture that was on your website with the Apollo Theater and the General Grant public housing.

MR: That's right.

TS: Civil War general and postwar president, Ulysses S. Grant.

MR: Yes. Not far from there, Grant and his wife [Julia] were entombed in Grant's tomb [Riverside Drive and West 122nd Street, Manhattan], by the Hudson River, just probably a few blocks from the house.

TS: So, it looks like a pretty congested area to me with a lot of traffic around there.

MR: That's New York City for you.

TS: Okay, so, you grew up in public housing. I thought I'd start by asking you about that neighborhood that you grew up in. What it was like growing up in public housing? I've got some interviews now with people, who were in public housing in Marietta, and some of them had very warm memories of public housing and the community atmosphere and what have you. That's not the common opinion about public housing, I guess. But what was it like growing up there for you?

MR: You had a lot of working-class families who lived in public housing back then when they first came out [during the New Deal in 1937]. You can pretty much set your watch to the fathers going out to work in the morning and then coming back in the evening. So, it's a lot of working-class people there, living in public housing. This was before, I think, there was a lawsuit to allow Section 8 to move into public housing.

TS: Oh, it took a lawsuit for Section 8 housing?

MR: I think it was the NAACP, if I remember correctly were the ones who had a suit. Because for the most part, public housing, back then, you had to be working. It wasn't particularly for Section 8. Like that came kind of…

TS: You had to be working? So, if you didn't have a job you couldn't get into public housing?

MR: Right, but that changed somewhere in [1974 with the United States Housing and Community Development Act], where they started letting people in who were on Section 8.

TS: Okay. So, everybody was working class basically when you're growing up there?

MR: Right, mothers and fathers; you can see them all go to work in the morning and come back, just like my father would come back at 6:00 o'clock. You can set your watch to that, then the church bell rang, and the streetlights came on, and it was time to go upstairs.

TS: What was your father's name?

MR: Harold. He was a Korean War veteran—decorated Purple Heart.

TS: Wow. What did he do to get the Purple Heart?

MR: He came in with that group behind [General Douglas] MacArthur at Inchon [15-19 September 1950]. MacArthur had taken the UN troops all the way up to the Chinese border, and then the Chinese got involved and pushed them back. So,

MacArthur did a landing at Inchon through rough waters and cut their lines in half. My father was a part of the group that followed MacArthur.

TS: So, he got wounded while he was doing that?

MR: Right, shrapnel in the leg and back and the wrist also.

TS: Do you have any thoughts about the Korean War?

MR: It left an impression on him for sure because he was right there in the action. But one of the things he always did—I always wondered why he was always friendly towards stray dogs in the community. Because during Korea he would feed the stray dogs, and the stray dogs would let him know if somebody came around him that he didn't know. Sometimes you couldn't tell the difference between the North Koreans or the South Koreans. But because of those dogs, he was able to point that out, or if somebody tried to sneak up at night when they weren't paying attention.

TS: Pretty smart.

MR: Yes.

TS: Did he volunteer for the military?

MR: No, he got a personal invitation from President Truman. He got drafted. He was in Charleston, South Carolina. He was a chauffeur for a doctor. Then, when he got drafted, his mother was afraid to look at him when he was leaving because she thought that might be the last time she saw him. But what she did—she gave him a small Bible and a picture of her and put it in the 23rd Psalm. He would always read that. And I do that myself now. Every day in the morning, I get up, I read the 23rd Psalm, and I have a picture of my mother in the Bible. And I put it in my father's shoes. I've got a pair of his shoes. So, that way when I leave in the morning and I come back in the evening, I look at the shoes, and I look at my mother's picture, and I try to see how I've walked in their footsteps during the day.

TS: What's your mother's name?

MR: Lillie.

TS: Your father would have been in the military in the early days of integration?

MR: Right.

TS: Do you have any thoughts about how that worked out?

MR: Oh, yeah, they had some brawls over that. Different people, different cultures, because you've got to think for many decades, people were used to being separate. And now you're trying to bring them together. It's kind of like almost a band. When we used to play in a band, when we warmed up, we sounded in disharmony, but then once we've been practicing together, we have good music. It was the same thing. That was because Truman integrated the military in 1948 [Executive Order 9981, signed 26 July 1948], and this [the Korean War] was the first action that Black and white had to come together and fight. So, there were different thoughts and mindsets about different cultures and this and that. But now they had to try and work together. For the most part, it worked well, but then there were some bumpy rides—people arguing and fighting. Then you get a bunch of men drafted. They're going to fight over anything.

TS: So, he spent his two years in the military, and then what did he do for a living?

MR: When his enlistment was up, he used the G.I. Bill to go to North Carolina A&T. He went there a few years. He wanted to work in a funeral home. But one time he was in there, and the body had the last breath. And he got scared and ran out. So, he took different trades while he was in school. He did about two or three years, I think. Then, he moved up to New York City and worked in the textile industry. The G.I. Bill was important for a lot of African Americans because for the first time, they were able to go and get educated beyond just high school. And that experience, you've got to think about it. Just like if you have a dog on a leash, and you have him on there for a year, and you let the dog off the leash, you're going to have a hell of a time trying to put that dog back on the leash. So, in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, they were taken off the leash of Jim Crow. They were able to go around the world and be treated in a different perspective and then come back home and go to college for free because of the G.I. Bill. So, now you're trying to put the same people back on the leash of Jim Crow…

TS: There's a fair amount of research on the impact of the G.I. Bill [Servicemen's Readjustment Act 1944], and for everybody it was transformative. For higher education, it was transformative. It made it possible for a lot of people to go to college who would not have gone otherwise. Part of the research has indicated that there was a slightly higher percentage of whites who took advantage of the G.I. Bill [to attend college] than Blacks. But a lot of people used it for vocational education as well as for college education. Former Cobb County commission chairman Ernest Barrett learned the dry-cleaning business on the G.I. Bill after World War II. And I think for whites and Blacks there was an incredibly high percentage that took advantage of the G.I. Bill for some kind of education.

MR: Well, not only was it good for the African Americans but your working-class whites who lived in the hills of Tennessee and places like that. They got a chance to go to school. It broadened their perspective serving overseas and then coming back and going to school. In case of the African Americans, they became a large part of the new civil rights movement because their perspectives and experiences

have broadened. And a number of them also went to law school, went into college for other areas besides trade, and they became the leaders, when it came to a different type of civil rights leader. They knew just as much as the person who, for lack of a better word, would oppress them. They had a whole different perspective. You have a more educated and experienced force.

TS: Well, say something about your mother Lillie. Did she work outside the home?

MR: Yes, she did. She was a nurse's aide, and she was also a domestic. Then she also was the board of elections supervisor at a post. She was a jack of many trades, and she always made sure everybody in the community, whether they were drug addicts or whatever, always had food to eat. She always took care of people in the community. Matter of fact, when we had her funeral, it was more young people there than people around her age. I was like, "Where did all these young people come from?" But they started talking about how she never shunned them, no matter if they were a crack head or whatever. Then, she was pretty good at giving my brother and me a good start in terms of learning how to read and write and do math. And that gave us a head start in school.

TS: You have one brother?

MR: I have one brother and one sister. My brother is a retired school administrator in New York City.

TS: Is he older or younger than you?

MR: He's younger than me. Now, he just got elected [in 2023] to the school board in Middletown, New York.

TS: What's his name?

MR: Curtis. He worked in the South Bronx for thirty years as a teacher and an administrator. I would go help him out when I was in town. I went to school one time and all the furniture was to one side of the room. I was like, "What is that about? Are you decorating?" He said, "No. Look up there." There were bullet holes in the wall from people shooting across the street in his office. So, we sat on the side of the room, so they couldn't get a good shot at us. But the community loved him. They did. He said it wasn't personal. They weren't shooting at him. It's just, that was his attitude about that.

TS: What about your sister?

MR: She works in Pennsylvania [as a finance specialist] for the city of Bethlehem. What she does is, she goes out and visits senior citizens and help them get improvements done to their house, a modification up to $20,000, furnace or roof

or whatever they need. So, she goes visit them, helps them with their paperwork to fill it out and then helps them get the services they need.

TS: And what's her name?

MR: Sheila. She's the youngest.

TS: Sheila, and still go by Rhett?

MR: Yes. She came out my mother's womb reading a book; she always read. For recreation she goes to the library to read.

TS: Well, it sounds like your family background really prepared you for public service—that there was a strong commitment to doing things for people living in the community with you.

MR: Yes. Yes. My father worked in the textile industry, but he also part time worked in the barbershop, doing a lot of different things. So, he got a grasp of what was going on in the community.

TS: Did you go to the Apollo Theater while you were growing up?

MR: Oh, yes, my brother and I would go there. I remember, the first time I went, James Brown had his show. The theme was, "Don't be a dropout, and don't do drugs." He had that song, "King Heroin." Because heroin addicts were really bad in the community; even though you had a working-class presence, heroin was rampant. I remember, my brother and sister, in the morning, we would go down the steps. If we didn't take the elevator, we had to dodge heroin addicts trying to shoot dope, or trying to get you to shoot it, because when they have a cold turkey because they hadn't had it in a while, they can't hold the needle right. So, they just say, "Hey. Can you shoot me?" So, you knew how quickly to sidestep them, go down the other staircase, and keep it moving.

TS: Wow. It sounds like you started at Public School 125. But very quickly it sounds like you were in Catholic schools for your education.

MR: My first three years, I went to public school. Then, they skipped me one grade, but my mother decided to retain me. Even though they skipped me, she had them retain me. The reason why she did that is because I started school at four.

TS: So, no preschool back then, I guess?

MR: She was our preschool. We could do the work because she taught us to read and our timetables and all that. But then they skipped me a grade from second to third…

TS: Because you were so far ahead of everybody?

MR: Because I could do the work. A lot of times, I was bored, so I could be a little problematic sometimes in school. But then because of the maturity factor, she decided to have me retained, so I'd be a little bit closer to the age group that I was.

TS: Yes, it could be a problem if everybody was older than you.

MR: Two, three, four years older. So, then they decided to place us in Catholic school.

TS: So, why Catholic school?

MR: She just thought we'd get a better education.

TS: You weren't Catholic, I gather.

MR: At the time we weren't, but then we did become Catholic. We used to have to walk down the street with the white shirt and the red tie. If you were in grades one through three, you wore a red tie. Four through eight, you wore a blue tie, white shirt. And so, you had to balance between talking proper English to the nuns and the pastor, and coming back home and talking street language with your friends. You can't be too proper. Then, because you wore a tie and a white shirt, you were targets, and they wanted to see what you're made out of.

TS: So, you knew two languages?

MR: Yes.

TS: Well, I saw that you started at Saint Joseph Elementary when you went to the Catholic schools, and then Bishop Dubois Catholic High School.

MR: Right.

TS: And we talked before the interview started, depending on whom you were talking to, how you pronounce the name.

MR: Bishop "Doo-boys" or Bishop "Doo-bwah," it just depends.

TS: When you were in school, how did you pronounce it? How did the nuns pronounce it?

MR: Well, some of them pronounced it both ways. Just depends on whom I was around. Just for a point of not having to correct their grammar, I would say, "Yes. I go to Bishop "Doo-boys." If someone said Bishop Doo-bwah, I'd say, "Yes, I go to Bishop Doo-bwah."

TS: I did a little checking on Bishop [John] Dubois. He was actually back in the early 1800s. He was from France originally and was the third bishop of the diocese of New York. I guess all New York was one diocese at that time.

MR: Oh, yes, still is—the Archdiocese of New York.

TS: And so, you went all the way through high school. Let's see, if you were born in 1956, it must have been about 1974 that you graduated.

MR: Right, in 1974. I had turned 17 when I graduated. My birthday came next to the last day of the year. So that always pushed me back.

TS: What happened to the high school? I saw that it closed in 1976.

MR: Yes, it did. A lot of the Catholic elementary schools and high schools closed down. Some of it was because of the money they had to pay for these lawsuits pertaining to the infidelity with priests and young boys. Then also you started to have more mega churches. And so, they had to consolidate. But the parochial schools were like when people nowadays set up their own schools. They had a lot of them throughout the neighborhood. So, competition from the lawsuits, other people setting up private schools, and then the mega churches, they had to consolidate.

TS: Well, it must have been a financial burden for your parents to send you to a private school.

MR: They did part-time work in the school to help out, like help out with bingo or help clean the classrooms and the bathrooms. They were very good at doing that.

TS: So, the school itself was trying to encourage a diverse student body, maybe…

MR: They just needed help, and my parents said, "I can help clean the bathrooms for you." Or, "I can help you with bingo, and save you from having to pay someone." And so, therefore, they gave us a discount on the tuition.

TS: It's ironic that the school colors were blue and gray it seems to me.

MR: Yes.

TS: That's the North and the South. But that may not be what they had in mind.

MR: No, it wasn't. I still have my leather jacket at home with the big D on it. I played varsity basketball for three years. I remember, when I first tried out for the junior varsity, my hip socket fell out of place, and they had to pin it back together. Then eventually, they took it out, and I went to try out for the junior varsity basketball

team. I told my parents I was nervous, and they gave me some advice. They said, "Chew gum and always stand next to the best player." That's what I did, and I became one of the star junior varsity basketball players, because I always stayed next to the best player and then became this confidant, and he taught me a few things about the game.

TS: And it was the Dubois High School Lions.

MR: That's right.

TS: You were a pretty good athlete, right?

MR: Yes, I played football, basketball, baseball, and track and field. I used sports and some other things to get me an audience with certain leaders in the community. My parents always told me there's more than one way to skin a cat. Sometimes, if you can't beat them, join them. So, I learned what they liked to do. If they liked little league baseball, I would go upstairs. My parents had some used encyclopedias. And I would read the encyclopedia on how to throw a curve ball, how to…

TS: You got that out of an encyclopedia?

MR: Yes. Then, I'd get my father to take us outside, so we could practice. Same thing with football and basketball: they used to laugh at my jump shot. It was consistent, but it didn't have any spin, because I read [how to shoot] it in the encyclopedia. It didn't say anything about a spin. It just [said you were] supposed to hold it like that. But by doing that, I was able to surround myself with athletes in the community. Because I was hanging out with these different athletes, different factions that might be adverse towards my wellbeing, that kept them at bay, because they saw I was playing football. Some of them tried to play football with us, but when we started knocking them upside the head, they figured, "I don't know if I want to mess with this guy."

Then, some of the gang leaders liked to play chess, so I learned how to play chess with them. So, that way we played chess a lot together, and I got a chance to see how well thought out they were. Someone will make one move and didn't realize that you've got to think two, three, four, five moves down. So, by surrounding myself with them, doing things they liked, that gave me an audience to them. And they taught me a lot about leadership and teamwork. And so, I used sports as an avenue.

TS: I think you told me you ran the 400 meters, 440 yards back then—the quarter mile.

MR: Right, we used to call it the strong man's race, because it's one loop all the way around.

TS: Do you remember what your times were?

MR: I think it was like about 47 [seconds].

TS: Pretty good!

MR: Yes, I was pretty good sprinter, but I also had endurance. So, that's why they put me in the 400.

TS: In fact, it's real good in high school.

MR: No, I ran track in college, not high school. In high school, I ran long distances my freshman year, but then I switched over to junior varsity basketball.

TS: Well, it sounds like you learned a lot from your sports and a whole lot about leadership and what have you.

MR: Yes, you can always tell what you learn from sports by the people you surround yourself with. If you want to get better, you can't hang out with people who are not as good as you. You've got to hang out with people who are better than you. Sometimes, it leads to ridicule because you're trying to fit in, but you don't pay attention to that. You pay attention to the lessons they're trying to tell you. "Hey, knucklehead. What are you doing? You're supposed to fill the lanes, not come down the middle, when you pass the ball." So, I've listened to what they wanted me to know and didn't take the other stuff personally. I just took it professionally.

TS: Did you ever meet Leroy Otis?

MR: Oh, he was one of our main coaches.

TS: I was trying to find a little bit about him. He did a whole lot of good work with kids and sports in the New York area. Is there anything that you'd like to say about Leroy Otis?

MR: He gave a lot of kids an opportunity to play sports and visit places they might have never visited. Just like when I played baseball and football, my brother and I would visit teams like in Philadelphia and Dallas, Texas. Or, when my brother was about 12, he [Otis] would take them to Puerto Rico and play basketball tournaments. When we played Little League Baseball, we were trying to get to the Little League World Series. So, he provided a lot of opportunities for the kids in the community to excel and grow in an environment that is not as toxic or consequential. Because in sports, if you do something wrong, you can still learn. So, it's always encouraging. He helped out a lot of kids in the community, and he was well revered.

TS: I saw you also were doing basketball and football with Riverside Church?

MR: Yes, Riverside Church.

TS: So, this is outside of school?

MR: Right.

TS: So, this was an after-school league that they had? What's Riverside Church?

MR: Morningside Heights, Riverside Church is one of the big churches where they have a large seminary and train different people to go into the seminary. It's right next to Columbia University.

TS: That's a famous church, isn't it?

MR: Yes, yes. That's one of the unique things about growing up where I grew out on 125th Street. You had Columbia University. Ivy League. I remember going up there, and my brother and I sneaking in the gym to play basketball and seeing the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] students protest and riot. Up the other street a few blocks, you had City University of New York. Then you had Riverside Church. Then you had the Apollo Theater and the Theresa Hotel. The Theresa Hotel was the main hotel that African Americans could stay at because of segregation. They couldn't stay at the [other] hotels. It was on 7th Avenue at 125th Street, and that was the hotel that the prominent African American stayed at. So, when they came out, and they would give speeches out there in the corner, we would listen to people like Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. Matter of fact, that's where he got stabbed [on 20 September 1958] by the [mentally-disturbed] lady with the scissors. The lady [Izola Ware Curry] stabbed him in the lungs with some scissors, and if she had moved an inch or two over, she could've killed him. But we had a broad section of people from different backgrounds and cultures who would be articulating their views. So, it makes you think beyond the immediate.

TS: You had a pretty good education. Now did you go straight into the Air Force from high school?

MR: No, I went to State University of New York at Albany and played football and ran track. They still have the program—matter of fact, I gave a speech there a few weeks ago—Educational Opportunity Program, where they look for lower income kids across New York State and provide grants and scholarships for them to go to school. Matter of fact, it was instrumental in building the Black and Hispanic middle class of New York State because they were able to go to college.

TS: How long did you study at State University of New York?

MR: I took the five-year plan. It took me five years. I had a double major: rhetoric and communications and African American studies.

TS: In 1974 to 1979 roughly you were there?

MR: Right, yes.

TS: So you got your bachelor's degree?

MR: Yes.

TS: So, why did you do a community college in the Air Force?

MR: That was when I wanted to go back to school. In the Air Force that is a degree that they offer based on your experience and then taking your core subjects. It helps you when it comes time for promotion.

TS: But you already had a bachelor's degree.

MR: Right, but I didn't tell them that. I just needed it on my resume. So, when it was time for promotion, it shows that you participated in the Community College of the Air Force.

TS: But you didn't really participate? They just took all those credits?

MR: Oh, I had to go to class. I was working at the airport, doing customer service in Oklahoma, where I was switched over to the Air Force Reserve in Oklahoma. I was active duty, but then I went to reserve. Then I had a day or night job working at the airport for Budget Rent A Car doing customer service. So, I had to rent the cars, clean the cars. When I had a break, I would go over to the state's Oklahoma City Community College and take classes. Then, after class, I would come back after my lunch break and go back to work. Matter of fact, [in 2018] they inducted me into their Alumni Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City Community College. They came out here to visit me. Then, from there, I went to the University of Central Oklahoma, and I got a degree in business education.

TS: I've got teacher education and business education. Are those two different degrees?

MR: Right, then I went on to get a master's degree in school administration.

TS: I'm getting a little confused on the timeline. You graduated from SUNY at Albany in…

MR: Seventy-nine.

TS: Did you go into the Air Force immediately?

MR: No, I worked insurance. I used to sell insurance. And then I had an opportunity. The company liked my work, and they said, "What do you want to do? Do you want to stay in Albany, New York? Do you want to go back home in New York City? Where do you want to go?" I said, "Send me somewhere I've never been before." So, they sent me to Oklahoma.

TS: So, that's how you got to Oklahoma?

MR: Yes. Talk about a culture shock. But it paid off with dividends later on because when I was out there, where I worked, there was a shoeshine man in the building, and he would listen to country music all day. After a while, I learned how to sing a lot of country and western songs. So, when I went into the Air Force, and I had to work and supervise guys from, like, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Texas, they were surprised that I could sing country and western songs…

TS: I bet.

MR: In the morning, we would wake up, and I'd be singing, "Livin' on Tulsa time, livin' on Tulsa time." "While the interest rate is up and the stock market down, you only get mugged if you go downtown." Or, "All my exes live in Texas and that's why I hang my hat in Tennessee." And then, I would help them get prepared for inspection, if they were late coming back from an additional duty.

TS: I skipped over it earlier, but you were a drummer at one point too. You played the drums?

MR: My brother and I, when we were in New York, the community center had a steel drum. A person was teaching people how to play Caribbean steel drums, calypso. So, he taught us how to play. He taught us how to keep rhythm. And we used to tour around New York City. His first name was Kim. They called him Kim. This was at Grant Houses Community Center. We used to travel around New York playing for people who are in nursing homes or sick and had a good time doing that.

TS: Okay. So, let's see. You're working in insurance after 1979 for how many years?

MR: I worked insurance probably for about two years.

TS: And you're in Oklahoma by 1981?

MR: Right.

TS: And what happens then?

MR: I just always kind of wanted to go into the Air Force. That's when I decided, "Well, I'm still young. My parents said, "You're young; you don't have any responsibilities; just go for it." But it took a while to get to that point because, what happened was, I was playing a game of pool with the recruiter. If I won, I was supposed to win $50. And if I lost, I was supposed to enlist. And that's how I got started. So, I let them know. First, they were kind of concerned about it, but they said, "If that's what you want, let the chips fall where they may.

TS: So, you're about 25 years old at this point?

MR: Right.

TS: And so, you go into the Air Force. You've got a college degree. Did you ever think about going in as an officer as opposed to enlisted?

MR: I thought about it, but I made a lot of friends with people who were enlisted, and I figured, "What the heck? It's a lot more fun that way." My first supervisor joined the Air Force in 1947. Old Sergeant Bobby Hignite. He was part Caucasian, part Native American. The funny thing in Oklahoma, you could see somebody as black as me. You say, "Are you African American?" "No, I'm partially black, but I have a card here that says I'm 60 percent Choctaw." And that entitles you to a lot of benefits. Bobby Hignite was that way. He looked Caucasian, but he had a card. He was so and so. He just took me under his wings, and we became lifelong friends. He showed me the ropes.

TS: You were in the Air Force for twenty-five plus years; so, 1981 to about 2006 or 2007?

MR: Actually, when I moved over to the reserves and the guard, going back and forth, when I came out of active duty, I retired actually in 2015. So, I say twenty-five plus years because I try not to say, "Well, it's thirty-three years, six weeks, four days, because some…

TS: But it's more like thirty-three years?

MR: Thirty-three years, yes.

TS: Okay. So, when do you go from regular Air Force to Air Force Reserves?

MR: When I came out of active duty. Before I went to basic training—that's when I met Bobby Hignite—and also another friend of mine, a supervisor; her name is Patricia Hill, and we just got along so well. And they were in the reserves. So, when I came back out, they had an opportunity for people to go active duty or go reserves. Because of my friendship with them, I said, "I'm going to go reserves."

TS: You mean after basic training you could go to reserves?

MR: Yes.

TS: Oh, so you spent most of your time in the reserves?

MR: Reserves and active duty. Active duty is I would go from time to time when I was on orders, but Air National Guard and Air Force Reserves—most of my time is between those. And then while I was doing that, I was an educator. I taught for twenty-two years and retired. I taught everything from K through 12 computer programming, accounting, business math, reading, writing, and science. You name it. I taught it all.

TS: And where were you teaching?

MR: I was teaching in Oklahoma, then, I taught here in Fulton County.

TS: So, you're teaching in the public schools?

MR: Yes. I did that. And then in the Air Force, I managed personnel for aircraft maintenance. Then, the Air Force talked me into going to the University of Georgia to do the work for a doctorate degree. And I said, "Are you sure you got the right person, because I am not that bright?" But they said, "No, no, no." Let me back up a minute. Before the Air Force asked me to follow through on that, I was a vice president of a teachers' organization called MACE, Metro Association of Classroom Educators. The chairman was the late Dr. John Trotter. He was the one that started talking with me about going to the University of Georgia to get a doctor's degree. But I told him, "That's 90 miles one way. I'm not going there." He said, "No, no. You need to think about it." And so, when I was in the Air Force, I retired as a master sergeant. I had a chance to be a chief master sergeant, but I was at a crossroads. I said, "Well, I could be a chief master sergeant or a master sergeant, but if I go this way and get this doctor's degree, I can still be a master sergeant and retire and get a doctor's degree." And so, we sat down, and then they encouraged me. And I was trying to find out what made these people like John Trotter and the Air Force think I could do that.

TS: Now what year did you get the doctorate?

MR: I started in 1998, and I did six years, so it was 2004. My father passed in 2006. So, I get those dates mixed up. That's when I met professor Dr. Sally [J.] Zepeda. She was my major professor. She had a unique ability; when it comes to research, she was pretty top notch. But she could come down and be a regular person. We used to go over to her house, and she taught me how to write. We would eat lunch, and she would give me suggestions. She was surprised how prompt I was about getting stuff done. She showed me how to write and helped me with my dissertation. And I remember when it was time to defend my dissertation, she

said to me, "You and your friends in the Air Force Reserves, all show up in your Air Force uniform." So, we showed up.

TS: Well, nobody's going to mess with you then.

MR: We came in there, "Ten-hut! At ease," I said, "Master Sergeant Rhett comes here as requested to defend his dissertation." So, I went in there. They asked me a few questions, and then you know how they tell you to go back out to decide if they want you to come back in if you know what the heck you're talking about. So, I went back in, and the guys were kind of sitting like this [leaning over and looking strange]. I was like, "Okay." They would ask me a question and answer for me. One had jokes, and he never had jokes all the years I knew him.

TS: These are the faculty on your committee?

MR: Right. Right. And I had to go back in and defend it. And then they said, "Congratulations."

TS: So, they didn't ask hard questions?

MR: No. But Sally prepared me very well too. When we left and we had lunch, I said, "Sally, those guys there. I mean, we get along well, but it didn't really bother me that much." She said, "Because I took care of that when you went out." You come in, and the faculty along with your major professor ask you a few questions. At that point they're trying to determine if they would really want to go forward with you or not, if you know what you're talking about. And so, then you go out, and then they converse among themselves. "Do you think this person is ready or not? Or what questions should we ask?" Then, they ask you to come back in, and they get deeper into your dissertation. You know, view of the literature, your data. Mine was on principals' preparation to become a principal while they were assistant principals.

TS: I was going to ask you that. What was the title?

MR: "Assistant Principals' Preparation before Becoming a Principal." I interviewed all women, and if I remember, I know a couple of them were in Gwinnett, but I think all three of them were in Gwinnett County Schools. So, I went and interviewed them. Mine was qualitative; it wasn't quantitative. So, I had to have a tape recorder and listen. Then, I had to have member checks because sometimes you can influence what you think you're receiving. You have to have somebody objective to say, "Well, I don't know. I don't think I saw that. I think this is what I saw from that response." Then, you go back and answer questions a different way or the same way, and you try and get a better perspective on it.

TS: Yes. So, in 2004 you got your doctorate. Now, when did you get the specialist's degree from Georgia State?

MR: That was 1996. I was teaching, and then I went there in 1996.

TS: Now those degrees out at Central Oklahoma, when were they?

MR: Nineteen eighty-eight was the Business Ed degree. Nineteen eighty-nine was for the Teacher Education degree.

TS: I understand you got an Educational Leadership master's degree from the University of Central Oklahoma. When did you get the masters?

MR: I went 1990 and 1991, and that's when I got the masters.

TS: Now Oklahoma City Community College, that was back when you first got there in 1981?

MR: That was 1988. I was going to three colleges at one time.

TS: Oh, my goodness.

MR: I was going to Oklahoma City Community College, Community College of the Air Force, and the University of Central Oklahoma. I was carrying about twenty-five credits that semester.

TS: When did you get transferred to Dobbins Air Reserve Base [Cobb County, Georgia]?

MR: Nineteen ninety-two. I left Oklahoma and came out to Dobbins, and I enlisted in the Air National Guard.

TS: So, you're living in Fulton County then?

MR: No, I was staying in Cobb County down the road from Dobbins.

TS: So, in 1992, you come to Dobbins. And then did you retire from Dobbins?

MR: Well, what happened was they moved our Air National Guard unit to Warner Robins Air Force Base. They took away our fighter jets and gave us B-1 bombers. So, they gave us new planes, and then we had to move one hundred twenty miles south to Warner Robins.

TS: But you didn't want to go?

MR: I did. I went with them, and I served down there for about eight or nine years. I managed personnel for aircraft maintenance. I also managed fitness and health for the pilots and navigators. Also, for the commanders, I used to make and pour

coffee. "Would you like cream and sugar with that?" [laughs] "Very good choice." So, I served there for about eight or nine years. Then one day, I was helping this young airman. She wanted to go into an Air Force program where she could consolidate her training. So, she had to go into the Air Force Reserves. I called up there, and recruiters can be like a pit bull with lockjaw. So, the recruiter and I both kind of hit it off because he grew up in New York City, but he grew up on the Lower West Side, and I grew up in the Upper West Side. So, he's, "Oh, yes, man. I remember this, that." So, he kept calling me and calling me and calling. I said, "No, I'm not interested." But one day, I was driving from Marietta to Robins Air Force Base, and my thermostat acted up. I was in the middle of the highway on the side of the road changing the thermostat. I said, "Maybe I do need to get back closer because Dobbins was only like about eight miles from home compared to one hundred twenty. So, I enlisted in the Air Force Reserves, and there I managed personnel for the pilot navigator school for the C-130. I did that for about ten years, and that's where I retired from.

TS: Now, you were teaching in Fulton County. Which schools did you teach in?

MR: Brookview Elementary School, and then Hapeville Elementary School.

TS: How long did you teach there at these two elementary schools?

MR: I taught altogether twenty-two years and retired. I retired because I didn't really intend to stick around that long in teaching. But my parents said, "Time is too valuable to throw away. You've got ten years invested. You might as well do another ten and build up a retirement. I actually did twelve more and that gave me twenty-two. Then from there, I got hired by Fulton County government.

TS: So, that's where the City of Refuge and Jefferson Place come in?

MR: Right. At first, when I went to those places and they showed me around, I said, "This is interesting. I don't know if I really want to do this." But they convinced me. They said, "It's something different. You never know your talents can be useful to help others." But in Jefferson Place, we would go into Rice Street Prison [the Fulton County jail on 901 Rice Street, NW, Atlanta] and recruit inmates out for a program I had. Also, we would sort people out from the homeless program and put them in a program I had where I would teach them how to use a computer, how to interview, how to apply for a job online. Drug rehab—I co-facilitated the drug treatment program, and then I would help them find a job and housing. But if they were in our program, they could stay in the housing we had there for up to almost eighteen months.

TS: Okay. So, this is part of Fulton County government—Jefferson Place. And these are people who are actually incarcerated or…

MR: They were, but they were eligible for parole. Or they were homeless. We would interview and try to screen them. We would go to the Rice Street Prison and interview inmates who were getting ready to get out and see if they would be a candidate for our program. Then we had a homeless counterpart in the program where we would bring people in, and we would interview and screen and see if they were eligible for the program I had. We would do the same thing at City of Refuge with the women.

TS: So, City of Refuge is the homeless women's shelter?

MR: Right.

TS: Battered spouses and what have you?

MR: Right. We had a federal grant, and so we did that. I did that for about four years.

TS: And that's a faith-based group?

MR: City of Refuge.

TS: I did a little research on the City of Refuge. Bruce Deel founded it. Was he still active when you were there?

MR: A little bit—in and out. My group—we were from the Fulton County government. Mainly, when I came in, I was focusing on my program, and he was mainly working with the induction process of bringing women in and finding a place to live. But we still would interact, and I would help them out sometimes with a social worker case.

TS: So what years were you involved with Jefferson Place?

MR: From 2012 through 2014. While I was doing that, I was working with the Cobb County Schools Adult Education program where I would help prepare people for the GED test. I helped them learn the language. I did that even while I was in the [Georgia] Senate. I did that for about six years, because I really enjoyed that, and it was right in the middle of my district [240 Barber Road, Marietta, GA 30060]. That's Cobb County Schools Adult Education.

At Jefferson Place, a funny thing happened with the people in the programs. I used to always say, "It's kind of like playing sports." Things aren't going your way. You're caught up in the other team's movement. So, the coach has to call a time out and sit you on the bench and try and give you some strategies. So, when he or she puts you back into the game, you can make a better adjustment and not get caught up into the other team's rhythm, which is causing you problems. That was metaphoric, because they made some choices in life and got caught up with

those bad choices. So now, we were trying to give them skills, so that when it was time for them to go back out into the world, they'd be ready.

Mr. Woodson was one of the head instructors. I said, "When Mr. Woodson blows the whistle, it's going to be tough for you to get back out there in the game of life. So we'll see if you're ready." And it was interesting, when it was time for them to go. But also, in the program, if they worked, we would save their money for them. Some of them, when they got out, would get $5,000, $6,000, $7,000, or $10,000. But we were discreet on how much we gave to them, because we didn't want to—it's like giving somebody who's an addict dynamite. They've got $5,000, and now they don't have any rules or regulations. But, anyway, when it was time for a lot of them to go back out, it was like we were literally trying to pull them off that wall to tell them, "The coach is blowing the whistle. It's time for you to get back out in the game of life."

But we had programs too where we would find them a boarding room or an apartment, and we would pay their first month's rent and half the second and then a third of the third, and slowly give them some of their money back. But one day, they didn't know too much about me because most of the time, I just came in. I was Mr. Rhett, and when we had the meetings in the morning, spirituality, you might say, "I'm John. I'm a recovering addict." "I'm Bob. I'm a recovering alcoholic." And I would say, "I'm Mr. Rhett, and I'm a recovering human being." And that fascinated them. It was like, "What's a recovering human being?" I said, "You know, we all have our kryptonite. Yours is a little more toxic than mine, but we're all trying to cope." They found out that I had an opportunity to run for the Senate. And they said, "Are you going to run?" I said, "Are you crazy?" They said, "How do you know it's not Coach Woodson blowing the whistle and telling you, 'It's time to get back out there in the game of life?'" And I thought about that. When you're responsible for people's lives or in leadership, and they look up to you, you've got to practice a little bit of what you preach. You know?

TS: Sure.

MR: And to this day I have some of my ex-clients who work at the State Capitol. I don't tell anybody about their business or anything, but we see each other and laugh and talk and have lunch. And we say, "Who would have thought nine years ago that we would be working in the State Capitol? If you'd told that to us, we'd have thought you were on drugs." So, when I see them, it motivates me sometimes, when you have good days, you have better days.

TS: Yes. Now, you were doing English as a second language, also?

MR: That and then helping them learn English, math, reading. You know? Some of them, we had to go pretty much from scratch. We would graduate them at levels. Some were able to maybe get their GED, but some, if they've been out of school a

long time, we wanted to at least help them to be able to be functionally literate and make them feel good about themselves. "You're moving up this level and this level." And it was right in the middle of my district. So, you know, it was funny. "My state senator is teaching and helping me get my GED, helping me with math." It was just a good feeling for all of us.

TS: Is there anything like Jefferson Place in Cobb County?

MR: The closest I can come to that would probably be MUST Ministry may offer some programs. But that was a unique program. It was a federal triage grant. That was a unique program. We had a cafeteria there and a dormitory and a gym. I remember when we had the ice storms. I stayed at the Jefferson Place for seventy-two hours both times, because we had food, we had a kitchen, we had a gym, and we had a dormitory. But it was very unique in itself. And you know, what's funny, an interesting thing is when it got to personal reliability, when we talk to people about self-esteem and things of that nature, relationships, dating, when we got to the self-esteem part, and I showed them pictures of unhealthy self-esteem, we discussed it. Then, as we showed them pictures or posters of what a healthy self-esteem is like, and we discussed that, it never failed. That's when I won all of them over. Some people would start crying because they didn't realize that they were living an unhealthy lifestyle in terms of self-esteem.

They didn't have to put up with that stress. At first, some of them said [sarcastically], "Who's this guy?' Most of them had a little street ethics to them, so they figured they were smarter than me, which is not hard. But they had the street element. We talked about personal liability, talked about self-help relationships, healthy self-esteem, how to argue with your spouse. That would win them over every time. That was a very interesting part of the class. I remember some people crying. I remember one guy in particular, Lee, was a professional gambler. He had a poker face. Even when he talked, his face never moved. But I was one of the only ones who can get Lee to laugh—and his face still didn't move. But when we got to personal development, he had his head down. I said, "You all right, Lee?" He said, "Yes. I'm all right." But it's just interesting the effect of that on him. The interesting thing about working there, I didn't have much of a problem because it reminded me of growing up in New York City because I grew up around a lot of drug addicts, people of a criminal element. So, it just in a funny sense reminded me of being home. I was kind of used to it.

TS: When you were doing the Adult Education Program for Cobb County Schools, where were the classes held?

MR: They used to be across the street from Fair Oaks Elementary School (407 Barber Road, Marietta, Georgia. But they tore it down, and they built a middle school there [Susan Todd Pearson Middle School, 240 Barber Road]. So now the classes are taught in Smyrna, right off Windy Hill Road [at 1595 Hawthorne Avenue].

They're still there. It's just that I had to transition because being in the Senate I've been placed on a lot of committees that take up a lot of time, like the Rules Committee. They're the one who decides whether or not bills get to the floor for a vote. Judiciary, you know, deals with all the top judiciary legal issues. Matter of fact, that was one of the reasons I got asked to sit in on the study committee where [Rudolph William Louis] Rudy Giuliani and others came talking about election irregularities. I walked in. A lot of people were in here. There was a table, and I sat across the table. I said, "This guy looks familiar. Who's this guy?" I said, "Oh, man! This is Rudy Giuliani!" And Finance and the Development Authority, they take up a lot of my time, but I don't mind. I enjoy working with people. But I just can't give the time I used to trying to balance being in the Senate and doing the GED [Adult Education Program].

TS: What persuaded you to run for the Senate? How did that come about?

MR: I always did a lot of work, like my parents, for people in the community, and it ingratiated me with a lot of people. My name became familiar. I would join organizations and run for secretary. Because I was the secretary, I would look at the organizational design and programs and come up with a plan to try to help them. One of them was to electronically publish a newsletter to go out to their constituents. A lot of times, the newsletters came from me, produced by Dr. Rhett. So, that helped to push my name out along with helping the organizations with their goals. Then somebody asked me to run for commissioner. I lost. I came in third, but I got 17 percent of the vote.

TS: Which year would that have been?

MR: In 2008.

TS: Whom were you running against in 2008?

MR: [George] Woody Thompson [Jr.] It was Annette Kesting's seat. She defeated Woody the term before, and then Woody challenged her.

TS: She was controversial as I recall.

MR: She had her challenges. Then, I ran a second time [in 2012]. This time it was like a plethora of people [six candidates in the Democratic primary]. Lisa [N.] Cupid was the notable one.

TS: Was this the year she got elected?

MR: Right, to the county commission in the southwest part of the county. I remember she came to me. We joke, I tease, but she's telling about she's running for commissioner and she's going to win. I said, "I'll bet you a dollar you won't win." Well, I lost that bet just like I lost the one with the recruiter. So, I don't bet

anymore. The only bet that I do is I go play a lottery ticket. So, third time was the charm. I was down to my third strike. You know, playing baseball, you get three strikes. Somebody said, "Why don't you run for state senator against Steve Thompson?" I said, "Steve Thompson? Are you kidding me?" I said, "Oh, no, no." "What do you got to lose?" It's the perfect storm. Everybody else is caught up in their own races, and he doesn't really want to stick around, like, you know, because he has been there thirty something years. [Born on 22 December 1950, Thompson was the youngest member of the Georgia General Assembly when he won a House of Representatives seat in 1980. He served in the State Senate from 1991 to 2015.] We were good friends.

TS: Oh, you were?

MR: Yes, when I lost to Woody, I'm the type of person, if something doesn't work out, I don't run away and pout. I try to learn from it. Woody and Steve taught me a lot about politics. A matter of fact, Steve's wife—at first, I told her I wasn't going to run anymore. She said, "No, no, no." She said, "I see something in you. You need to stick around. Your turn is coming." I said, "Oh, okay."

TS: Steve's wife persuaded you to run again?

MR: No, not to give up. This was before I ran against Steve. Then, when I got elected, somebody tapped me on the shoulder in the Senate and it was her. She said, "I told you. I prophesied, didn't I?" I said, "Yes, you did." So, the third time was the charm. I'm down to my third strike. If you lose three times, that's like striking out. You don't want to get the loser tag. But I felt good because I had a young man by the name of Lance, who was a campaign coordinator. Last name is Jones. In the second election when I ran for commissioner, he was helping Lisa Cupid with her campaign. When he heard I was going to run for the Senate, he came and said, "I think I can help you out." At that time, he was young. He said, "I've never lost a race, and I've analyzed your race because, you know, I was working against you. And I think if we make some adjustments…." So, I said, "What have I got to lose?"

TS: What kind of adjustments did he suggest?

MR: Technology, so I could know which doors to knock on and which ones not to, which people to call and which people not to. It's interesting. I can get on my phone, and I can pull up names or addresses and figure out who is more likely to vote for me. I have a program, so I can tell on the street who doesn't vote and who may not vote for me, so I can know where to go to. Some people say, "You know, Doc, I voted for you." I go to my phone, "Heck, he hadn't voted since Nixon." You know? I'm being facetious, but it's true. You know? "Come on." I can pull it up. He taught me how to do that, and he worked with me. And I won by 150 votes.

TS: That's a close race.

MR: Yes, it was 150 votes [2,878 to 2,729]. Steve was very gracious. Like I said, we were friends, and he told everybody at the Capitol, even the security guards, to take care of me.

TS: That is nice. I found a quote from him in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* after the election. He was saying that he knew that the district's minority population was increasing. So, he knew that he might be in trouble in the election, I think, because of demographics. But he said that, "If anything, I'm proud of the support from minority voters. We must have done well to come that close. I'm grateful for that."

MR: Yes. Steve was a very good politician. You know, he was instrumental in changing the Georgia flag, him and Roy Barnes, Governor Barnes.

TS: Right. I think I told you that he got money for me once for the oral history project from Zell Miller when Zell Miller was governor. They got me $13,000 [from the governor's contingency fund]. Back in the 1990s, that went a long way.

MR: Yes, that's a lot of money [laughs]. But we were good friends, and he showed me the ropes. Sometimes, we all have to think about when it's time to transition, when it's time to do something different, because he was the governor's Senior Floor Leader when Roy Barnes was there [1998-2002]. But then when the Republican wave took over, he was irrelevant to for the most part. He stuck around because when Governor Barnes ran again in 2010, he thought, "Just in case…" I think he ran against [Nathan] Deal.

TS: I'm trying to think, Roy was elected governor in 1998 and served through 2002.

MR: And then [he lost to] Sonny Perdue [George Ervin "Sonny" Perdue III].

TS: And then Sonny Perdue would have been in office 2003 to 2011.

MR: Right. But then Governor Barnes didn't win, so [Thompson] was kind of just trying to figure out…he was just going through the motions.

TS: My own take was that Barnes did too much as governor. He accomplished so much in those four years and created a lot of enemies out there.

MR: Governor Barnes, when he took away teachers…

TS: He upset the teachers.

MR: He upset them. Tenure, when he adjusted that tenure [eliminating tenure for newly hired teachers], that's like stepping on a fire ant hill or a hornet's nest.

Matter of fact, when I talked with Governor Barnes, he's a good supporter, and he always tells me, "Whatever you do, don't mess with those teachers, because it's like touching the third rail of a train track." And he said he knows he's done it.

TS: Well, they changed the Georgia flag [removing the Confederate battle emblem] also and that upset the flaggers.

MR: That's right. That didn't help him either.

TS: And he also upset the environmentalists when he wanted to put an outer loop [in North Georgia] from I-75 over to I-85.

MR: Some people now wish they would have built that. Look at the traffic. I was trying to dodge trucks [this morning] coming up here from Columbus.

TS: So what's Steve Thompson doing nowadays?

MR: Every now and then I see him. He spends a lot of time with his grandkids. He goes back and forth between here and North Carolina. And he's happy. His legacy is intact. Matter of fact, we invited him and the family down to the Capitol. We had Steve Thompson Day, and we had a big plaque and let him say a few words. His reputation's intact. His legacy's intact, and he did some significant things down there.

TS: Were there any particular campaign issues when you were running in 2014?

MR: Well, I mean, in 2014, I was just telling people, "Don't forget Senator Rhett." That was my campaign slogan, and that worked. But it was built off a lot of work I did in the community, and I would be more responsive to their needs, phone calls, or if they needed some direction and guidance.

TS: So you're kind of implying that Steve Thompson was losing touch with his district maybe as the demographics changed?

MR: [Nods yes]. I'll give you an example of that—same with Woody Thompson.

TS: It was the same thing with Woody wasn't it"

MR: That's what happened. He was a Republican [in 2004], and he ran against Annette Kesting, a Democrat. And Steve had tried to tell Woody that he shouldn't change to Republican because of this district makeup. Annette won by a landslide [in 2004].

TS: Yes. He changed from Democrat to Republican, didn't he?

MR: Right. Then when he ran against her the second time [in 2008], he changed back to a Democrat.

TS: Oh, so he ran in the Democratic primary against her?

MR: Right.

TS: And won that one?

MR: Right. I can't remember now, but it was a runoff. She came in second. He came in first. And he won the runoff by a landslide, a lot.

TS: There was a lot of controversy about her I remember at the time.

MR: It didn't help. Yes. It didn't help.

TS: Okay. I guess at one time everybody [in Cobb County] was a Democrat who was white. Then, they switched from the Democrats to the Republicans.

MR: Yes. Woody switched from Democrat to Republican and Republican to Democrat. With the closing down of public housing and working class housing in Marietta, a lot of African Americans were pushed out towards Austell, Powder Springs, Lithia Springs, Douglasville. And when you look at the government leadership, it reflects that African American change. It changed under him, and Woody wasn't aware of that change. Then people were moving out of the area towards Paulding. But now they're moving further out than that.

TS: Yes. It seems like Marietta has been trying to get rid of affordable housing as fast as they can.

MR: Well, [home prices are] expensive. We talk about $600,000, $700,000, $800,000 [houses], you know. I can't loan you that much, but…

TS: Okay. So, no particular campaign issues except that you're appealing to people that know that you know about them, and you've got their interest at heart.

MR: And be more responsive because you've been hearing from me.

TS: I once asked Joe Mack Wilson about campaign issues, and he snarled at me. He said, "Issues! Local politics is who can deliver what for their constituents." Do you agree with that?

MR: Yes. That's part of it or at least, maintaining communications. One of the things as I said earlier, I have a degree in communications. I've utilized it pretty well, keeping in touch with people in the community, a large swash of people, you know. And then Rhett is not a common name. When you get closer to South

Carolina, you'll see a lot more Rhetts. But when you go around the country and look in phonebooks, you don't see that many Rhetts. So, it's not a hard thing to remember. Then, when you put a little marketing behind it, "Don't forget Dr. Rhett," I developed that when in the State University of New York, I ran for student council. But my slogan was "Don't forget Mikee Rhett."

TS: You went by Mikee?

MR: A lot of people called me that. Yes, "Don't forget Mikey"—the old [Life] Cereal commercial [from the 1970s]. So, it just stuck. So I said, "Don't forget Michael Anthony Rhett."

TS: When I get your online newsletter, it still says, "Don't forget Dr. Rhett."

MR: I made that adjustment.

TS: So that's been ever since you were running for student council?

MR: At the State University of New York in Albany.

TS: How about that?

MR: But just being responsible communication. People hear from you, and they see you. I've been very fortunate too, now being at the state legislature, to be able to get significant bills signed into law. That's not easy for Democrats [since they are the minority party]. But I've gotten bills like the Senator Jack Hill Veterans Bill [Senate Bill 87 in 2022] where it provides scholarships for disabled veterans who go to technical colleges. I got passed another one, the Georgia VECTR [Veterans Education Career Transition Resource] Program with Dobbins and Chattahoochee Technical College, where active members in the military or veterans can go over to Chattahoochee Tech to get a college degree or change their military certification into a civilian certification. And then the bill for people living in nursing homes—their personal allowances I got it increased from $20 a month to $70 a month. Because, you know, if I give you $20, say go buy some toiletry, you may come out with deodorant, maybe a stick or two.

TS: Not much.

MR: That was the personal allowance. People are living in nursing homes on Medicaid. And then the famous hot car bill—you know how people, every summer, leave a child or animal in the car, and the police will come and rescue the kid or the pet. People said, "Thank you, but here's a lawsuit. You shouldn't have broken my window, or you shouldn't have scratched my paint."

TS: My goodness.

MR: Interesting thing about that, to show how I was blessed to be able to work in a bipartisan manner, Senator Kay Kirkpatrick and I both wanted to do a hot car bill. We're seatmates. And so I said, "I'll tell you what, Kay, you take the hot car bill from the civilian standpoint of rescuing, and I'll do it from the police standpoint. Hers made it to the House floor for vote, but it didn't pass because some people were skeptical about just anybody breaking in their car because what you may think is hot, I might think is cool. Where with mine, it covered police liability in the scope of doing their job. They're better trained to know if somebody's under duress or if they have to go in and …

TS: So, what you're really saying is you're in the minority party as a Democrat, and generally, you don't get your name on the bill, but you're getting a lot of bills passed?

MR: No, those are bills with my name on it.

TS: That's what I'm trying to say: You're getting a lot of bills passed anyway, but it ain't easy if you're in the minority party.

MR: I have a good working relationship. When you look at the committees that I'm on, I'm probably the only one who has those types of committees: Rules Committee, Finance, Judiciary, Regulated Industries and Utilities, Senate Reapportionment and Redistricting. Those are all top-tier committees. But like I said, I learned in the Air Force teamwork, working together as a team to get the goal done to accomplishment. So, I've been very fortunate and blessed because I learned that from the Air Force—teamwork and how to work with people. Agree or disagree. Just like in Air Force, I remember at one time I was the first sergeant, and my commander and I never tried to get out in front of people in public. Every now and then, we'd go behind a closed door and have a frank passionate argument and, on occasion, refer to each other as mother, and it wasn't Mother's Day. But when we came out, we were of one accord. You know?

And it's something I kind of learned from my parents. I don't care how mad my parents were or disappointed they were in someone. They still found a way to work with the person. So, that's what I try and do. I've been pretty fortunate to get probably more bills signed as a Democrat from Cobb County than all the other Democratic legislators combined. But my first two years, what I did was I studied the rulebook every day for about a year or two years. Then I also worked at developing relationships with my colleagues. I'd spend some time with them. If I see a bunch of my colleagues from the other side of the House sitting down having lunch, I'd join them, and same with my colleagues on my side of the aisle. So, I always say, "Don't take things personally. Take it professionally, and you'd be a lot better." So that's what I do. Then I'll try to keep a sense of humor. That helps a lot.

TS: I guess we should have mentioned that you were the first African American resident of Cobb to be elected to the State Senate.

MR: Yes, that is correct. I didn't realize that until somebody brought it to my attention. You had people whose district might extend into Cobb County, but they weren't from Cobb County.

TS: There were several that I guess lived in Fulton County, but the district ran into South Cobb County.

MR: Right. Cobb County was a tough place for Democrats to get elected, but, of course, that's changed.

TS: Yes. I thought maybe you could talk a little bit about the changes taking place in Cobb County in the time that you've been here.

MR: Well, you know, Cobb County has opened up. Some people have a certain amount of foresight, and other people can't see it. Just like you mentioned Ernest Barrett. Many years ago, he was commission chair. He talked about running sewer lines and water lines out towards East Cobb, and people thought, "Are you crazy?" Now look.

TS: Well, just going to East Cobb was crazy back between 1964 and 1984 when he was commission chair. They used to have the honey wagons that ran out to East Cobb County when people had septic tanks. And so that that was really a big step for Ernest Barrett and the development of East Cobb to run those sewer lines out there.

MR: And then you had Tim Lee who [worked out the deal to bring the Atlanta Braves to Cobb County]. People are, "Are you crazy?" But now look.

TS: Yes, he lost an election for bringing the Braves to Cobb County. But now everybody thinks it was an act of genius.

MR: Right. And so, with Battery Atlanta and the Braves in the area, you're bringing in a lot of younger people with a different perspective on things than the old guard. I sing with Turner Chapel in the choir. We visit choirs. I can tell if there's a mixture in leadership of young and old or if it's just elderly. If it's just elderly, there's hardly anybody in there. But if you have that mixture, you have more of a congregation. And that's what's happening with Cobb County—not only just here but for the metro area—they move into the area, and they have a different perspective on life. Go back to, like, you're talking about 1960 or 1950. They're starting to transition. Some don't like the fact that Cobb is now urban suburban and not suburban rural. So they're trying to move further up north to Cherokee, north to Paulding, and etcetera, etcetera.

But the further up you go, you have to think in terms of the services you need. Are you able to get them? So right now, we're in a transition in Cobb, and I think it's important that we all get together, not only as politicians but as citizens and have these town hall meetings and purposeful discussions on which direction we want to go and how to shape that. Because Cobb is going to evolve, and we can be a part of that or we can just let it grow. But it's better to be a part of it. So, I see a lot of that happening when we have these town hall meetings just like Chairwoman Cupid had one not too long ago at Kennesaw. And so, it's all for the better. Change comes. You've got younger people with different perspective on things. They look at life differently. I know I've been working with the movie industry with their tax credit, and I've been around a lot of young people here this summer. It's interesting looking at the technology and listening to their perspective on things. Then you look at when I first ran for Cobb County Commissioner, I didn't see anybody who looked like me up there. I didn't see any women up there. But now it's a whole different ballgame, and they're doing a great job.

TS: So, no women and no Blacks. Is that what you're saying?

MR: Not when I first ran in 2008.

TS: Cobb County has changed a lot. What about the State of Georgia? It's transitioning too, isn't it?

MR: Yes, because young people, when they go away to college, and they get exposure to people from different persuasions, they say, "You know what? You're not what I thought you were." Or with the young people, if you go to rural Georgia, and you don't have Wi-Fi or Internet, they ain't sticking around and are coming to the metropolitan area. There are the jobs. They try to locate not too far from major metropolitan areas in terms of resources or delivery of goods or access to transportation, like, from the airport through the three main highways and the rail system. So, "Let's change it," because the younger people want to be where they can have Internet, like I said Wi-Fi, and then enjoying life and trying to look past…we all sometimes have these little stereotypes in our mind.

I remember when I ran track in college—I told you I ran the 400—a friend of mine is Rich Schrader, who's Caucasian. He ran the 220, which is a quicker race. I remember watching track and field. Most of the people who won [the sprints in] track and field for the United States were African American. So, I say, "I know I can outrun him." So, we started out. I looked behind me. I didn't see him. I said, "Man, he must be slow." I looked ahead of me. He was at the finish line. You know? So, there you go that stereotype. But we became good friends. He taught me techniques about track and field, and I helped him with his stamina because I was a distance runner. And that's what's happening, you know, you meet different people from different backgrounds.

For example, I remember a childhood friend of mine, Terry. We used to play football together and play baseball. He threw the ball a little different, but we didn't care as long as we were winning. He threw it how he wanted. Anyway, to make a long story short, he came out and said he was gay. We were good friends regardless. I thought gay meant happy. We had fights with each other and fights with other people. And so, those are things that help break stereotypes people may have. And he was my lifelong friend. He got sick some years back and passed away. But all I have to say, when you bring more people coming in, they see people from different perspectives and then start to explore more and say, "You know, we've got a lot in common more than we realize."

TS: Let me ask you about something that's very current, and it's redistricting. The legislature is going to have a special session coming up in, what, the 28th of November?

MR: November 29 is when it starts. We're three weeks away from there. That's because of a court order to make Georgia districts conform with the Voting Rights Act more, I guess, and make sure [there are a] certain number of districts where African Americans are in the majority, and so on.

TS: Can you talk about what you think is going to happen?

MR: I'm on the [Reapportionment and Redistricting] committee. When I was on the committee two years ago and they did the redistricting, that was some of the most stress I've dealt with since I've been in the Senate [laughs].

TS: Because of the way they drew the lines?

MR: Well, everybody has a stake in their districts and how they want it to look and how it can affect them and affect the constituents. But I don't see them doing like Alabama trying to fight it. What I've been hearing is they're going to go ahead and follow court order and set up what the judge wants. Because if you don't and they bring in a special master, he or she doesn't care if your uncle was Boss Hogg [from the Dukes of Hazard television series of the 1970s and 1980s] or [former Cobb County Commission Chairman] Ernest Barrett or [current District 3 Commissioner] JoAnn Birrell or [current Cobb Commission Chairwoman] Lisa Cupid. They are going to come in and draw that district to the tee, where they want it, and they're not going to take any of that in consideration. I don't see them wanting to do that. So, they're just going to go along and do what they know exactly what they need to do.

Now then they know which districts are involved. While they're at it, who knows? They may tinker with a few other areas. It's kind of like somebody going in and getting plastic surgery. The doctor may say, "Oh, while I'm at it, let me tighten up under your eyes a little bit or maybe remove that wart." The Supreme Court says that redistricting is a partisan affair as long as it's not an

issue about race or the areas are not evenly populated. And that was the case here with race. You know, you've got five [commission seats]. When you look at those areas, the majority African American. That's what he was looking at. But I think they're going to do what he wants. They may tinker with a few other areas, but it's one of those things that it can get pretty hot because moving forward, what is their district going to look like, [in terms of] constituents. For example, Senator Kay Kirkpatrick, in the last redistricting she had Sandy Springs and was more into Cobb. They pushed her up to Cherokee, and she picked up like 90,000 new people.

TS: Which helped her going to Cherokee, I would think.

MR: But when they don't know who you are, you have to introduce yourself. So, she had a lot of work cut out. They go, "Who's Kay Kirkpatrick?" You know? And I think I had, like, about 3,000 or 4,000 or 5,000 new people, so I had to work to let them know. And it's probably, like, December or November. Then you have Thanksgiving and Christmas, when you aren't doing much. But then when you come back, you try to balance between being at the Capitol in January, February, March, then getting out in April and part of May to try and get people to know who you are. So, it could be somewhat challenging. Then you have to know [for] these new people what's important to them. What's important, you know? You may think this is important, but over here, it may not resonate with them. People need housing. People need rent. So, it's a lot of work.

TS: Well, two years ago when they drew the lines, they basically took Lucy McBath's congressional district away from her. She had to move to a different district in order to get elected again, right?

MR: Right, moved to Gwinnett.

TS: And so, do you think that the legislature is going to maybe restore that old district the way it was. What is that, the Sixth congressional district?

MR: Sixth, but that area up there is not majority Black. So, you're probably going to have to move into parts of Cobb and towards Douglasville, moving to get that Black population. Because where it was before this election was North Cobb, North Fulton, and a little bit of Gwinnett. It's not a large Black population. I could be wrong, but I don't see them drawing that Sixth back there again if they're following the court order. They said western metropolitan. Just like I talked about earlier how Marietta closed down a lot of working-class housing and pushed a lot out there. You see the reflection in the government, African Americans as Cobb Commissioners, the sheriff, the district attorney. You go out there to Douglas, same thing, and then the city mayors, etcetera, etcetera. So, if they've trying to fight to make an African American [district], which is what I believe the judge said, they're probably going to have to move a little further west because up there [in the Sixth], that's not a large black population.

TS: They can get Marjorie Taylor Greene out of the Powder Springs, Austell area and create, different lines. Of course, she'd probably be very happy to be out of Cobb County.

MR: I would think so too.

TS: Anyway, that's the area that's going to be affected the most, do you think?

MR: That's where you have a large Black population, not at the northern part. The judge said west metropolitan. I guess there's somewhere going west but it doesn't have the population that he's talking about.

TS: Then you can run for Congress.

MR: [Laughs]. You know, that's funny, but you never know, man. Things happen. But right now, I'm pretty comfortable doing what I do because I'm able to deliver the goods and services, help people out, and keep them connected. I'm able to work with people to get stuff done. When you go to Washington, most of the time, they're trying to raise money. And it's hard to get anything done. Up there, it's a whole different ballgame where at least in the Georgia Senate, you only have fifty-six of us. It's a little easier to develop a relationship and work.

TS: So, are you happy where you are?

MR: Yes, I didn't think I'd be here.

TS: Do you think that Georgia is going to have a Big D Democratic majority in the legislature in the foreseeable future?

MR: Eventually, I could see that happening because we're creeping slowly closer now. The Republicans are reluctant to set up any districts in the metropolitan area because they'll be turned blue. So, they pushed up north and pushed south. But then in the south, they lost the seat because of demographics. Leaving South Georgia, they brought it up here and it became a Democratic seat. So, they're losing population. You know, just like if you go up north on I-85, then you go to where the chicken coops are.

TS: Gainesville area?

MR: Right. How many young people will work in a chicken coop? They will come to the big city and work a job. But also, I think you have to have a platform that reaches out to a broad section of people who may not necessarily see what you're trying to talk about right away. You have to kind of work at that. Can't be one issue or two. You have to have an array of issues that people are concerned about and try to address them. That's just like in my office. People call me and talk

about somebody has got too many cars parked on the lawn or the dog's barking. That's not my job. No. But I'm like, "Well, let's talk about it. Okay. Now this is whom you need to talk with."

TS: Let me ask you a question. Several years ago, Environmental Georgia designated you as Environmental Legislator of the Year from Cobb County. There's an Environmental America that they're part of that obviously is interested in environmental issues. What did you do to get them to recognize you as legislator of the year?

MR: Worked with them on different legislation. I remember I helped pass a bill that the governor signed into law. But before I got it to that point, the year before in the House, somebody tried to strip it and put coal ash on it. And so, dealing with coal ash, we burn coal. They tried to pass it, but I was fortunate that my colleagues and my caucus and another caucus and the lieutenant governor stopped it, and we let time run out. So then, the next session came. We stripped it and put my bill back on it, and then it went through onto the governor's desk. So, that's the one that stands out and then voting on other bills. See, what happens with coal ash, they put it in a pond, and you don't have a lining. It seeps into the water table and eventually gets into drinking water. So, they need to have a liner. And then we've also been working on things to try and get away from coal. I know it's a thorn in some people's side about the nuclear plant that we've built [Plant Vogtle, Waynesboro, Georgia]. Cost overruns.

TS: But then one of them at least is online now.

MR: Right, but that takes away from having to depend on coal.

TS: Right. So, you're in favor of nuclear power?

MR: Well, anything that helps clean air, clean environment. I'm a favor of those things. It's interesting how things can sneak up. You don't know. Just like the Sterigenics [medical equipment sterilizing] plant [near Smyrna in Cobb County]. How many people didn't know for years that they were submitting to air cancer-causing [ethylene oxide] gas? I think about people who live there, robust persons. How'd they come down with cancer? And now I'm kind of like, "Oh!" So you have to be vigilant about that.

TS: They just settled for $35 million, which didn't sound like a whole lot of money that they had to pay, although I don't know.

MR: Yes. But you have to be vigilant no matter what form of energy you use. They have good and bad points, but, you know, we have to be vigilant and make sure that no one sells us a bill of goods that what they say is not what they're doing.

TS: I guess it's really related to switching to the Democrats taking over again, but Georgia is one of the few states that doesn't take all the federal money for Medicaid. I know Governor Kemp's trying to do some things to substitute for Medicaid for people of limited income, I guess. But you've done so much work with, the homeless and what have you. Do you have any sense of what the future is going to be for Medicaid in Georgia?

MR: It's helped a lot of people, especially people who have chronic health issues. One of the things I learned in the Air Force when we had the first Gulf War and we called up men and women from the Guard and Reserves. A lot of them, before we sent them to train to do their jobs before they went to war, we had to send them to the doctor and the dentist, because they had no health care. It's hard to shoot a gun or rifle when your teeth are hurting. So, we made it a part of their readiness portfolio—Military TRICARE, which is a health care program and a dental plan—because good health is equated to the success of a mission. And when you talk about bringing businesses or companies into Georgia, people have to have access to health care, so that they're not missing work and they're able to show up and be healthy.

He [Kemp] has tried to write waivers to help people who are already on Medicaid but the people in the gap are still left out. I think part of the problem is we've got to get past rhetoric and deal with our most precious human resource, which is our people, and get them the help they need. Because if you've ever known anybody who has a chronic health issue, diabetes or, you name it, they're happy because their health care is affordable compared to what they had to pay before. So, I said, "How much do you have to pay?" "What?" So the challenge there is we've got to try and get control of both houses because the way they pass the bill is that you have to have both houses' approval. So, we don't necessarily have to get the governorship, but we have to get [the General Assembly]. But that would help.

They're trying to do this waiver where they give piece by piece to people. But it's not dealing with the people who are in the gap. But eventually, hopefully, one day people will wake up and realize, "You know what? We've all got one thing in common. We need health care." Just like when I had my knees replaced, I used the military TRICARE. When the doc said, "Oh, it's time for your co-pay," I started sweating. Then she said, "Oh, it is $25." I was like, "Twenty-five dollars?" I got a piece of paper, and I wrote 25. I spelled it out. She said, "Oh, yes, yes." I hurried up and paid and got out of there before they changed their mind.

TS: Well, I just had a few quick questions to end with about your community service. You are a trustee for Turner Chapel AME Church [Marietta, Georgia].

MR: Yes.

TS: Now you were Catholic when you were growing up. How did you get to the AME?

MR: I was working out in the Navy gym here at the Naval Air Station in Dobbins, and a buddy of mine was in a hurry. I said, "What's the hurry?" He said, "Well, they've got a male choir they tried to start at Turner." And that's how I got involved. I said, "Well, if they let you sing, surely they'll let me sing." And then the late pastor Dr. [Kenneth E.] Marcus [1954-2018]—I always tell a story—one day they were nominating people for trustee, and they were talking about some guy. [Dr. Marcus says,] "This guy has lived a Christian way. He's a nice guy. He's faithful. His heart is after Christ. He's kind, considerate." I said, "I'd like to meet that person; maybe he could teach me something." Then he said my name, and I passed out.

TS: So that's how you became a trustee?

MR: Yes. You know what I mean? I said, "I've got to live up to this now." I said, "Are you sure you're talking about me?

TS: What do you do as a trustee?

MR: Maintain the building, set up venues for different groups, all those little things, keep the building running for the most part, landscape inside, outside. I enjoy it. It gives me a chance to be around a lot of people who are a lot of them surprised to find out who I am. I don't tell a lot of people who I am. They're like, "I need somebody to plunge the toilet." "Okay." "I need somebody to throw out the garbage." "Okay, okay." Then they say, "Wait a minute. Are you Dr. Rhett?" I said, "What do you need? The toilet fixed?"

TS: How did Turner Chapel Cathedral come through the pandemic? Is the membership as high as it used to be, or?

MR: It's starting to come back. You still have a lot of people.

TS: Because you used to have [an additional] parking lot across the street that's no more, I guess.

MR: No. We still have it. We still park people over there. They're starting to come back. A lot of people still go Zoom, like in a number of other churches. But, also, with Turner Chapel and not only just the Black churches. I was reading about Roswell Street Baptist Church. Because of the demographic shift and a lot of people moving out and moving certain demographics in there, the congregation numbers aren't what they used to be.

TS: They're about a third of what they used to be.

MR: Yes. Turner still has a sizable population, but it's not as big as it used to be.

TS: Yes. Well, it was up to something like eight thousand or something like that, wasn't it?

MR: Right. They still get a crowd, but not…

TS: Not that big.

MR: Right. I remember the New Year's Eve service before New Year's Day. They used to be packed to the rafters. I used to be singing. It was interesting. Everybody waiting for the midnight bell. "Ding." Then we go party.

TS: I know you've been active with Paul E. Kelly Jr. American Legion Post 296. Do you want to say anything about that; you are a former junior vice commander?

MR: Yes, that was me, former junior vice commander. They do a lot of good work helping veterans out and helping people in the community. Just like every Veterans Day and Memorial weekend. We used to do Fourth of July. We didn't do it this year. We will barbecue and feed anybody who wants barbecue in the community. Then, if they're a veteran and they need some help, we sit them down and help them with what they need. So, they do a very good job of working with people in the community. Now, we're having a generational shift. The Vietnam group is starting to transition, and now you're starting to get the Gulf War I and what I call the Gulf War II group coming in. So, we have a generational shift coming in.

TS: You've done a lot with the Cobb NAACP.

MR: Yes.

TS: And Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

MR: Yes. The NAACP, I'm a life member. Deane [Bonner] suggested that [laughs].

TS: Suggested that you be a life member?

MR: Yes, I paid $750. And the SCLC, they do a pretty good job, working with different issues in the community, helping people. You know, they both do a good job reaching out when people need help or guidance. And that's right up my alley, working together with them.

TS: The Cobb County Commission on Children and Youth?

MR: That was one where I used to work with former sheriff Neil Warren's [sheriff 2004-2020] wife [Penny]. She and myself and some other people formed that

committee, and we used to raise funds to help children in schools with different needs. You know, I didn't even know she was Neil Warren's wife until I don't know what happened. One day, I guess, they had the corn boiling or something. She said, "Oh, I want you to meet my husband." I said, "Okay. Hey, I know him!"

TS: Well, you've been on all kinds of committees in Powder Springs, the Six Flags area, and so on.

MR: Yes, that's how I learned the community. A lot of people, when they lose an election, they just run off. You don't see them anymore. But I've always been the type of person where I learned something from it. I might not like the way I feel, you know, but that's how you grow.

TS: Yes. Well, what have we not talked about that you want to say?

MR: Not a lot. I think that's pretty much about it. One thing, I always try to surround myself with people who are more knowledgeable than me and put my ego aside. That's why I'm able to get to where I am today, being able to be successful with the Senate and work with these different organizations. Something I learned from my parents—they knew how to humble themselves, whether it was shining shoes, cleaning the bathroom, or just any other job. You can learn a lot when you learn how to blend in like that. I know some of these functions of these organizations. I will put on a hat and put on a janitor's jacket and go sweep around. Listen to people, engage with them, and you learn a lot that way.

TS: Well, if I've done my math right today, you're probably about 67 years old, but you don't seem that age, is that right?

MR: Sixty-six.

TS: You don't seem to have slowed down a bit. Are you just going to keep going as long as you can or what?

MR: As long as I enjoy it. That's the same thing my girlfriend says. She said, "You're always on the go." I said, "I enjoy what I'm doing, helping other people." But I told her I do leave time for the finer things in life, and I said, "You reside in that category." She likes that [laughs]. But I think it was interesting when Giuliani came down there. Matter of fact, I got one of the subpoena letters. I'm going to give it to you [for the KSU Archives].

TS: You got subpoenaed to testify in his case?

MR: Because I was on the committee, and Fani Willis subpoenaed a lot of people. I was subpoenaed for her side. But it was kind of funny because, usually, when people give you a subpoena, they want you to sign for it. But it was like, "Oh,

we'll leave it on your door, and give us a call and let us know you got it." I say that because my presence wasn't that important. They had enough people, but the people pleaded to plea bargains. But it's going to be interesting to see how that works out.

TS: You don't think he's going to take a plea bargain, do you?

MR: That's a good question. Only time will tell. But the other people might because it costs money to try and, you know, do it, try, and go against the grain.

TS: I think I asked you once. You had in your newsletter, I think, at one time a picture of you and Giuliani after he did his appearance before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Elections.

MR: I've had pictures with Giuliani, [Senators] Warnock, Ossoff, Congresswoman [Lucy] McBath, Stacey [Abrams]. But the one with Rudy was kind of interesting because growing up in New York City, we didn't always see eye to eye with Rudy.

TS: Well, I doubt if you still do, do you?

MR: Not really. No.

TS: But you still have the picture that you took. You had a nice response when I asked you about that.

MR: Right. For my friends I thought it was funny and ironic to show, "Look who I'm with." Because where I lived was about a few blocks down from Reverend Al Sharpton's national network. And so, you know, we would go out there and be a part of supporting him, you know, protest this and that. We did not agree with Giuliani's policies on many levels. So, I thought it was interesting for them to see. "Look who I'm taking a picture with. I'm here asking questions about his policies like we did in New York City with Rev. Al Sharpton's organization." And so, it was more like a joke to my friends from New York and people who know my background. In New York, you know, it's like, "Rudy Giuliani of all people!" Some people took it a different way. "How dare you take a picture with him?"

TS: Well, that's what I was wondering if you got some flack from them.

MR: But like I said, my style is I try to work with everyone. Just like I learned from Martin Luther King—he would send Hosea Williams and John Lewis in there to rile up the crowd. Then he would send Andrew Young in to negotiate. Then Martin Luther King would come in. You know, I tried to model myself after the school of Andrew Young of problem solving. You can't problem solve if you ain't communicating. You know? Then, I learned that from my parents, despite

what happened in the community, they were the first to communicate with the other side even though they didn't particularly agree with them. But you have to have that dialogue.

TS: Well, I appreciate you taking the time for the interview.

MR: Oh, no problem. My pleasure.

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