James Johnson

Page. U.S. House of Representatives (1959–1961)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

October 24, 2019

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

"I've always been taught—I mean, everyone's different. But I, from an early age, I always looked at what was the same about somebody. And as I went into medicine, you know, everybody I ever operated on—no matter what their skin color, gender, education, where they came from—once I put the scalpel on them, they all looked the same within a few microns of skin. Blood was always red and if it wasn't, they were in trouble. If they didn't get oxygen within a couple of minutes bad things happen. So I've always looked—it was my starting point is what do we have in common rather than what, what's different about us."

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Abstract

In January 1959, Chicago high school sophomore James Johnson accepted an invitation to become a Page for the U.S. House of Representatives. When he arrived in Washington, DC, however, House officials retracted the appointment, a decision that focused national media attention on Johnson. Five House Members agreed to m hire him as a messenger in their Capitol Hill offices, allowing him to work for Congress and attend the Capitol Page School until his graduation in 1961.

In this oral history, Johnson discusses the race and class divisions in his childhood neighborhood in Chicago, as well as the time he heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak at a local church. He remembers his parents emphasizing education as a way to overcome racial inequality, telling him at a young age that he needed to work harder than his white peers to receive the same opportunities.

Johnson describes receiving national press attention when he first arrived in Washington, DC, including an appearance on NBC's *The Today Show*. He recalls moving in with his aunt, journalist Ethel Payne, and attending a DC public school while the House found a way for him to attend the Page School. He notes the different public attitudes about race in Chicago versus the in the Washington metropolitan area with its more overt segregation; but he also remembers being able to connect with his Page School classmates. He explains a typical day working in the House and the ways his position differed from a traditional Page. Johnson cites his time on the Hill as providing the foundation for his medical career as a Navy surgeon.

Biography

James Avery Johnson Jr. was born on an U.S. Army base in Wilmington, NC, on June 17, 1944, to James Avery Johnson and Avis Ruth (Payne) Johnson. His mother was a social worker and his father worked in a post office after serving in the U.S. Army. His family moved to the Midwest and Johnson grew up in Chicago with his younger brother, Fred.

During his sophomore year of high school in 1959, Johnson's aunt, the pioneering African-American journalist Ethel Payne, helped him secure an appointment as a House Page through Illinois Congressman Barratt O'Hara. When he arrived at the U.S. Capitol, however, House officials claimed that all vacancies in the Page program were filled, denying Johnson the opportunity to become the first African-American Page in the 20th century. Five Representatives joined together to devise a specialized arrangement. They each hired Johnson as a Page-like messenger for their offices, which allowed him to work on Capitol Hill and attend the Page School. Johnson lived with his aunt and joined his peers each morning for classes but did not have permission to go on the House Floor like his classmates. Instead, he worked in a different Member office each day of the week, running messages and assisting with office tasks.

Johnson graduated from the Page School in 1961 and subsequently earned degrees in biology and chemistry from Oberlin College in Ohio. He graduated from medical school at the University of Rochester in New York and completed his internship and residency at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he was the first African-American student in the surgery program.

Johnson joined the U.S. Navy in 1966. He reached the rank of Rear Admiral. One of his first assigned duties was as a medical officer on the USS New Orleans. In 1994, he was the Commanding Officer of a United Nations hospital fleet in Croatia. He went on to serve at medical centers in Washington State, the District of Columbia, and California. In 2001, he assumed command of the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, California. Johnson retired from the military in 2004 and continues to live in San Diego.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

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Interviewer Biographies

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V. Grace Ethier is a researcher, writer, and oral historian for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned her BA in history from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She co-authored *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017) and leads web production for the oral history team.

— JAMES JOHNSON —
INTERVIEW

WASNIEWSKI: Today is October 24th, 2019, and I'm Matt Wasniewski from the House History Office [in the Rayburn House Office Recording Studio]. I'm here with my colleague Grace Ethier. We have the privilege of interviewing Admiral James Johnson who was one of the very earliest African Americans to serve as a House Page. We're going to talk to him about his House service. Thank you for being here today.

JOHNSON: Thank you for having me.

ETHIER: Thank you so much.

WASNIEWSKI: We have so many questions for you, but we wanted to get to a few biographical ones. First, tell us where and when you were born.

JOHNSON: I was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, on June 17th, 1944. Let's see, why was I in Wilmington? I was there because my dad was stationed there in the Army. There was a big Army base at the time outside of Wilmington, not very far from what is now Camp Lejeune Marine Base. That's why I was born there. I had the occasion to read a lot of the letters that my parents wrote to each other during that time frame. They're both deceased now, but he shipped out when I was about two or three days old. [He] was shipped to a base in Louisiana, an intermediate staging base and was there only a few weeks. And then was shipped to what is now Beale Air Force Base in northern California where he was staged before he went overseas to Burma and India.

But my point is my mother had no family there. So, as soon as she could get passage back to Chicago, where her family was, she took me back there when I was about six weeks old. My reason for being born in Wilmington wasn't family. It was just because that's where my dad was stationed.

WASNIEWSKI: What were your parents' names?

JOHNSON: I'm named after my father. He's James Avery Johnson Sr. My mother was Avis Ruth Payne—P-A-Y-N-E was her maiden name.

WASNIEWSKI: And were their families originally from the Chicago area?

JOHNSON: Yes. My mother was born and raised in Chicago. Her mother was originally from Evansville, Indiana, moved to Chicago when she was a fairly young woman. Her days were all in Chicago. My dad was born and raised in Trenton, Tennessee, which is about 80 or 90 miles northeast of Memphis in cotton and corn country—or at least it was back when I was a kid.

WASNIEWSKI: And your dad was in the military, but what did he do for an occupation when he came back home?

JOHNSON: My dad was interesting. My dad graduated, I believe, in the late '30s—around 1938 or so—and was among the first people who went to selective service, which started about that time. He got drafted before the war. I believe he was supposed to have been released—his time would have been up in 1942. Of course, December 7th, 1941, comes before 1942. So, he wasn't released until 1945—late in 1945. In the service, he drove trucks and stuff like that. He was in the Quartermaster Corps as I recall.

My dad was of a generation that didn't talk much about what happened to them overseas. My wife's father was a Marine and it was the same thing. He

didn't talk to family members much about what happened while they were over there.

He came back to Chicago and got a job in the post office because by then I was almost two and my dad had strong values about being a provider—that you weren't really a good man unless you could provide for your family. While he had a college degree and was considering going back for a master's degree, providing for the family trumped that. He got a job in a post office because that was an area where a Negro male could find a good-paying job. That's how that happened.

WASNIEWSKI: And your mom? Did she have a job as well?

JOHNSON: My mother was a social worker, and she worked for the Cook County Department of Public Aid.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

ETHIER: Could you describe the neighborhood you grew up in in Chicago?

JOHNSON: The first neighborhood was Englewood, which is an interesting neighborhood. I lived there until I was eight years old. Chicago is often referred to as being the city of neighborhoods, which it is. But it is also one of the most segregated cities in the country. Every ethnic group is in their own neighborhood. You have the Black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods. Within the white neighborhoods, you have Greek neighborhoods, Italian, Irish, Polish, etc., and with very little transition. You could go from an all-white to all-Black neighborhood in a matter of a block or so. You could go from all Polish to all Irish in a block or so.

Englewood was an all-Black neighborhood for the most part. We lived on Throop Street and Loomis Boulevard was two blocks to the west. When you got to Loomis, the neighborhood changed from Black to white. Once you got to the first street past Loomis, it was all white. On the west side of the street of Loomis there were some Black, some white, but by the time you got to the next street it was all white. Pretty much by the time you got on our side, it was all Black. That's just the way it was and that's what I remember.

I remember Ogden Park, which was two blocks south—the north and east side of the park led into Black neighborhoods. The south and the west side of the park led into white neighborhoods. I always remember coming and going from the park from either the east side or the north side. I never ever went the other way. The old Comiskey Park was set up that way. If you came in from the east or the south, those were Black neighborhoods. If it was the north or the west, those were Irish neighborhoods. When the game was over you knew which doors to go out. You didn't want to wind up in an Irish pub after the Sox lost a game if you were Black. That was not a good look for you. {laughter}

I lived there until I was eight. Then, we moved to Park Manor, which was a neighborhood that is further south. It was a neighborhood of single-family bungalows. When we moved in, it was mostly white. Within two years, it had changed to being all-Black, which is what happened in Chicago at the time. Neighborhoods changed overnight. Black families who were more educated and more middle class would move into a working-class white neighborhood. They would all move out or they would get good money for their homes and they'd move someplace else. Then middle-class Black families could move into homes that were better homes. It was sort of a win-

win, but it was interesting how they did it because the school boundaries would be adjusted because, as I said, there was very little transition zone.

When we moved to Park Manor, the school that was closest to me was two blocks away on 76th Street. We lived on 7339 Indiana, so near 74th. 75th was the divide. I didn't go to the school that was a few blocks away. I went to the school that was actually a mile away because it was still in the Black neighborhood. In fact, they built a new school three blocks from me before they would allow us to go to the other school. That's just the way things were.

BRIEF BREAK

JOHNSON: For me in the early '50s, when I went down south to visit my father's folks in Tennessee, signs were up— "colored only," etc. The Illinois Central Train was integrated in Illinois, but by the time it crossed the border into Tennessee it was all segregated. That's just the way it was. For me, that part of America is not something I read in a history book. That is something I remember vividly because I lived it.

WASNIEWSKI: When you say that the train would [become segregated]—and I've heard of this, but what did that mean for you? Did it mean you had to get up and move to a different car on the train?

JOHNSON: No, no. They were very subtle about it. So, you leave Chicago and the cars are all integrated. As you got to Southern Illinois, a person buying a ticket who, let's say, was in Springfield who was white and was going to New Orleans would be put in car A. If you were Black, you would be put in car B. By the time you got to Tennessee, the cars had all been changed without a lot of hoop-di-doo. So, no. It was not a situation where you had to get up and

move. I don't ever recall doing that. It's just by the time you got to Tennessee, everybody in your car was Black.

WASNIEWSKI: Right. Who were your role models growing up in Chicago?

JOHNSON: My family, my parents. I was given certain values at a very early age. By early I mean as early as I can remember—three or four. I could read by the time I was four. Reading was a huge part of our family and our extended family. Everybody read to you.

There were three major rules. One, you had to get a college education. Going to college was not optional. Two, you could be whatever you wanted to be in life, but whatever you chose to be you had to strive to be the best at it. You had to work hard. Mediocrity and being lazy is not on your list of things to do. And number three, whatever you chose to do, you had to be honest and have integrity. Being a criminal was not on your list of things to do. Those were the three rules I remember even before kindergarten.

Also, that you were born a Negro, not fair, but that's just the way it is. I was taught from the earliest age that I would always have to work harder and longer than my white colleagues, that I would have less opportunities, and I had to make the most of whatever opportunity I was given because I wasn't going to be given as many as other people. And that's unfair, unjust, but that's life. As my dad or someone used to say, "If you don't like it, you should have picked better parents, but you didn't. So, that's that." {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: And just because I didn't ask it up front, where did your dad go to college?

JOHNSON: He went to what was then Tennessee State. He came from a family of 13 and I believe he was the only member of his family that went to college. He was an excellent football and basketball player. I believe he had a scholarship. He

went to Tennessee State. My mother went to West Virginia State or West Virginia Teacher's College? I think it's something else. They both went to historically Black colleges, which have now been—I think are part of the West Virginia and Tennessee systems and are not historically Black colleges anymore.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

ETHIER: Did you have an interest in politics when you were younger?

JOHNSON: I first came to Washington when I was nine years old. My cousin and I came to visit my aunt who lived here and was a journalist. She took us all over and I remember then seeing the Pages in Congress and thought that was interesting. I guess I've always had an interest. I can remember the election in '52, even though I was only eight years old. I remember [President Dwight D.] Eisenhower running against [Adlai Ewing] Stevenson [II]. I remember [President Harry S.] Truman. I guess I always was sort of interested in politics, not necessarily wanting to run for office.

Also, Chicago is a very political city. Politics and privilege and patronage is very much intertwined in Chicago. There were 50 aldermen, each of whom has their own patronage system. If you grow up in a city like Chicago, the political side of things is very much part of the government—the patronage, how services are distributed, etc.

WASNIEWSKI: Were your parents active in politics at all?

JOHNSON: Not really. We were active in the sense of discussion. But they weren't activists. My aunt was very active in politics—my aunt Ethel, the journalist. I had a cousin who was very active in politics. But it was certainly something we talked about and discussed.

Never talked about who we voted for. I never knew who my father voted for. My father always said, "There's a reason why it's a secret ballot." {laughter} He said, "You're not required to tell anybody who you vote for." But we always discussed issues and things like that. It was clear that based on the values and issues at home, some politicians would be less favored than others.

But I don't know if my father was a Democrat or Republican. I know my maternal grandmother was Republican because, for her, the Republican Party was a party of Lincoln. She was born in 1883 and that's the party that freed the slaves. But party affiliation wasn't something I grew up with as being something you had to do. Voting was, okay? Voting was something you had to do. That was part of your responsibility as a citizen. It was never taken lightly. It was something that you had to do. You didn't have to say who you voted for, but you couldn't sit at home and not vote. That was not accepted.

WASNIEWSKI: Civic responsibility versus partisan affiliation. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Correct.

ETHIER: You saw Martin Luther King Jr. speak at a rally near your house in 1956.

JOHNSON: Correct.

ETHIER: I'm wondering if you can describe that experience and what he was speaking about and what the important issues for families living in your neighborhood were at that time.

JOHNSON: We all walked to see him. He was in a place maybe six or eight blocks from our house. We all walked to see him, and it was like throngs of people as you got closer. Martin Luther King, of course, is an incredibly eloquent speaker, with what I will call a James Earl Jones voice. When he speaks, you just

listen. It's captivating. He spoke about things that were spoken in my household, about the injustices that were there, but what you could do to overcome them. In my household, I was taught things were unfair. I was also taught that the unfairness could never be an excuse for my failure, that I had to find a way to overcome the unfairness. The unfairness was a given, but things like, "I couldn't get from A to B because the man wouldn't let me do it." That was not an acceptable excuse. You had to find a way to get around that and number one was education. In my family education was felt of being the center point of how to overcome the injustices in the world.

ETHIER: Were your friends and family members involved in the civil rights movement?

JOHNSON: Some more than others. I don't remember going on a lot of marches. But we were involved. A lot of the involvement wasn't so much going on marches. Involvement was getting educated, advancing oneself, and then looking out for the person that was coming after you. That if you got an opportunity, you had an obligation to make the most of it, be successful, to be an example of what the just system should be, and always looking out for the person who is coming behind you. Those were the values that were in the household. Less of the rabble-rousing, if you will, although, there was an appreciation for that. But more that your job was to get ahead and not let injustice get in the way. You had to figure out a workaround—whatever that was—an honest, legal workaround. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Could you tell us a little bit about how the Page program here on Capitol Hill got on your radar and your early interest in it?

JOHNSON: Well, I became aware of the program when I visited Washington to see my aunt as a nine year old. As I went through the school system in Chicago—I

mean I decided I wanted to be a doctor when I was six. The importance of education was always important, but I was also focused on a specific goal of becoming a doctor. I knew I had to go to college. I knew I had to go to a good college in order to get into a good medical school. The high schools that I was in and the grade schools—there was a mix.

Again, school districts were based on neighborhoods and the education was an afterthought. I mean, as long as the neighborhoods maintained their "neighborhood purity," then everything else was secondary. The better schools were in the white neighborhoods. No if, ands, or buts about that in terms of the academic accomplishment.

What the Page appointment offered was the opportunity to go to the Capitol Page School. That was part of the deal. The Capitol Page School was like going to a prep school. All the teachers were extremely capable—the college professor types. The only graduates of the Page School who didn't go to college would be someone who didn't want to go to college. But if you wanted to go to college, the graduates all got into good schools with good educations.

That became the big draw as we learned more about it. It wasn't just becoming a Page. It was becoming a Page in order to be able to go to the Capitol Page School. And again, my family—education is at the top of the list of values.

WASNIEWSKI: You've mentioned your aunt, Ethel Payne, a couple times.

JOHNSON: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: What role did she play in promoting the Page School idea to you and getting you here to Washington?

JOHNSON: My aunt is a very special aunt. I have a lot of special mentors and leaders in my family. But my aunt was a pioneering journalist. She was one of the first African American journalists—particularly female—that was part of the White House Press Corps. She was not only a journalist, she was a damn good journalist and a pioneering one. When Vice President [Richard Milhous] Nixon went to Africa, I think it was around 1956 or thereabouts, she was part of the press corps that went there.[1] When they got back, she invited the Nixons to her apartment for a reception and a party. And they came. In fact, I have the thank-you letter that Richard and Pat Nixon wrote to my aunt about how much they enjoyed being in her apartment and meeting folks and whatnot.

So, my aunt was a heavy hitter politically. She also, at times, worked for the ALF-CIO. She was very connected. She never married, was very connected, and she knew about the Page program. She knew about the school. She proposed the idea, which my dad went along with because of the school. Had it not been for the school that was attached to the Page program, my being a Page would have never happened. He also went along with it because in my coming here, I was going to live with my aunt who lived in town, as opposed to the normal circumstances that Pages lived under. Because to go to a city or go to another place without having family to look after you—that wasn't happening. If my aunt had not lived in Washington and had that opportunity, I wouldn't have been a Page because my dad wouldn't have gone along with that—or my mother for that matter.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you live with her the whole time you were here?

JOHNSON: Absolutely. {laughter} There was never a consideration for any other arrangement.

WASNIEWSKI: Because most Pages would have lived in boarding houses at this time. There was no Page dorm that Congress ran.

JOHNSON: Correct. They lived in boarding houses that were a couple of blocks behind the Library of Congress. As far as my family was concerned, that was an unsupervised situation that was not something they would go along with.

ETHIER: Where did your aunt live in the city?

JOHNSON: Originally, [she] lived on Belmont Road Northwest, but after my first year, I was going to be reappointed, we moved to a larger apartment on Clifton Street Northwest, which was right across the street from Cardozo High School up on the hill—1225 Clifton.

ETHIER: So, how did you get your Page appointment?

JOHNSON: {laughter} Well, that's an interesting evolution. We lived in the 2nd Congressional District in Illinois, which was Congressman Barratt O'Hara, who was a long-standing Irish politician—chain-smoker. I mean, his fingers were stained yellow from the nicotine. He would light up one cigarette with another. But Congressman O'Hara was a seasoned pro and he arranged for my appointment with my aunt. As I said, my aunt was connected and so that's how it came about.

We came to Washington expecting to be appointed as a Page in the House of Representatives under the sponsorship of Barratt O'Hara. When we got here, it turned out they said, "Nope. There's no vacancy. You need to go back to Chicago," which caused a bit of a furor. I mean, we were completely blindsided.

Remember, the school was the big draw and I came here in the wintertime between semesters. I finished my first semester in Chicago. Between semesters we came here expecting to not only be a Page but expecting to go to school. When this happened, this was a big deal not only as to why it happened, but it was a big deal because now I'm not in school. While this was being sorted out for a few weeks, I actually enrolled in Western High School, because not going to school was not an option.

So, how it happened? Originally, there was the talk that, "Well, he would have been the first Negro Page and the Southerners didn't want that." Not sure that was actually the problem. There may have been some more internal issues within the Illinois delegation. But at any rate, there was no vacancy.

This got into the media. Remember, my aunt was a journalist and when this didn't happen, I'm sure her co-journalist friends said, "What's going on?" It was like, "I don't know." I remember being on *The Today Show*, interviewed by Frank McGee and basically [I] said, "I don't know. I came here wanting to be a Page, but more importantly I came here because I wanted to go to the Page School and get an education and become a doctor." That happened and of course then that lit up the whole country. It was like, oh, now what's going to happen? If we send this kid back to Chicago, not a good look.

I remember at the time, Sam [Samuel Taliaferro] Rayburn was the Speaker and Sam Rayburn was an individual who didn't like anything that would besmirch the reputation or the honor of the House of Representatives. I mean, his life was the House. Obviously, he was an astute, adept politician, tactician, etc. But he loved the House of Representatives as an institution. This was bad copy for the House of Representatives.

It turns out in order to go to the school, you had to be a full-time employee of the House, the Senate, or the Supreme Court, and be of high-school age. Well, it turns out that the only full-time employees of the House, the Senate, or the Supreme Court who are of high-school age are Pages. That was the hook.

Eventually what happened was a bipartisan effort—strange word in these times. James Roosevelt, the eldest son of President Franklin Roosevelt [and] a Democrat from Los Angeles, and William H. [Hanes] Ayres, a Republican from Akron, Ohio, got together and came up with this scheme in which I would work one day a week in their office along with three other Members of Congress: Martha [Wright] Griffiths of Michigan who eventually became Lieutenant Governor of Michigan, Byron [Lindberg] Johnson of Colorado, and Quentin [Northrup] Burdick from North Dakota, who eventually became Senator Burdick.

The five of them each employed me in their office one day a week, which was not a big burden in terms of their individual office budget. The five days added up to an FTE [full-time equivalent] in the aggregate. So, working for five Members of Congress as, quote, "an Office Page," one day a week made me eligible to go to the Page School. I never received an appointment as a Floor Page, but I stayed there the rest of my high school days working for various Members. Eventually, if someone left for any reason, someone else would be found. I also worked with Adam Clayton Powell [Jr.], Charlie [Charles Cole] Diggs [Jr.] from Michigan, [Thomas William] Ludlow Ashley from Ohio, and Henry [Schoellkopf] Reuss from Wisconsin. I always had five people. I was always on five Members' payroll.

When I left school [in the morning], the other Pages went to the House, to the Senate, the Supreme Court. I went to whatever office I was scheduled for

that day and worked in the office. I did personal message running for that particular Member and learned all kinds of office skills. It was a good education for me in terms of learning skills which would benefit me later on. I was never allowed on the floor of the House or the Senate while they were in session. I could go into the cloakroom but was never allowed on the floor.

So, it was years later, in fact within the last three to five years—Susan A. Davis is my Congresswoman. I live in the 53rd Congressional District in California. She, a couple of years ago, took me on the floor of the House while they were in session to close out that bucket list of my life. That only happened within the last five years.

WASNIEWSKI: You were a high school sophomore at that point, correct?

JOHNSON: Correct.

WASNIEWSKI: How did you deal with the attention and then coming here and having those plans upended? That must have been a challenge.

JOHNSON: It was, but holding my head up and doing things with dignity was what I had been taught. Sticking to values is what I had been taught. The fact was that my real quest was to get the education. Becoming a Page was a means to getting into a good high school, okay? I mean, being a Page was—there is that. But for me it was always about going to the school. It was a means of getting to a good high school to get to a good college to get to a good medical school.

Some of the other trappings that one might associate with being a Page wasn't a big deal for me. When the Members of Congress arranged for this other thing, that got me into the school. Every year there was this sort of thing whether or not—would there be an appointment? It never happened

and I think that it didn't happen, probably, being there was so much notoriety that the arrangement that they worked out was working. It kind of saved face for everybody and was a win-win for everybody. Whoever didn't want me to be a regular Page, they got their wish because I wasn't. But going to the school, which was the real goal for me, I was able to do that like any other Page. So, it was a win-win.

WASNIEWSKI: And you were the first African American admitted to the Page School?

JOHNSON: No. The Supreme Court had Pages before me. There were African-American Supreme Court Pages—at least two prior or also while I was there. But in the House and the Senate, there had been none. I was the closest thing to that. Eventually, I think in the mid-'60s, there was an African American appointed by the usual process.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, by Paul Findley from Springfield.[2]

JOHNSON: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: When you mention that there was disagreement on the delegation, was that because of another Page position?

JOHNSON: You know, it's one of those murky things. Maybe there wasn't a vacancy because it was supposed to go to somebody else and there was a mistake. Or maybe O'Hara didn't clear it with the right people or when they found out that I was a Negro, maybe somebody from the South didn't like it. There was like—who knows—who knew. I still to this day don't know all the ins and outs.

But again, I got into the school. That was the goal for me. All the other stuff was secondary. I wore the same clothes that all the other Pages did. I got up

and got to school at 6:30 in the morning. When school was over, I was working for specific Members of Congress. I was working in their offices. I was actually learning more skills than just running messages back and forth. I don't think I really lacked. It would have been nice to have been the first House or Senate official Page by the normal process. And it would have been nice to have been allowed on the floor. That was sort of the barrier. That was kind of like, "Okay, you can go to the school, but you can't come on the floor while we're in session." But like I said, I punched that ticket a few years ago thanks to my Member of Congress.

ETHIER: Did your family back home or your aunt offer you any advice about handling the ongoing media attention or the difficulty of your appointment being retracted?

JOHNSON: The main thing to focus on was getting into the school. That's what I remember talking about. I want to go to the school because I want to get into a good college and I want to become a doctor. I did. I had been wanting to be a doctor since I was six. This is going to help me be a doctor.

I know that resonated with a lot of people who wrote letters—favorable letters and whatnot. In their letters, they said, "Keep your chin up. Don't let them get you down. Don't lose sight of what's important." So, I didn't. And it helped that my aunt was here. It helped that I made friends with a family in town that sort of adopted me and had the same values as my parents. I went to church and all the things I did at home. Those were very important. I wasn't just sent here and cut loose. Whatever was going on around me, when I left the school or I left the offices I worked in, I went into a normal environment with my aunt. I went to church. I had friends that lived in town that weren't a part of anything going on here on Capitol Hill. I had the ability to have a normal life, if you will, outside of what was going on here.

No matter what was going on here, every single day I left and went back to a more normal life. That was very important.

WASNIEWSKI: Who was the family that you befriended?

JOHNSON: The Davis Family. They befriended me. I was Lutheran at the time and they were part of the Augustana Lutheran Church in Washington. That's where I met them. They only lived a couple blocks away and [were] hardworking, working-class people. She was a homemaker. Herman worked two jobs. He worked in a dairy and some other job. They were just nice, ordinary, working class people. None of the trappings that went on in Capitol Hill. Whatever buzz you could think about being a Page or being involved in politics or the kinds of figures that are common in Capitol Hill—not being critical. I'm just saying that life [style].

The Davises were ordinary, nice, good people with normal values like I was accustomed to. They met my mother and they looked after me. They made sure that no matter what was going on on the Hill, that I had a normal life and was exposed to the right kind of values—went to school, dated, and didn't get into trouble. Because that was easy to do. {laughter} People might look at you and say, "Hey, maybe you want to try this over here." And, "No, you don't want to try that. Nope." They kept me out of trouble. There were temptations along the way. Trust me. But they kept me out of trouble. They didn't let me stray from the values that I had been brought up with.

ETHIER: Did you feel that the city was welcoming to you as a young African-American man when you arrived here?

JOHNSON: Well, that's an interesting question. In the late '50s—Washington, DC, is part of the South. There's some who will say that Philadelphia is the northernmost southern city. Washington, DC, is the South. As soon as you

cross the Potomac River, all the signs were there. All the segregation signs from that era went up as soon as you went to Arlington, Alexandria—as soon as you crossed the river the signs were there. The signs weren't in DC. They weren't in Maryland, but attitudes were.

So, welcoming city? Yes, if you were in the right part of the city. Certainly where I was with the Davises and the church was very welcoming, very supportive, but there were plenty of places I could go to easily where it was not so. Western High School was one of the few really integrated high schools at the time. It drew from a variety of neighborhoods and areas in the Northwest part of Washington, which as you know, has working-class neighborhoods, but there are also a lot of embassies and lots of other things so that it was a good cross-section of individuals.

Although, it was kind of funny when I first got there. {laughter} Back in Chicago, they had an honors curriculum, which the brainiacs were in. It was sort of a small group of kids who took what would now be called college preparatory classes. When I came here and went to Western—Washington [schools] at the time had a track system [with four levels]. There was an honors level, a college prep [level], a vocational [level] was a lowest one and then there was a basic [level in between]. But if you weren't in the first two then you weren't in anything that was going to lead to college. Most of the Negro kids were not in the first two tracks.

When I came here, I was put in I think track three or whatever. The first day I was there was a math test of some sort. I scored a 100 because it was easy. It was stuff that I'd learned maybe a year or two earlier. The teacher was like, "Okay, where did you learn this?" I said, "I learned it in the school I came from in Chicago." There was kind of a hubbub and they gave me some other tests and I kept scoring 100s because it was stuff I had already learned like a

year or 18 months earlier. So, they put me in the college prep track. But the assumption was I wasn't smart enough, because I was Negro, to be in those classes.

ETHIER: How long did you attend that school?

JOHNSON: I think we came here in January. My recollection is by March things were sorted out and I was in the Page School. So, not more than four to six weeks because there was a period of several days or weeks were I wasn't in school at all. It was like if this doesn't get resolved, not being in school is not one of the options here. The family talked [and] said, "Well, there's still a chance something will work out." So, that's why I enrolled in Western High School.

WASNIEWSKI: Did one or both of you parents come out with you initially?

JOHNSON: My mother did.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

JOHNSON: Also, the Davises' kids, they were high school age, went to Western.

ETHIER: Did you meet with any Members as they were figuring employment out for you?

JOHNSON: I think there were meetings going on. I wasn't actually here. I was kind of like in never-never land in my aunt's place. When this was sorted out, it was clear that Congressmen Roosevelt and Ayres were the architects of this agreement. They sent letters saying this is what's going to happen. I still have those. But they're the ones who put this together, I'm sure with the blessing of the Speaker because something like this would not happen without the Speaker. That's just the way things were. I was never told he was part of it,

but I know enough to know that it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't given his approval. It just wouldn't have happened.

WASNIEWSKI: Rayburn is one of those legendary people in House history. So, we have to ask if you ever had any personal interactions with him.

JOHNSON: Yes, I remember meeting him. It was a very ordinary thing. As I said, I went back and forth to the cloakroom and all the Members of Congress who I worked for, except for Ayres, were Democrats. So, I had the occasion to meet him. The Speaker was not a man of a lot of words. Didn't need to be a man of a lot of words. Let's just say being in his presence, there was an aura about him. You knew who you were in the presence of. If he never said a word, never opened his mouth, never said anything, his body language was something to behold. And he loved this institution. He loved the institution of the House of Representatives. It was his life. He dedicated his life to it. He never married. It was the most important thing for him. I say that because, of course, there's politics. But for Speaker Sam this wasn't just about politics. This was a calling.

ETHIER: How would you describe the atmosphere of the House when you arrived?

JOHNSON: Once all the hoopla went down, I got to the school of course. People read the papers. *The Today Show* is *The Today Show*. I think when I got there, it was kind of, "Who is this guy?" I conducted myself the way any student would and rather quickly I was accepted. There were some students who were less accepting than others. Remember, this is a bunch of teenagers from all over the country. You've got teenagers from the South whose exposure to someone like me is very different and who have been taught that someone like me isn't somebody that you interact with other than that person being subservient to you. You don't ever interact with someone like that on an equal basis. There

was a lot of adjustments that people had to make, but they made adjustments. I've always been taught—I mean, everyone's different. But from an early age, I always looked at what was the same about somebody.

And as I went into medicine, everybody I ever operated on—no matter what their skin color, gender, education, where they came from—once I put the scalpel on them, they all looked the same within a few microns of skin. Blood was always red and if it wasn't they were in trouble. If they didn't get oxygen within a couple of minutes bad things happen. My starting point is what do we have in common rather than what's different about us. Sports like basketball—yeah, I like basketball. It didn't matter if you were from Mississippi. You were from where you were from and you would look for some common ground. I was able to find that common ground with just about everybody. My yearbook pictures have people signing things from all over.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you remember anything in particular that helped break the ice?

JOHNSON: I think just going to class and just interacting like any other student. People [could] see that I wasn't this sort of strange public figure that was trying to undo everything. I was just a kid who wanted to go to school and, frankly, that was the motivation for most of the kids that were there.

You could be appointed for a whole semester or a year or just for a month. Some Members would bring a different person up every month, some for just a semester, some for a year, and some for all four years. There were a variety of different kinds of appointments but however you were appointed, the kids who came here had an understanding about the school. The school was the great unifier. It didn't matter whether you were House, Senate, Supreme Court, or me in the situation I was in. You came to school at 6:30 in the

morning. You were there from 6:30 to 10:30. You had classes. You had great teachers. You focused on education and no matter where you came from virtually all the Pages came from some kind of background where coming to the school was seen as a value from the community they came from.

When you share that commonality that being in the school was special, getting an education is special, that tends to break down a lot of the other stuff. Whatever bad things you might have been taught at home—you weren't at home for the most part. Wherever you came from, that was back there. You were now getting up at oh-dark-hundred to go to school at 6:30. I mean going to school at 6:30 in the morning that's not—

WASNIEWSKI: That's no easy task. {laughter}

JOHNSON: No easy task and that's not something any other kid experienced for the most part. We were all sharing something that was unique—going to school from 6:30 to 10:30 in the morning and then working in the highest offices of the land—the House, the Senate, the Supreme Court. That was a shared commonality that no matter where you came from, whatever you're going back to very few people would know anything about that.

WASNIEWSKI: A little bit like military service.

JOHNSON: Yes. So, valuing commonality and understanding how important that was, I think that also helped break the ice, that ultimately, I was there for the same reason most of the other kids were there for. And I wasn't really different. I mean, I was, but not enough that it should matter.

ETHIER: When did you find time to study?

JOHNSON: Well, you got to understand there's always time for study. {laughter} You can't just study, but there's always time for study. Going to school is a lot about time management. I mean, my first job was nine or ten years old as a paper route. Even before I came here, I was doing jobs and I had chores around the house. Going to school and studying was always in the context of other things that you had to do. It was very important and it was a number one. But you couldn't just study. You had to develop other skills. That was part of it. So, {laughter} time management is critical.

When you go into higher education that's what it's all about. When you're in high school you're in school from, let's say, 8:00 to 3:00 in a normal high school. And yes, you have homework, but you spent a lot of time—every day you're in class. When you go to college, you're maybe in class three hours a day? Four hours a day? Some days you're not in class at all. But for every hour you're in class, there's probably four to six hours of work that you have to do. But it's not in a classroom. Time management is exquisitely important in college. I learned that here.

When I got to college, I played sports. I had a sport. I worked, went to school, but time management that I fine-tuned here, going to the Page School 6:30 to 10:30, leaving there and going to a job—a full-time job—and then finding the time study afterwards or on breaks or whatnot, that became part of the routine. You learn how to read on a bus—a street car. I lived out in town. I commuted. The time it took me to get here was at least a half hour, 45 minutes every day. I was reading on the street car. You learn how to multitask.

I still to this day {laughter} take my Kindle with me almost everywhere. If I'm standing in a Costco line that's going to be a 15-minute wait, I pull out my

Kindle because it makes the time more productive. That's always been part of my life. I learned a lot of that here as a Page—how to manage time.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you talk little bit more about what you did in individual Member offices?

JOHNSON: In an individual Member's office, I did a lot of what was called office stuff. Back in the days when there was a mimeograph machine, for example. Making copies of things that the various Members wanted to get out to their constituents—being engaged in that sort of thing. A lot of the things that people go to a Staples or Office Depot [for], put together packages and whatnot. That's a lot of what I did and, in the process of making copies and putting together things, you also read a lot of stuff. If the Members are sending something to their constituents or preparing something for a bill that they want to take to committee, if you're in charge of putting those packages together—I was also a fast reader. I read a lot of stuff.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you ever interact with visitors or constituents who were in town or give tours?

JOHNSON: Sure. In the day that I was in a Member's office, I had my own desk in the outer offices. There would be a desk where I would be working. When you came into your Member's outer office where there was an array of people usually six, seven desks with people doing various tasks, I would be at one of those desks.

WASNIEWSKI: And back in this era, it would have been the Longworth or the Cannon Building because there was no Rayburn Building.

JOHNSON: There's the old House Office Building and the new House Office Building. They didn't have other names. {laughter} And the one Senate Office Building.

WASNIEWSKI: Right. {laughter} Any of those members—we have a list of folks that you worked for—James Roosevelt, Martha Griffiths, Quentin Burdick we talked about. Any memories about any of them stand out for you?

JOHNSON: Yes, James Roosevelt, of course, was the oldest son of the President. He had obviously a remarkable family history. His mother was alive at that time. I remember part of being in the office—he had a close relationship with Eleanor [Roosevelt]. His interaction with Eleanor, whatever that was, often took priority. There were Eleanor kind of projects that would come about and that went to the head of the queue of whatever might be going on.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you ever have a chance to meet her?

JOHNSON: Not to my recollection. But I knew a lot about her. Congressmen Ayres was from Akron, Ohio. A very active Republican within his party. I believe after he left Congress he became—might have even been the Head of the VA [U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs] at one point when he retired. He was the only Republican I worked for. I remember him because the Republicans were always in the minority when I was there. It gave me a perspective from the other side of the aisle working for him because he was on the minority side. He was on the Republican side.

So, again, I had an experience that most Pages don't get because you're either appointed by a Democrat or a Republican. I worked for both sides. Throughout my time as a Page, I got to see what was going on on both sides of the aisle.

ETHIER: You also started working in the Senate Office Building.

JOHNSON: Briefly. When Congressman Burdick ran for the Senate in 1960, he won [and] moved over to the Senate. For a brief time, I worked for him over in the Senate Office until a Member of Congress on the House side was found.

ETHIER: Can you compare the House and the Senate? Were they different at all?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, just like today. I mean, the Founders set up the two chambers with different primary responsibilities. The presidency with different primary responsibilities and the Supreme Court with different primary responsibilities. The House is set up to be the finance side. So, most money matters originate in the House—appropriations and whatnot. And they run every two years. The Senate is six years and they were the more statesman-like issues—foreign policy, approving all the court nominees. Things on the Senate side were more deliberative by design. I don't like to say it moved at a slower pace, but moved at a different pace because there were things that you did on the Senate side that didn't happen on the House side. Their perspective about foreign relations and the court system was a focus. And, of course, if you had just been elected to your Senate seat, it was going to be five, six years before you had to run again. So, their perspective was different from that respect. Everybody on the House side, including the Speaker, ran every two years. So, it gave me a brief look at the difference between the House and the Senate.

WASNIEWSKI: There were so few African-American lawmakers at that point.

JOHNSON: Correct.

WASNIEWSKI: Charlie Diggs, Powell, Robert [Nelson Cornelius] Nix [Sr.] from Pennsylvania.

JOHNSON: [William Levi] Dawson from Chicago.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes. Did you have interactions with Dawson?

JOHNSON: Not that I recall. In fact, Roosevelt's district, I believe, Augustus [Freeman] Hawkins, who was the first African-American Congressman from California—or at least Los Angeles. I believe he eventually took over Roosevelt's old district is my recollection.

WASNIEWSKI: Shortly after, '62 or '63.

JOHNSON: Correct. When Roosevelt left Congress, Hawkins ran and took over his district.

WASNIEWSKI: I think he's the first African American west of the Mississippi in Congress.

JOHNSON: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: So, it was a very small group. But what about Diggs and Powell? Did you have a chance to interact with them or kind of see them in action?

JOHNSON: Yes, Diggs I did. [He's] from Detroit. A very deliberative, smart guy, really dedicated. Adam Clayton Powell was more flamboyant. I don't think he ever saw a camera he didn't like or didn't like him. Very dedicated, but very different. I mean, they were both excellent leaders in their own way and did a lot of things to move things along, but they were very different personalities. Diggs had none of the flamboyancy of Powell. And Detroit's a stereotypically kind of a working-class, blue-collar town. Harlem, New York is—lots of flamboyant personalities come from there.

ETHIER: Did you have a favorite part of the Capitol that you liked to be in on your adventures around the complex?

JOHNSON: {laughter} The Capitol has a lot of catacombs. There are a lot of parts of the Capitol that nobody goes to unless you're really part of the inner sanctum. Knowing where some of those places were to either deliver a message or something where the tourists weren't was exciting. Or just taking in some of the areas that the tourists go to when the tourists weren't there, like the "Whispering Rotunda" at 9:00 at night. To be able to be in the historic parts of the government like that and not be a tourist, to take the time to really look at something and take it in, not be rushed, was a lot.

It was an experience that most teenagers don't have—will never have. I mean, there's lots of people who visit the Capitol. But how many kids of high school age get to work in the Capitol, work in a House Office Building? Get to go over there on a weekend when they're not in session and there's no tours going on and be able to just walk through. I mean, now in particular with all the security. There wasn't all that security back then. You could actually walk and drive around. I think my favorite part was just being able to walk freely to various parts of the Capitol and take it all in, in my own way.

WASNIEWSKI: You could get onto the floor when they were out of session, correct?

JOHNSON: Correct. Not when they were in session.

WASNIEWSKI: Right. Were there any other parts of the Capitol that were off limits at that point or that were segregated?

JOHNSON: No. I mean, there were parts you didn't go to unless you're invited. I mean, you didn't just stumble into the Speaker's Office. That was a bad look. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: And still is. {laughter}

ETHIER: You also ran for student government—secretary treasurer.

JOHNSON: Of the student council, yes.

ETHIER: Why did you decide to do that?

JOHNSON: In part because I was a senior and because it was a responsible thing to do. When you're an underclassman, you work hard [and] as you get to be further along in the system, you have a leadership responsibility. When I was in college, I ran for the student council as a junior and senior in college and got elected. Something I would never have considered doing as a freshman or a sophomore. I think part of it is there are certain things that you think about doing because you've been there for a couple of years. You're expected to move into more leadership positions by virtue of the fact that you're of that age. You look at the people who were doing it ahead of you. It's just taking responsibility and leadership is—it's something you do. It's a responsibility when you reach a certain year. It's not an ego thing. I know it is for some folks. But that's not why I've ever done something like that.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you have memories of any teachers in particular who were influential?

JOHNSON: Yes. Two in particular. Mr. [Lewis R.] Steely, who was our Physics and higher science teacher. And Mrs. [Florence C.] Block, who was the foreign language teacher.

WASNIEWSKI: How did they stand out from your other teachers?

JOHNSON: Steely was kind of a gruff, no-nonsense kind of guy. Very smart, very educated, but demeanor was kind of like Archie Bunker, but not Archie Bunker. You wouldn't run up to him and want to hug him. I'll put it that way. Mrs. Block you would like to hug. He taught a way of approaching

things from an analytic, scientific standpoint. When I went to college, I became a biochem major. I appreciated his approach to learning, particularly from the sciences and physics. I appreciated the no-nonsense approach, that at the end of the day, particularly in the science areas, you had to have your act together. You couldn't be successful trying to BS somebody. You really had to know what you were doing.

Mrs. Block taught French and Latin, and she made me really like foreign languages. I mean, I enjoyed it and she was a very personable person. Those are the two I remember the most.

WASNIEWSKI: Any fellow students that stand out and did you keep in touch with anyone?

JOHNSON: Not once I left. I mean, when I left, I went to Oberlin. I got deep into biochem, pre-med. Then, I went to medical school. Rick Harding was from Virginia. He was on the basketball team. He was the best basketball player—set a bunch of records at the time. Rick and I just hit it off. He helped smooth out some of the rough patches. I mean, he was from Virginia. He was from a southern state. Like I said, signs were up. But we talked about basketball and stuff like that. We had a lot of common interest and played on the basketball team together.

ETHIER: Can you describe your graduation from the Capitol Page School?

JOHNSON: Yes. That was an interesting graduation because it was in the Ways and Means Committee room. Lyndon [Baines] Johnson was the principal speaker. At the time, of course, in '61 he was the Vice President. Not a lot of high school graduations have the Vice President of the United States as the keynote speaker. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Any other memories from that day? Were your parents both in attendance?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. There was a gaggle of folks—my parents, the Davises, I think every member of the Johnson extended family and friends who could get to Washington was there.

WASNIEWSKI: A special day.

JOHNSON: A special day. Graduations are always special days in our family. Graduations are like weddings—heavily attended—and funerals. Graduations, weddings, and funerals are big deals.

WASNIEWSKI: You went to college at Oberlin. Was that your choice among universities? How did you end up at Oberlin?

JOHNSON: Interesting how that happened. I got into the University of Illinois, University of Michigan, Lawrence in Wisconsin—a bunch of schools. I liked Oberlin, but it cost too much. It was just out of my price range. My parents could afford to support me at a level like the University of Illinois, but there's no way they could afford Oberlin. It was just too expensive.

One day, Congressman Ayres asked me, "Where did you decide to go to college?" I said, "Well, probably Illinois, maybe Michigan. I'm not sure. I liked Oberlin, but it's too expensive." He said, "Oberlin in Ohio?" I said, "Yes." I said, "It seems like a really good place for me, but there's no way my parents can afford it." He said, "Oh, I think I may have a solution for that." He went down the hall to Congressman [Charles Adams] Mosher's office—Congressman Charles Mosher from Oberlin, Ohio, alumnus of Oberlin College, whose cousin was the Dean of Men of Oberlin College. And so, there was a phone call. In less than a week, I had a new letter from Oberlin offering me a scholarship, a loan, and a job. That's how I got to Oberlin. {laughter}

ETHIER: Did you find, sort of building off of that, that your experience at the Page School helped you in the way that you hoped in your prospects for a good college?

JOHNSON: Absolutely. The Page School is why I got to Oberlin. Oberlin is why I got to the University of Rochester. University of Rochester is why I got to my residency at UCLA. I was the first African American in the UCLA surgery program in 1970. It was all A leads to B leads to C leads to D. If you don't want me to succeed at something don't give me an opportunity. Failure is always a possibility in anything you do, but it is never an option. So, if you don't want me to succeed at something, never give me an opportunity because I've been bred to hit home runs. Been bred from the earliest days, if you give me an opportunity, I'm not going to waste it. I'm going to find some way to succeed whatever the challenges or barriers are. That's what I've been bred to do.

WASNIEWSKI: You said you dreamed of being a doctor from age six.

JOHNSON: Correct.

WASNIEWSKI: That never wavered at any point?

JOHNSON: No. {laughter} When I was a kid, I had asthma. I was sick a lot. I also got every childhood disease. I got chicken pox, measles, German measles, mumps. Every illness you could get as a kid, I had them. Plus, I had asthma and some very bad times with that. I was in the doctor's office a lot. I didn't put it together until much later in life that that experience is probably what made me consider being a doctor because people ask you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Well, a fireman, a cowboy, the usual things. By the time I was six or seven, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I want to be a doctor." Eight years old, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I want to be a doctor." Never changed.

Knowing the education that's required to become a doctor. Education is number one value in my family. There were no doctors in my family. So, it wasn't that I had a familial role model. But again, I could choose to be whatever. Choosing to be a doctor was an admirable profession. Obviously, all the members of my family supported that choice. But it probably related to the fact that I was sick a lot. I grew out of asthma when I was about 11 years old. Health got better. That's probably why. Plus, I was an avid reader as a child, and my parents had medical books and I read some of them. I was eight years old reading about medical stuff, which I liked.

I also built models of airplanes and ships. I thought about being a pilot at one time. I thought about going to Annapolis. But back in those days, if you went to a service academy, when you graduated you had to go immediately into the service. You couldn't go to Annapolis or West Point like you can now and leave there and go to medical school. Being a doctor won out over everything else. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: What was your specialization as a surgeon?

JOHNSON: I was a general surgeon. Back in the days when general surgeons did a lot of things. Spent a lot of time with breast cancer surgery, endocrine surgery, pancreas, adrenals, that sort of thing—trauma. Did whatever the community needed me to do. Now, a lot of that is more sub-specialized.

ETHIER: Did you view yourself as a pioneer or a pathbreaker?

JOHNSON: Yes, and no. Yes, I was aware that I might be doing something that nobody who was Negro or African American had done before. When we moved into

the new neighborhood in Park Manor it was mostly all white. The closest church was a Lutheran Church, which was two blocks away. That's where my parents went. The Augustana Salem Lutheran Church, which was part of the Augustana Synod, which was Swedish in background. They welcomed us. So, I sang in the choir, was the first Negro to sing in the children's choir. [I] had a Vienna boys choir voice, which changed when I was 13 or 14. {laughter} The testosterone storm hit, and my Vienna boys choir voice changed to a James Earl Jones voice. A speaking voice as opposed to a singing voice. But we were the first Black family in the church in the new neighborhood. Both my parents became elders in the church eventually. But they were elders in the church we left in the Black neighborhood too.

Like I said, my grandmother was the superintendent of the Sunday school in that church. It was sort of a natural thing. I came here and I was the first person to take a shot [at] being a Page in the House, but, again, the reason why I wanted that shot was not to be the first. I wanted to go to the Page School. It was the education.

Oberlin was the first school to admit Negroes back in the nineteenth century. Also, the first school to be co-educational. That's not why I chose it, but I chose it because it was an excellent place to do pre-med. Everyone thinks of Oberlin and the conservatory, but it had one of the largest libraries for a liberal arts college at the time. It had a very excellent track record of getting its pre-meds into medical schools. So, that's why I picked Oberlin.

I went to the University of Rochester and there was maybe one other Black [student] in the class and he was African. I worked on—at Rochester—working to increase their minorities.

I guess I've been a pioneer, but if you get an opportunity you have to make the most of it and you have to look to bring some other people behind you. If you fail, then no one's going to come behind you. If you're the first one into something, you have to succeed. You can't be messing around because if you're the first one in [and] you fail or you mess around, it may be a long time before somebody else gets a chance. So, part of, quote, "being a pioneer," or being the first, is understanding the responsibility that goes along with it. But for me, that fit with my family values of always striving to be the best at whatever opportunity you have, not wasting it, hard work.

I was the first African American at UCLA in surgery. I was the first African American selected on active duty as an admiral doctor in the Navy medical corps. When I went on my first tour in '72 on my ship—it was what we would call an amphibious ready group now. [There were] probably 3,000 in the task force. As a fresh-caught lieutenant, I was the highest-ranking African American in the entire task force. Back in '72, there were issues. [USS] *Kitty Hawk* had race riots on their ships, so did ours—the [USS] *New Orleans*. The CO [commanding officer] said I had to help quiet this. The only other Negro officer on this ship was an ensign. Even though I had only been in the Navy a few months, I was in that leadership role. The Navy had a long history of African Americans who were in the Navy being primarily in subservient roles, working as mess stewards.

Like I said, you have to make the most of what opportunities you're given. If you're given an opportunity, particularly that no one has had before you, you can't fail at that. My maternal grandmother looked upon wasting an opportunity as a mortal sin. If you wasted an opportunity, she would get down on her knees and pray for the devil to be taken away from, that you be

exorcised so you would not waste this opportunity again. That's the value system I was bred for.

WASNIEWSKI: We just have one wrap-up question.

ETHIER: What advice would you give to someone who is facing a similar obstacle?

JOHNSON: First of all, look upon it as a challenge, and an opportunity as opposed to an obstacle. An obstacle is something to overcome. The world is not a fair place. There's a lot of injustices. You look at the number of military individuals who've donated a body part for the country. When you talk to wounded warriors, most of them won't talk about *losing* an arm or a leg. They talk about *giving* that arm or leg for the country. And now they're faced with, what do they do? When I had my knees replaced, I spent [rehab] with other young military people rehabbing from very challenging situations because they just wanted to get back to the team where they lost an arm or leg or whatever. They just wanted to rehab and get back to the team. They didn't see it so much as a loss. I mean, there is that.

But obstacles are things to be overcome. Life is full of obstacles. If you expect to not have any obstacles then you're either not very realistic or you were born into a very select group of folks who have no obstacles because their station in life is such that all the obstacles are removed for them. I can assure you that wasn't what I was born into. {laughter} I was given a different game plan.

Just be the best at whatever choose to be, do it with honesty and integrity, overcome obstacles, and however much you're able to accomplish you are responsible—you need to do something else. I mean, family is very important. But no matter how good you are and no matter how successful, you need to also do something for somebody else's kid, for somebody else's

family. You have a responsibility to bring somebody along who is not part of your family.

All my opportunities, for the most part, were given to me by people who weren't part of my family and weren't Black. Because when I came along, there weren't people in my family or people who were Black occupying those positions. That individual, that James Roosevelt, that William H. Ayres, that doctor later on, they had to see something in me, beyond my being Black, that said, "You know, I should give this person an opportunity." Having been given that situation, it's incumbent on me to do the same thing. Whatever you do, whatever success you have, you need to do something for whatever you consider your family and you need to do something for someone who is not part of your family.

ETHIER: Great.

WASNIEWSKI: It's been a pleasure Admiral Johnson. Thanks for sitting down with us and talking about your experience.

JOHNSON: Happy to do it.

ETHIER: Thank you.

NOTES

[1] Vice President Nixon visited Morocco, Ghana, Liberia, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, and Tunisia in 1957. See "Text of Vice President Nixon's Report to the President on his African Trip, 7 April 1957, *New York Times*: 46.
[2] In 1965 Frank Mitchell became the first African-American Page in the 20th century, sponsored by Illinois Congressman Paul Findley. The Office of the Historian conducted an oral history interview with Mitchell in 2008: https://history.house.gov/Oral-History/People/Frank-Mitchell/.