

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
AKO KAMBON
AUGUST 19, 2019

Q. Good morning. My name is Kevlin Haire. I'm here at the Ohio State University Archives on Monday, August 19, 2019. I'm conducting an oral history interview with Ako Kambon. Ako, please pronounce your name for me. I want to make I have it correctly.

A. You did a good job.

Q. Thank you. And will you spell it too?

A. A-k-o K-a-m-b-o-n.

Q. Let's start at the very beginning, where you were born and when you were born.

A. I was born April 10, 1951 in Atlanta, Georgia, and raised in Birmingham, Alabama.

Q. Tell me a little bit about your family. You said you were raised in Birmingham. Did you have any brothers or sisters? Was that where most of your extended family was?

A. Grandmother and grandfather. No other siblings. I'm an only child. Spoiled rotten. Mother was a nurse, student at Grady Hospital, and father was at that time, this was in '51, he was a student at Morris Brown College.

Q. I often ask, were you the first to go to college in your family, but no you were not. I'm assuming education was important to them.

A. Extremely.

Q. Especially with one child. I understand that your father attended OSU.

A. That would be my stepfather.

Q. Your stepfather, I apologize.

A. It's alright.

Q. Tell me a little bit about your family and about your stepfather.

A. My mother and father divorced at a very early age, my very early age. That's how I ended up being in Birmingham with my grandparents. My mother subsequently remarried what some people refer to as a stepfather, but he is my father. That's who I've known. He attended Ohio State. He was not able to complete Ohio State because he went into the service. He had to go into the service. I guess in his own mind it was his desire, his dream, to see me complete what he was not able to complete. In fact, I know that's what the whole thing was all about.

Q. You ended up going to another college first, didn't you?

A. To put it in context, Birmingham, Alabama, in the '50s. Actually, at this point, I was born in '51, so the first part of my years I lived in obviously a very segregated city, oppressive I would say. In the '60s, during the integration movement, I was asked to go down and help integrate a school that was always called the white school. I went down, along with a couple of others ...

Q. You must have been very young.

A. No, no, no, this was in, I want to say '66. I was 16 maybe, no 15.

Q. That's young.

A. I was asked to go and help integrate the school, and we did. It was very interesting. That period at that particular school was very interesting. Despite the non-violent movement, it was a fight every day, literally a fight every day. The people there were really nasty. They used to, as we walked down the hall, do really nasty things. Spray ink in our clothing, from the back. Just little nasty, nasty, nasty things. When it came time to go to college, I applied, and to this day I have no proof of this, but I applied at The Ohio State

University. They sent my transcript to Ohio University. Bottom line is, by the time we figured that out, I'm sitting back waiting. I didn't apply to any other colleges. My father knew that I was going to go there. That's the only school I had applied to. I felt I was going to get it. My GPA was good. We kept waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting. Finally, we got on the phone and said, "What's going on?" They said, "We have an application from you, but we don't have the transcript and the supportive documentation." Anyway, the short of that is, we discovered that they sent it to OU. Now of course, they say it was a mistake. I don't know if it was or not, but I was not the easiest of students for them to deal with during my tenure there, and I thought that might have been a little way to get back at me. I don't know. I didn't get into Ohio State. By the time we settled all of the issues, Ohio State had accepted all of the out-of-state students that they would accept. I don't know if that policy has changed now, but there was a certain number of out-of-state students that they would accept. I didn't get in. I went to a community college. The community college, Hudson Valley Community College, in Troy, New York, which is near our home in New York. The moment I had an opportunity to transfer – I want to say '69 – I applied, was accepted, and came to Ohio State.

Q. Had you been to the campus before you showed up for school?

A. Actually, graduation, let's just say was May 25th in Birmingham. We left the very next day, with my mom and dad and I left the very next day. We stopped in Columbus. We drove up and we stopped in Columbus for a couple of days. My dad wanted me to see the campus. God, that was a culture shock.

Q. How so?

A. In every way you could possibly think of. Think of Columbus now back in 1968, the only building I think downtown was the Lincoln Leveque Tower. They say it was the tallest, but it was basically the only one. It was a very, very, very white campus at that time. I don't recall seeing anybody black on that campus other than me, my mom and dad. We walked around for a while, becoming acclimated. My father wanted me to go here, so fine. I thought of other places I could have gone to, historical black colleges where I thought I could have fun. Now one thing about my grandparents and my parents, as you indicated, [they were] very, very committed to education. I had visited scores of historically black colleges. One was right up the street from us. Miles College, literally four blocks from my house. Had been to Tuskegee a number of times. Had been to Alabama State. Had been to Alabama A&M. I had really traveled. I had been to Fisk. Had been to a number of black colleges. Had been to Morehouse. I had visited all of these schools because my grandmother was extremely committed to education. She, too, attended college even at that time. They were pioneers in the sense that these were things that were not the norm for African Americans at this particular time period. She and her sister were committed to doing great things, and they did do it. Again, by the time we got all that settled, I ended up at Ohio State, but the University was quite a shock for me.

Q. Was it a shock mostly because it was so white, or also because of the size?

A. The size didn't bother me. I never get bothered by the size of a place. It was just so white. The culture, the norms. I remember we had freshmen orientation. They wanted to go on a hayride. I had never been on a hayride in my life. Hayride and going to drink beer. Hayride and they got kegs of beer and put in the middle of this truck. I thought, "This is not for me." I came to wherever the location was at that point. I was the only black

person there. I left. I was like, “This is not for me.” I left. There were no programs to acclimate students who were not of the culture of the school. There was nobody, no greeters, no nothing. You had to kind of fend for yourself. I’m saying that only because it led to my activism here in the University because that to me was absolutely wrong and disrespectful to the people who were coming here. Anyway, that’s what we found when we got here.

Then when I got here, that was probably the highlight. It kind of went downhill from there. There were no African Americans in the classrooms at that point. I only found this out later. I think there were, like, one or two African Americans on staff. There were no role models. There were no people I could go and talk to about scheduling. Mind you now, I graduated at basically 17. It was three weeks after my 17th birthday or something like that. No, three weeks after my 18th birthday. I was basically 17 years old. So I didn’t know about scheduling. When it came to scheduling my classes, I asked, “What do I do?” They gave me some courses. No one told me, “Don’t take this many five-hour courses or this kind of heavy course at the same time.” Spread it out. We were then doing quarters. You guys are now on semesters. There was no process by which I could be, or others could be informed as to how to matriculate at Ohio State. Again, I’m saying that because that led to my activism. My experiences, my early experiences here at the University, indicated to me that there were deficiencies in the way the school operated, as it related to people of color. That really solidified my activism here but that was born out of my activism in Birmingham, Alabama, late ’50s and early ’60s.

Q. I can see that. Let me back up for a second. Where did you live when you came to Ohio State? I assumed it was a dorm.

A. Yes. I lived in Steeb Hall and that was a great experience. I had a wonderful time ultimately with the people that I had a chance to meet. I was the only person, not necessarily in the dorm, but there were maybe five of us in the whole dorm, something like that. But we got to meet each other and hang out. That worked out well. I requested and received my own room. That worked out even better because now I wasn't bothered by stupid questions that people were asking at the time. Literally stupid questions.

Q. Give me an example. Do you remember?

A. Oh sure. How do you get your hair like that? You're like, "Excuse me?" Jesus, I'm not coming to Ohio State for some idiot to ask me, "How do you get your hair to stand up like that?" At that point, Afros were in style. I remember one guy wanted to touch my hair. He wanted to pat my hair. I'm not a puppy. I told him no and he was offended that I said, "Don't do that," because he thought he was, I don't know if it was white privilege, "I can touch your hair if I want," or that "I'm trying to befriend you" kind of thing. "I'm trying to befriend you to get to know you and I want to pat your hair."

Q. Right, but in a very condescending way.

A. He didn't think so, but it was, yes.

Q. Is this how you met other African-American students? Because we've had interviews with people who have told us that African Americans who were there at the time, there were very few African Americans, and they would just be so excited just to see one crossing the Oval.

A. The Oval was a great place. I remember standing in the Oval watching to see who would walk by and walk up and introduce myself, "How ya doing?" And introduce myself. That was fine for all of us because we weren't the only ones who did that. Later, as we started

to meet one or two, I began to find that there was a little corner in the cafeteria of the Ohio Union. I started going over there to kind of socialize and talk to people, play some cards. I remember very vividly, my first or second day here, school hadn't really started, if you will, but the Union was open. I went to eat. I was sitting at the table. I don't know how long you've been here, but the Union had a lot of space in it. I was sitting at one of the tables and there was basically nobody else in the cafeteria. I was sitting down eating and just thinking, "Did I make a mistake in coming here?" Some guy came and sat next to me, sat at my table. Mind you, I'm looking around, there's like 400 other tables. It was a white guy who came and sat at the table. Fine. He said, "Do you mind if I sit here?" Of all the tables, I said, "Okay, fine, sit down, no problem." And his first question was, "How does it feel to be from the ghetto, to be poor and from the ghetto?" Okay, now where did this come from? What's the genesis of this? "I don't know you, you don't know me. You don't know whether I'm poor or not." It happened to be that in black economics I was not poor. I was working-class poor but not poor. In the terms of the audacity to sit at my table and ask me, "How does it feel?" These are my experiences, my first few days at Ohio State. My purpose was to come to school and get this education that my mother demanded that I get and become the lawyer that we all expected that I would become. It was very interesting because that was always my goal. Political science.

Q. That was your major?

A. Yes. From political science to go to law school. It was pretty clear I wasn't going to go to law school here. But that was clear to me, that that was my path at that point.

Q. I can see why, I think it was your sophomore year, that you cofounded Afro-Am. Explain everything about that, why you decided to do that and what you wanted the mission to be.

A. The co-founder was my cousin, Paul Cook. We used to sit around, in that case, people were reading a lot. We used to sit down and read and talk about books and stuff that we were reading. The movement, the Black Panther movement, was very strong at that time. The repressive police actions of Chicago and so many other places. He and I used to talk a lot about some of the conditions. On one occasion, we said that we really needed to do something about what was happening at Ohio State. We need to have more black students here. He was from Columbus or is from Columbus. Our concern was that there was no relationship between this University and the African Americans who lived in Columbus. In fact, I remember distinctly saying to my RA [dorm resident advisor], “Where is the black community here in Columbus?” because I really didn’t have a good grasp of it. My father had some relatives, so I knew something about it. “Where do I go?” “Where do I go get a haircut?” He said, “I don’t think you want to go. It’s on the east side. I don’t think you want to go on the east side because they don’t like students from Ohio State. You might be in danger if you go there.” “Oh, okay.” To me, that’s significant because I don’t want to put myself, black or white, I don’t want to put myself in any kind of danger. But I said, “How do I get there on the bus?” COTA was not the most reliable at that time. It may still not be, I don’t know.

But anyway, Paul lived in the community. He had just gotten married. I got over to his house and we would sit down in his house. He lived in a part of Columbus that was all black. I got a chance to feel at home. We said that what we saw at Ohio State needed to change. We needed to do something about it. He was always the prolific writer. I was

the activist. We found it necessary to coalesce to make sure that everything was well written, but then we also would be willing to march if we needed to and to raise the voice if we could. That's really how it started between he and I.

Q. That was separate from the Black Student Union.

A. Yes. The Black Student Union at that time had really diminished in its activities. There was repressive action against them called the Thirty-Four. Many of them were facing as many as 99 years in prison, although the charges were later dropped. That thwarted the movement of the Black Student Union. That was the first thing we talked about. There was no need in us re-inventing the wheel, if something is already going on in the Black Student Union, in that case, let's see what we can do. But there were a number of issues around the Black Student Union at that particular time. We thought the best thing to do was to create a fresh [organization], and that was Afro Am at that point. We didn't want to have to defend the actions or inactions of the Black Student Union because we didn't know anything. We didn't know the people who were involved then. I know them but I don't really know what the situation was. They had started to disperse. Many of them had left campus. I couldn't get a historical perspective on what was happening with the exception of one guy who was really, really kind and supportive of Paul and I. His name was Bill Kilgore at that time. We went on to become very, very close friends. Close enough to be kicked out of school together, I guess. That was the genesis of the organization.

Q. How hard was it to recruit members?

A. Not hard at all.

Q. People were angry.

A. Angry was not the word. They needed an opportunity to coalesce around some issues that were of concern to them. There were a number of incidents on campus that made it really easy for the few black students who were on campus, to see that there was a need for them to protect themselves based on what was happening. It may sound like an inconsequential thing but being called names, etc. by people on your floor. You are isolated. You feel yourself alone on your floor. You're the only one. Or having eggs or whatever it is thrown or smeared on your door. I remember these incidents, not mine, but some other doors, particularly young ladies who felt vulnerable anyway. You're in a totally different environment and the psyche of young ladies at that particular point, black or white, they were looking, chivalry was not dead and not a dirty word as it may be now. But they felt alone. Many of them came just for the discussion, came for protection. We started walking them to class and walking them home in the evening and to the library. It was what we thought was necessary at that particular time.

Q. You came up with, I think you came up with a list, I don't want to call it demands. Maybe you want to call it demands.

A. It was.

Q. And you presented it to the administrators, and they had a whole different take on that meeting than you all did. Explain how you were able to meet with the administrators, what happened, what was your reaction to that whole thing was. There was a lot going on.

A. I don't want to make up history. I don't want to sit there and say, "This is what happened." Some of it I just don't remember. I do remember the major parts of it, however. And I remember that the demands were presented to John Mount. John Mount

was the Vice President of Student Affairs and one of the most racist individuals that I could come in contact with. He had a guy with him whose name will come to me in a moment, who was like his right hand, former FBI, I was told. He carried a gun with him at all times, which did not intimidate any of us, but I think that was the intent because sometimes he could kind of flash the gun, like, "See what I got?" I wish I could name his name, but it will come to me in a minute. Anyway, I don't know why the demands went to John except he was Vice President of Student Affairs. It almost came to me. This guy, who set the meeting up as you would normally set up a meeting, to have a conversation, we took time to try to do research to say, "Hey, what are the real issues? How do we deal with them and present that to them?" He was struggling with whether or not to call them demands or not. It was from our perspective a demand of correction. You're going down a path that's the wrong way and we're telling you you're doing down a path the wrong way. You're either ignoring it or you don't care. As a result, we demand that you do something different. I don't know who else was in the meeting. I think it was just John and this guy.

But anyway, it was not a fruitful meeting in terms of listening to us. The meeting did not become heated, but it was disrespectful. I remember sitting there thinking, "This guy is totally disrespecting me." I'll come to that in a minute where he got it from, that there are no problems at Ohio State, that the "coloreds" were being treated fairly and that we were just instigating problems and situations here on campus. That was insulting to me. That was the beginning of the conversation. It was like [Mount was saying,] "Why are you guys doing that," as opposed to, "Let us take a look at what each one of these are and talk about it and let us get back to you after we review it." None of that. It was just,

“We’re not going to sit here and have an intelligent conversation with you.” I did not go there to become angry. My style is to have an intelligent conversation with whoever I’m having a conversation with. Now, you push me, things can quickly change. But that’s the last resort. I don’t start out like that. I start out with, “How do we resolve whatever the issues are?” It became clear to me that this guy wasn’t paying attention at all and didn’t care. I found the word colored in 1970 to be offensive, ’69, ’70, to be offensive. Obviously, he had not done his homework, and nor did he care. We came back out of that meeting. At that point, I’m steaming. Everybody is steaming. I think there were maybe six or seven of us who went into the meeting. And everybody is steaming. And so it went from there to other things.

Before I forget, because I remember very vividly, making a connection on something. I told you that Mount said that the “coloreds” were fine, and everything was okay, and we were instigating. Somewhere long the way, let me go back. There was one brother who was on the Board of Trustees. His name was Jack Gibbs. He was the principal of East High School. I would not have wanted to be in his position. Black people who were demanding that you stand up and raise hell at all costs and represent our interests. You were appointed by the governor and therefore could be unappointed. You’re the only one in the room, so you’re trying to navigate this volatile environment between the black students, the governor and your colleagues on the board. He was in an untenable position. But bottom line is, he arranged for a meeting, this is what I want to get to, he arranged a meeting between three of us with Novice Fawcett at an off-site location in the black community. Jack was, or Mr. Gibbs at that point, Mr. Gibbs was the member of a black male social organization. And they had a clubhouse. We met at this

clubhouse. We were sitting down, again having a conversation, or to have a conversation. And so the first thing Novice G. Fawcett said to us, is that, "You three are provocateurs." I remember seeing Mr. Gibbs' face because he was shocked that that was said. He was a light-skinned brother and had freckles, and he literally turned red. He turned red based on what Fawcett was saying. I couldn't believe he was opening up a meeting with this. I'm sitting there trying to bring peace. At that time, you attacked me, as far as I'm concerned you called me this. First of all, I didn't know what a provocateur was. I didn't know what it was. It really ticked me off because I didn't know what it was. But I could tell by the way he used that word, it's not a good thing. I do know that. I let him know, not only was I not a provocateur, but he was a fool. The meeting didn't go well. But he said, "The coloreds on this campus had no problems and were doing well until you three came on campus." Then I made the connection between John Mount's statement and his statement. Either they both felt the same way, or they had a conversation between the two of them. And we were the problem and not the situation [being the problem]. I was like, "Okay, this is not going well." I remember Mr. Gibbs doing everything he possibly could to try to salvage that. He said, "Wait a minute now. Let's all settle back down and let's not call anybody provocateurs. Let's not use profanity." Fawcett said, "I'm not going to sit here and let you cuss at me." "Then don't call me names," [I said.] I wanted to say, "... that I don't know what they mean." Anyway, it was very interesting. I made that connection because I think that either that was the prevailing mentality at that point or there had been conversations and Mount was simply following the script that had been given to him by those in higher places.

Q. Because you were a “provocateur” you were expelled under the disruption rule. Did you see that coming? What was your reaction?

A. I didn't see it coming and I didn't really care. Yes, I anticipated some reaction. You've got to remember, I'm accustomed to science, for every action there is an equal reaction. I'm intellectual enough to know that this is not something that I'll sit down and say, “This is good.” If you knock Dr. King, then I know you're going to have some reaction to us.” He was the most important part about that. They charged us with a violation of a particular code. We then, and they only charged me, Bill Kilgore, and Lorraine Cowen, I think, it was just the three of us. Bill and I went to New York and secured the services of William Consler, to be our lawyer, because I didn't really care whether I won or lost. You're not going to just jack me like this. Consler came into town to be our lawyer. The University said that he couldn't be our lawyer. I said, “Since when can you dictate who are lawyer is?” They said, “He is not going to be your lawyer, and if that's going to be the case, you will not have a lawyer.” Our “hearing” was held without us there, and without legal advisor for us. That's how all that happened. They would not allow Consler to be our lawyer. That's how we got to talking about it was a kangaroo court, which it was. They had obviously made up their mind before we even got there, and there was no reason for them to deny us our representation. Because in their letter that came to us it said, “You are able, should you desire, to bring legal advice, to the hearing,” which we exercised. And they decided not that one, not Consler.

I don't know if you mean [in your question], did I see it coming? No, I didn't see it coming, that we were going to get written up or charged or whatever they called it. I didn't see that they were going to deny us the opportunity to have legal representation of

our choice. I think at one point Mount said, ignorant behind, that they would appoint us one, as it was like a public defender. "I didn't ask you to appoint me anybody. We're paying Consler. I don't need you to appoint somebody for me." Again, I don't know what you mean by, did we see it coming? I certainly didn't see it coming, but it was okay with me.

Q. But you were expelled.

A. Yes, for, they called it, one academic year. And we were, as a condition told not to come on the property of any Ohio State University, not to come on any Ohio State University property. Now that was significant because I love football and wanted to go the games. Love basketball and wanted to go to the games. We couldn't do that, which in my opinion, you don't have the right to tell me I can't go to a football game. But okay. The significance of that is, they put our picture in the hands of the police department. If they saw us, we were to be arrested. Bill wanted to go to a football game. I think it was a Michigan game. He wanted to go to the game. So he went to the game. He was arrested at the football game for attending or for trespassing because he was told not to go on campus. We were going to fight back in terms of being arrested and going to the football game. Do you have the right to tell somebody they can't go to the game if they have a ticket?

Q. It sounds ludicrous at some point.

A. In 2019 it sounds ludicrous to you. In 1969 and 1970, it was ludicrous to me. But it was the prevailing thought of the individuals who were in charge. Of course, I'm giving you my lens of what the events were. But I try to be always as objective as I can. I'm saying it was ludicrous then. It would be ludicrous now. The only difference was, at that time we

didn't have social media, to help us out because we could have made it major, major, but we didn't have the wherewithal at that point to make it work.

Q. When you were expelled it was at the end of the year. What did you do the year that you were expelled?

A. Since I couldn't come back on campus I came back on campus. I could teach, organize and work with my cousin, who had not been suspended in Afro Am.

Q. You didn't physically come on campus.

A. Yes. I was like, "Come and get me." It wasn't so much an arrogant statement; it was like, you're not going to intimidate me. That's all. I received a scholarship that I didn't apply for. I received a scholarship to go to school in the Netherlands, a full-ride scholarship to go to school in the Netherlands. I'm trying to figure out, where in the heck did this come from? I received a full ride to go to the Netherlands. The Netherlands? Then I received a scholarship to come and go to Rutgers University. I went on whatever it was, there wasn't Internet then, but I looked up the school in the Netherlands. It looked real nice. Then I of course knew about Rutgers and its reputation, etc. But I'm trying to figure, how did I get a scholarship that I didn't apply for at these particular schools? You may not want to go there. This is my conspiracy theory at this point. You may not want to go there; you may want to just wait. But now, here was a larger issue for me. I refused to leave this University because that would to me mean that they won. If I did not return, then they successfully intimidated me to the point that they won. And I refused to let them win. I didn't care if it was going to be another two years. I was going to come back to Ohio State and finish my degree, not because I was in love with The Ohio State University, but I was not going to let them win. Not as it relates to me. I had some other

people say, “It’s not worth it. Let’s go and do something else.” No, no. I’m finishing here. I didn’t want to let my dad down either because I was not on scholarship. That’s why the poor comment kind of insulted me. My parents were paying for me to go to school out of their pocket. I had no loans and no grants. My parents worked their butt off to put their only child through school. To have me declared as poor and whatever was insulting. The reason I stayed here and didn’t “leave,” is I refused to let them win.

Q. What was your parents’ reaction when they found out?

A. That was not a good one. That was not a good one right there. We can skip over that part right here. My mother had a different attitude about being kicked out of school. My father, actually they both were very supportive of my activism. My mother didn’t appreciate my tactics. She wanted me to say what was wrong was wrong but just say it. Don’t do anything. Just tell people that they’re wrong. I said, “Mom, that’s not how it works. You can tell people that they’re wrong and they keep doing it.” They say okay and keep doing it. You have to push back. It was more, I believe, about my safety and her having only one child. You’ve got to remember, there were a lot of killings at that time. Police were killing a lot of people in Chicago, California, etc. She didn’t want her only child killed, and she certainly didn’t want him even hurt. I believe that was maternal, as opposed to what you’re doing is wrong. She had a problem with some of the stuff, closing down the school and all that kind of stuff. She said, “That’s wrong.” I said, “Mom, you’ve got to make a point at some point.” But pop was always there, he was always cool. Pop was always cool. He said, “Must watch yourself. Watch your back.”

Q. When you came back you didn't just come back and do whatever you needed to do to get the degree. You actually got involved again because I saw in The Lantern that you were in The Ohio Student Advisory Board to the governor, which I find very ironic.

A. Here's what happened. I think their attitude was, you can always co-op. We can give him a job, give him a title. Make it sound like the governor, and I think it was [James] Rhodes at that point, we were going to create this environment. And he had the right verbiage. "We're going to create this advisory group, and you guys will be able to tell us what's going on around the country on the state-supported schools, universities, and we're going to listen to you." I said, "Okay, cool." Again, that's my style. I want to have an intellectual conversation about what's going on, and my thought was, that we were going to come out of here with some programs and some changes, and it's going to come down from the governor. I didn't truly believe that, but at least that was my hope. I wanted no one to ever say, "Well, listen, we gave you an opportunity to participate and you chose not to. So that's why we're not in any greater position that we are in right now because you chose not to."

The first thing they did on that particular advisory board was give us all jobs. I didn't ask for a job. They gave me a job at that time at the state liquor store. The state liquor stores are more controlled by the state. And they were all state liquor stores. They gave me a job making big bucks at this liquor store in the black community on Mt. Vernon Avenue, which was the best experience I ever had in my life. I'm serious. My commitment to God is so clear now, that He had aligned all of this in his will. He exposed all of this. The circumstances that pushed me to get there was one thing, but He put me right where I needed to be, right on Mt. Vernon Avenue with all the black people

in Columbus. This was great. I got a chance to see the best of us and the worst of us. I got a chance to meet them and form relationships and bond and stuff, and then get paid for doing that. I learned a lot about liquor stores and how much money they were making off of the black community. I'm a public speaker, so this little store was producing \$1.7 million annually. This little store, with no parking space. No parking spaces. I use that frequently. This is what you call genocide. You put it right here in the middle of a community. You don't put anything else around it. But this is what was happening. I appreciated them putting me in that position.

Now there were some other people [from Ohio State] on the board. I know this guy's name was Jack Nitstitch, something. I believe Jack was the president of the student body at that time. You can go back and check the records. I don't remember who else was on that. It wasn't like we were friends. We were there to serve on this particular board and have a conversation. But Jack was the consummate politician. He thought he was going to be, and he probably is the governor somewhere. He probably is a Trump supporter. He made it, and I believe he was appointed chair of the committee, he made it his duty to call everybody and say, "How's it going? We're going to have a meeting. Bring your proposals together." We all did that. I can't remember what happened with all of that stuff. I profited so much from being on Mt. Vernon Avenue. It was a great experience. It was effective, even though it wasn't their intent.

Q. When did you graduate and please tell me you went to the ceremony.

A. I did.

Q. When was that?

A. '69 or '73. '73. March '73, because I got married in September of '73. I went to the ceremony at St. John Arena. I had on my cap and gown but underneath I had on African garb. After we got inside and we were all seated, I pulled off my robe and for the rest of the ceremony I had on my African garb. When I went across the stage, I had my African garb on at that point. So everybody was like, "How did he get in here with this African garb on?" But yes, I did go.

Q. Did you feel anything different, it's hard to say, who knows what you might have felt otherwise because you had been expelled. Did you feel like getting this diploma right now a ...

A. No, the only thing was important to me was that I put that in my dad's hand. I put the diploma in my dad's hand. Because that was history. Ohio State was history. So when I came off the stage, my grandmother and grandfather were there and my mother and father. My mother said, "Where did that come from? What do you have on?" I gave it to my dad, and I said, "Dad, this is for you." They were all very proud of me. They were happy. I finished and was not throwing any bricks. What I was most proud is, I showed you. That was my thing. I showed you, that you will not break me. That's what you think you want to do, with a one-year suspension or expulsion or whatever it is. Ain't going to happen. You've got to come up with something better than that. That was the personal piece. But really from an academic standpoint, that was my father. He wanted that. I thought he deserved that. Not only did he encourage me to go there, he and my mom paid for it. They worked two jobs, if you will, each of them, for years, to put me through school.

Q. Do you have your diploma now?

A. You mean the actual diploma? No, he probably does. I don't know. I haven't talked to him about it.

Q. Oh, he's still alive?

A. Yes, yes. My mother is 89 and he's 86. I'm trying to get them to move with me. That's not happening. He's a very independent guy. He feels he would be giving up his independence if he moved in with us.

Q. Let's get back to the Mt. Vernon Avenue liquor store because this may have an influence on how you ended up working for the City of Columbus.

A. I got married that September and started a job. I got married on Saturday and started a job that Monday. I never will forget, because I got a job with a poverty program. The era of the poverty programs, Lyndon Johnson I believe. I started that Monday and I was making \$10,000 a year. Wow! I'm serious. It was like wow, making \$10,000 a year. Along the way, and I became, again, actively engaged in the community. What was going on in the community. There was a state representative who was doing absolutely nothing in my opinion. And needed to be challenged by this young brash early Obama. I thought he needed to be challenged and I challenged him electorally, and I lost. But the way I ran the campaign caught the eye of then city council member, Jerry Hammond. Maybe sometime along the way, Jerry asked me as his assistant, his administrative assistant, and I was excited to do that. He was the premier black politician, and for me to be his assistant was an honor. He said I liked the way I handled myself in the campaign. He said he loved to hear me speak. But remember, I am the city council member. I stayed with Jerry for almost 14 years. It was a great relationship. That's how I got to City Hall.

Q. Did you ever think of running for office again?

A. Oh yes, I did, for school board. I lost there as well. The name Ako Kambon, in that era, is not the same as Barack Obama now or AOC now. To have an African name, was not very easy to the public at that time. It was easy for those who opposed you to say, “You’re not American. You hate America,” which they did do. Again, I’m so clear that God lined all this stuff up. Because today I can see, look back and see. So I did run. Mike Coleman and I ended up working together. Mike was the assistant to Ben Espy, city council member, and I was assistant to Jerry Hammond. Jerry was the president of the council. I was promoted to chief of staff of council staff members. Mike and I developed a real close friendship. Mike and I said that one of us would be the first black mayor. We committed to each other. Obviously, you know the rest of the story, is that Michael became the first black mayor.

I was getting ready to take the law school exam, to go to law school, on that Saturday morning. That Friday night I was studying, trying to prepare myself for this test. I woke up that Saturday morning and it was, let’s say 9:00 in the morning. The test started at 8:00. I blew it. This is what I had prepared myself for, is to come out of Ohio State and go to law school. It became clear to me at that point because I don’t oversleep. That’s not what I do. I said, “Okay, God, you don’t expect me to be a lawyer. Okay, what is it I’m supposed to do?” Ultimately, I decided to evolve and that’s how I got into politics. I never looked back at the law piece again. It was clear to me that that wasn’t what I was supposed to be. I don’t oversleep and that is just His way of having me not go down the wrong path. I became really engaged in the political process, electoral process as well as policy, and working for the president of city council, who had an adversarial relationship with the mayor at that point. It was Buck Rinehart. They were like oil and

water. It gave me an opportunity to sharpen my skills in terms of writing, research, etc. I always wanted Jerry to be on top of his game. He had the hopes and aspirations of the black community on his shoulders. They were throwing everything they possibly could at him. I was trying my best to stay on top of it, to make sure that they didn't win again. A clear understanding. Once you set yourself against me, then every ounce of energy that I have says, "Let's fight." That's not what I would like to do, but I'm capable of that. I'm pretty capable of a good fight. So let's go. That was why I immersed myself into politics.

Q. Let's back up. Your name when you were at OSU was Jerry Roberts, then you changed it. When did you change it, and why?

A. I don't remember when I changed it. I could only change it legally when I was 21. That's 47 years ago. Forty-seven years ago I actually changed it. I started to use the name before I legally changed it. That's why I don't remember when. Why? I wanted to identify closer to my culture. I wanted to identify with my history from Africa. I wanted to identify with the struggles of African people across the diaspora. Ako means the first-born child. It's Yoruba. Kambon means of the people. It, too is Yoruba. That came as a result of my studies. My studies said in the tradition of Africa, the last name says something about your direction, about your commitment to the people, to the village and community. The first name is something about you. Ako, first-born. I am the only born in my family. First born was easy. Kambon, of the people, is my direction, that I chose to commit myself to the struggles of the people. That's how that came about. I went down and changed it, very close I believe to my 21st birthday, which is April 10.

Q. Was that after you had graduated?

A. Yes, I think so. I could do some math real quick.

- Q. It would probably make sense to do it after you graduate.
- A. No, actually because I graduated under Ako Kambon.
- Q. You're right, because I looked in our graduation index, and I couldn't find you under Jerry Roberts. Then I realized, wait a minute.
- A. It had to have occurred before I graduated.
- Q. To take on just the bureaucracy of OSU, hats off to you.
- A. That was a lot. And you think it's bureaucratic now. When they were trying to do stuff with paper, you stand in line. You get the people who say, "Why do you want to do that?" "I'm sorry, I didn't come here for that today. I appreciate your inquisitiveness, but I didn't come to give you that lesson today. I came to make this change. I want my transcript to be reflected of this." It wasn't just entering it into the computer. You had to go different places and get it done in all those different places because it wasn't just kind of a homogeneous computer program that you just change everything with one clean swoop.
- Q. You worked for city council but now you're president of the Visionary Leaders Institute. How did that evolve?
- A. I left city government and went to become Assistant Vice President at the Chamber of Commerce, which was very interesting because at that point I'm with blue blood. As much as I was trained and taught based on my experience on Mt. Vernon Avenue, my experience at the Chamber of Commerce was the opposite in terms of exposing me to white businesses, the thinking of CEOs, all of that. I had to go and meet with CEOs and talk about their desire to expand to be more inclusive, which was all a lie, because they had no desire to be inclusive or otherwise. But that was my role, to tell this lie. But I said

to myself, "This is not where I want to be." I left there, basically they fired my butt. I left there and went to the State of Ohio. A state senator, an African-American guy, William Bowling from Cincinnati, asked me to serve as the Executive Director on the Commission on African American Males, a state-wide commission. He went to the governor, I forgot who it was, it may have been Celeste. But that was the last year of Celeste. He was on his way out. The question was whether or not whoever beat Celeste at that time, whether or not they were going to keep me. This was a state-wide position. Anyway, I met with the guy, whoever it was. They decided to keep me. We were doing great work also. I had no problem with the work that I had been asked to do. If you tell me this is what you need me to do, and I'm interested in it, you're going to have a good product. That I'm confident about because I will give you my very best. They kept me on, and I stayed there for a couple of years.

Then my relationship became closer with God. Ultimately, he said to me that this is not where He wanted me to be, which was kind of shocking because I didn't ask to be here in the first place. This is not what I asked to do in life. We're doing it to the best of our ability, so why not? We're doing it and He said, "I want you to leave this job." My oldest daughter, I had three girls, my oldest daughter that year went to a private African-American college, called Spelman in Atlanta. She had just entered. I said, "God, surely you're not talking to me." To leave my job? They're paying me well. I've got a child that's going to college, and she just went to college, and I have no money. My wife at that point was a teacher. We had no money. I didn't want to leave my job. "I didn't ask you about any of that. I said leave this job." Okay. I went home and told my wife, "Hey babe, God said I need to leave this job." She said, "We need to talk about this a little bit.

We both need to talk about it.” I’m laughing now because that was so many years ago. But it was just that simple, but it was not easy. I left the job. I had already started doing public speaking around the state. Part of my responsibility as the director of the state commission was to go around all these cities talking about what was happening with black males and what we could do and give suggestions. I was already doing public speaking. We were one of the first in the nation to develop a Commission on African American Males at a state level. Others saw the success that we were having. That’s why I said they didn’t fire me, because they saw the success we were having, other states. And they started talking about it.

Then I became the person that all the states brought in, to talk about how to create it and how to do it. I was getting this public base. One of the gifts that I have been given is the ability to speak, public speaking. It was easy for me to see that, okay this is something I really enjoy. I was led to leave my job. I was led to create something, but that wasn’t until after I left. I don’t know any of these people. God gave me the name. That’s not my choice. He gave me the name and gave me the people that I was to speak to. God has been directing this path for me for 68 years. I smile because He’s still directing my path. I started meeting people. One brother gave me an opportunity to speak to a national group of educators. He had two hours that he was supposed to present. He and I met. I told him I was looking for an opportunity, but it hadn’t come. He said, “Tell you what? I’ve got two hours. I’ll give you 15 minutes of my two hours.” I said, “For real?” We were in Las Vegas. I said, “For real?” He said, “Yes.” I got 15 minutes of his two hours. Wow! Thank you. That was it. From that particular time, the company took

off. The company really took off. I got all kinds of engagements and opportunities from all these principals and superintendents. For 23 years now I've been doing this.

Q. What kind of groups do you speak to?

A. All ages.

Q. In any setting?

A. K-12. It's primarily K-12. Now I've branched out. For example, I just came back from a contract in Omaha, where I had bus drivers, school bus drivers, which is a whole different group of people. First of all, probably in most cases, 90 percent of them, the highest level of education would be a GED. Let me rephrase that. The highest level of any of them who have a certificate of any kind would be a GED. I want to tell you that number is probably 20 percent of the total. These are not people who graduated from high school. It's a whole different group of people. You've got to come in a little differently. I've been working with now for a while in that particular district. Now it's branched out to Kansas City, their bus drivers, and getting ready to go to Milwaukee to do their bus drivers. You see what happens is, my business is word of mouth and it's really very strong. People will say, "He's somebody to talk to my drivers. Have you heard of this guy?" That's literally how it happens. In the field of education, in talking, doing professional development, teachers, principals, and superintendents in some places say, "Do you have anybody who is good at cultural competence?" "Oh wow, there's a guy." "Do you know somebody who can motivate?" "There's a guy." You end up with all these references, if you will, by word of mouth. That's how I've been doing it for 23 years. Some of them have been great and grand opportunities. Some of them have been challenging. I'm not regretting this

“direction,” this force out of my state job at all. It’s been some downs, which is life. But man, I’m not regretting it one bit.

Q. I really can see how one step led to another step led to another step, even looking forward you might think ...

A. I didn’t see it. I acknowledge that, that I didn’t see it. I said, “God, you are in control.” I forget that sometimes and try to get ahead of Him, but He has a way of bringing me back. It’s like, “You’re too far. Come back, I want to talk to you.” But it’s been a great journey.

Q. I don’t know what kind of relationship you have to OSU, how much in touch with it you keep or anything. Given what you went through and what’s it’s like for students now, I’m just going to ask, do you see a difference? Do you think the University has far to go? I wanted to back up a little bit because you mentioned your wife. Even while you were still here, there was change because they had implemented a scholarship for African American students, and she was a recipient of that, which I would think came out of your work.

A. It did actually. In fact, we often talk about it. Her mother, who is now deceased, mothers-in-law may now always give you proper compliments, but she said, “Had it not been for what you did at Ohio State, my child would have probably never have gone to college, certainly not at Ohio State.” She was raised in the projects, very poor, public assistance and stuff. Because we gave them full rides. Two things about that. First, it shows what a University can do when they want to do it, whether they are being compelled to do it, or whether that’s what they want to do. Because we created that program, I want to say, I’m being roundabout in dates, in February of 1970. It was in place, to bring students in in September. All this we’ve got to think it out. We’ve got to process it. We’ve got to make

sure it fits. Bull. When you want to do it, and need to do it, either for the right reasons or the wrong reasons, whatever the reason is, they can do it. They put the money in place. The president was on board. The Board of Trustees. Everybody. How do we make this happen? And the second thing is, sometimes you get pushed into doing the right thing. You can do it and it might be the right thing to do. In this case, it was called Project 100. In this case, there were 100 students that were brought in. She was one of the 100, didn't know her. Met her shortly after she got on campus. We've been married 46 years in two weeks. It was the best thing. Who would have thought that the program that I had created, would have brought a young lady on campus, who would end up being my wife of 46 years? You know what I mean? You can't make this stuff up. You just can't make it up. It's like, seriously? And gave me three daughters who are also now Ph.D. and masters.

Q. It all worked out.

A. It worked together for my good. When I lived here and lived here for a long time, I did keep up with Ohio State. Some people who are in strategic positions here who are my friends. My friend, who is Chairman of the Black Studies Department, my friend who is the Director of the Community of the Extension Center, my friend who is on the Board of Trustees. I had friends, so I kept up with what was going on. At one point, one of the presidents, which I won't name, one of the presidents talked to me about coming on staff, one of the presidents of Ohio State. We got into serious dialogue about that. Something happened, didn't happen. I really did keep up with what was going on. I think there's some good stuff that has happened. But Ohio State is a microcosm of society as are most universities. I worry about the direction it may go now, that we have people who are not pushing inclusion. I worry about the governor's next appointments. Let me give you an

example. At one point, there were five African Americans on the Board of Trustees of this University at one time. How many are there now? One. So we've gone from five down to one. Interesting. And that one I believe comes off next year. We might be back to where Ohio State used to be, depending on who DeWine appoints. You know what I'm saying? While Ohio State has taken some progressive steps, and they brought in Dr. Drake, which was an interesting move. I'm not overly impressed in terms of the fact that they did. They brought in a female prior to him and they mistreated her. She was treated like a step child. That you bring in an African American immediately after that, I don't get excited about that because you'll do the same thing to him that you did to her, right? I just thought it was very interesting.

His first major act was to fire the band director. I was like, "Where did that come from?" Seriously. This guy, I'm not saying anything about the band director. I don't know anything about the circumstances. But he was beloved by so many people. The first major act of the new African-American President, is to fire the band director. Really? His predecessor could not have fired the person? They were leaving anyway. Why didn't they fire him? You know what I'm saying? Let them take the heat. Obviously, he had the backing of the trustees which means that they would have backed the other person. I've been around politics enough to know that there's something that was going on in that room, in that meeting. I don't know what it was. But I'm an observer. I say, "Okay, I know that the swan that's gliding is peddling like hell underneath." There's some stuff going on underneath that, if I knew I'd be able to tell you. I'd say, "Here's what the deal was." I think that Drake has done some things that improved the quality of life of African Americans on this campus. Quietly. He's not a high-profile guy at all.

But I'm disappointed. The black community in Columbus doesn't even know him. Arguably, the president of one of the strongest universities, financially and academically in the nation, and you're African American and you're a doctor, and the black people who live where you are, don't even know you. But then I give people leeway by saying that you can't be everything to everybody. Just do my job. I'm here to be the President of the University; I'm not here to be the social activist for the Columbus black community. I just think that there's a source of pride that could have come with that, but it didn't. I do know that there were changes made here. James Moore is now in a strategic position. But it is an academic institution. It's a traditional academic institution. It is not a Rutgers. It is not a UCLA or USC even. It's not a hotbed of progressive political thought. This is Ohio and it is just not progressive. They want to play football. They want to win games. I'm not even sure that some of the people here care that much about the academics of the University. They want to beat Michigan. Urban did that for them for nine years. Now this new guy has probably got two years. If he doesn't beat Michigan, he's going to get fired. You know what I'm saying? I think that, to a large extent, is what Ohio State prides itself on. It could be so much more. It is what it is.

Q. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A. No, I think that this is good enough. I thank you.

Q. Thank you.