

Name of Interviewee: Lonnie Brandon

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Additional Materials: TV34 interview

Interviewer: Sarah Shelly (Montclair State Student), Jane Eliasof, Angelica Diggs

Date: 04/21/2018

Location: Montclair Fire Department on 1 Pine St, Montclair, NJ.

Introduction:

Alonzo “Lonnie” Brandon, Jr. was born in Montclair, New Jersey in 1950 and lived here until 2018. He had a 33-year career with the Township of Montclair, starting in his early 20s as the Pool Manager at Nishuane Pool and ultimately serving as the Director of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs. He is known to many in town, not only because of his large extended family, but because of his leadership of many township programs in which so many people throughout town participated. His involvement in the 1990 establishment of the African American Heritage Parade is described in some detail.

Lonnie talks about his paternal and maternal families hailing from Virginia, and the many relatives who reside in Montclair. He describes his childhood growing up in the Fourth Ward, and the importance of the Washington Street YMCA. He also speaks to the tumultuous times of the 1960s civil unrest, his civil rights advocacy while at Wagner College, and how he embraced his Black heritage. (Although his father was not too fond of his afro!) He also recalls the toll of Vietnam on his friends and classmates.

While he has reservations about changes he sees in Montclair, he cherishes the friendships and memories of Montclair.

Timestamps:

[1:29]: Alonzo “Lonnie” Brandon, Jr. was born in Montclair in 1950 and lived here until 2018. He recently left Montclair to make his second home in Atlantic City his primary residence. His family lived in several locations in Montclair, including approximately where the current Montclair Fire Department is (where the interview was taking place). The street used to be Bay Street, but now has been reconfigured as Pine Street. They moved to an apartment on North Willow Street as the family grew and ultimately bought a home on North Fullerton Avenue.

[4:50]: He cited his involvement with the YMCA. As a youngster, he used to go to day camp there, learning to swim at the Washington Street Y. In the 1950s, the Ys were segregated, so he attended the “colored Y” on Washington Street; the other Y was on Park Street. He played basketball and participated in all kinds of athletic programs at the Y, noting that it was a great experience, it was a community “center.” He noted that the whole concept of community centers was lost over time. Community centers play an important part in society. In his career as the Director of Recreation for the Township of Montclair, one of his goals was to build a community center here, but it never came about. The value of the Y was that it offered various activities and people from all over town gathered there.

[5:14] As an eight-year-old, living on North Willow Street, he attended day camp at the Y.

[5:25]: He would be picked up for camp every morning by a fellow from Walnut Street and another who lived in the [Frog] Hollow on their way to day camp for six weeks. He never knew their names until he met them again in 7th or 8th grade. Since they lived in different parts of town, they didn't socialize a lot during the school year, until Junior High School brought people together from different neighborhood schools.

[6:14]: He had a tight-knit group of friends on his block of North Willow Street. They played baseball and football together. Occasionally, they were able to play basketball when they were able to get into the YWCA to use those courts which were the only ones nearby. They used to play in the lot behind the YWCA where the Crane House used to be [when the house was still in its original Glenridge Avenue location, prior to being moved to Orange Road]. They used to have to compete for the space with the kids on Greenwood Avenue; although right around the corner from North Willow Street, Greenwood Avenue kids went to Grove Street School. North Willow Street residents went to Hillside School. So they went to different schools and didn't know each other except for when they used to compete for the space behind the YWCA, which was in between both streets. He also used to go to dances at the YWCA and the YMCA in junior high school. However, once he reached high school, the use of the YMCA and the YWCA sort of fizzled out for his crowd. A couple churches in town started activities. The most popular was the IT, it was at the church on the corner of the Crescent and South Park [First Congregational Church, 40 S. Fullerton Avenue]. Every Friday or Saturday night he would go there for dances when he was in high school.

[9:00]: His grandfather worked for the WPA [Works Progress Administration] back in the 1930s. His father worked for Singer sewing machine company for 40 years in Elizabeth, NJ. Lonnie's father was born in Virginia, migrated to Philadelphia when he was 10 or 12; his father was drafted into the army and served in World War II. Upon discharge from the service, Lonnie's father learned there were job opportunities in North Jersey, so he moved up here and lived with his aunt who resided in Montclair and got the job at Singer.

[10:40]: Lonnie's mother's family came up to Montclair circa 1922. His grandmother and her twin sister came to Montclair from Kenbridge, Lunenburg County, Virginia when they were about 16 years old to look for work. They ventured here, leaving their parents and seven siblings (one older, six younger) in Virginia. After working for a year in Montclair, the rest of the family joined them in Montclair; Lonnie's great grandparents subsequently had three more children born in Montclair. He jokes that, consequently, he is related to almost the entire African American population in Montclair; when he was the Director of Recreation for the Township, he'd often end up being related to residents who came to the Recreation Department office.

[12:18]: Although officially he worked for the Township of Montclair for 33 years, in fact, since he started out working for the township as a sophomore in high school, it was longer than that – probably closer to 40 years. He worked part time at the Recreation Department during summers and vacations, continuing through high school and college. The summer after college graduation, at age 23, he worked as the Manager of Nishuane Pool. The town pools had only been around for three years at the time. He recalls that one time, he took a day off and when he came back Nishuane Pool the next day, he got a call saying the commissioner had called to see him; Lonnie was concerned that perhaps there had been trouble the day he wasn't at work. Lonnie notes that at that time, the Township's form of government was different than what current exists; there were commissioners instead of councilpeople, and the commissioners served as department

heads. He met with Ralph D'Andrea, the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, who noted Lonnie's great performance at Nishuane Pool and offered him a full time job. Although that role was not Lonnie's original career plan (he still had hopes of being a professional football player at that time), he had a wife and one child and another child on the way so he took the job. He planned to work there for a couple of years but stayed for 33 more. He started out as an Activities Director; by the time he retired he was Director of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs. He was the first African American department head in the township government. He also served for approx. six weeks as Township Manager when the town was in between two.

When asked if the town was still segregated when he was at Nishuane, he responded, "not formally" but since housing patterns were segregated (with few white people living south of Bloomfield Avenue), the neighborhood pools ended up being segregated and there were not many white patrons at Nishuane Pool in 1973. He notes that shortly after that, the town began to change, with people moving "all over the place."

[17:11] He cites difficulty finding the thing he's most proud of from his career with the Township, particularly because his role encompassed so many domains: parks, recreation, cultural affairs, shade trees, public access television station, and many more initiatives and programs were all his responsibility. He is very proud of the TV station because it was established from nothing. It had been operated out of the Montclair Public Library previously, and when they renovated the library, they did not want to continue the Public Access channel, so he took and revamped it. He "inherited" many initiatives in that way. He also ran the senior citizen transportation system for almost the entire time he worked for the Township. He ran the parades for the African American Heritage Festival and the 4th of July. As Director, he worked long days, staying late after the office closed to do paperwork because so many people he knew would stop by his office if they had other business in the municipal building [205 Claremont Avenue] and talk during the day since he knew almost every one, having grown up here. He also served as a witness to at least 30-40 marriage licenses issued at the municipal building over the years because when people were unaware that they needed a witness, they would ask him to serve that role.

[20:08]: He was one of the founders of the African American Heritage Parade. In January 1990 Audrey Fletcher, who was a friend and the Fourth Ward Councilperson at that time, asked him to help her start a parade. He had worked on other parades, like the 4th of July parade, so they wanted his help. He wanted to start it in 1991 but she wanted it to be ready quickly and launch that same year (1990). They got a good response for the first meeting on the parade, with about 50 volunteers attending. They wanted the parade to go through the 4th Ward of the Township since the July 4th parade route does not go through that ward, although it goes through the other three. They all paid for the start up expenses themselves. The African American Heritage Parade and Festival is still going strong 29 years later, at the time of the interview. He was integrally involved until 2011 when he took a smaller role, although he is still a member. He cites the good work of the African American Heritage Foundation. The first parade was big and there were lots of people involved. People and bands came from Brooklyn, Westchester, elsewhere to participate. That enthusiasm lasted for the first 10-12 years. At one point they had over 120 vendors in Glenfield Park during the festival [that takes place after the parade], and now they are down to about 40. He notes that it is still a great activity.

[25:12] Lonnie mentions that two of his uncles ran catering businesses, in which he and other family members worked during weekend catering events. His Uncle Eddie's business was Woods Caterers, which had only recently closed.

[25:48]: He married his high school sweetheart but got divorced when he was 33. With custody of his three children, that's when he had to learn to cook.

[26:16]: Lonnie attended Montclair High School and was captain of the football team his senior year. He ran track and played baseball. He was in different social clubs and graduated in 1968 from Montclair High School. He had a great time there. At the time of the interview, he was helping organize his 50th Class Reunion.

[27:01]: Protests were in high gear in 1968, and there were civil disturbances all over the country. In the summer of 1967 there were riots in Newark, Detroit, Los Angeles, and other places. Since Montclair was so close to Newark, there was a sense of unease and mistrust. Also, for him and many African Americans it was a time of awakening and starting to embrace who they were. As one example, prior to 1966 or so, he self-identified as "colored" and was identified as "colored." In 1966/67, he and others instead used the term "Black" and then "African American."

[29:00]: He recalls an issue his father had with Lonnie's afro hair style. He had a big afro, and his father would not allow him to stay in the house with hair like that. Lonnie was 18 years old and a senior in high school, and he stood up to his father, noting that he was an adult who was of draft age and felt he could determine his hair style. But his father was very adamant about it; Lonnie did indeed cut his hair.

College

He went to Division 3 Wagner College in Staten Island, NY on a football scholarship. He had scholarship offers from Rutgers and University of Dayton, Ohio as well. He had never heard of Wagner until one of the coaches came to recruit him. It kept him close to home and his girlfriend, too.

[31:47]: He did not have to go to Vietnam because he was in college. The lottery came out when he was a junior in college. His number was 228. He went to the Draft Board and advocated for his student deferment. The Draft Board told him that they probably wouldn't get to his number that year, and after one year his exposure to the draft would be satisfied.

[33:22]: He lost 3-4 friends from Montclair to the Vietnam War. A dozen friends survived Vietnam but came back with problems like PTSD and drug addictions. It was sad for him to watch people who should be in the prime of their lives aging so quickly. He recalls an interaction with a former classmate one day when Lonnie was about 30, stopped at the stop sign at the corner of Pine Street and Glenridge Avenue near Caggiano Liquor. A man on the street approached the car window and asked him for money for the liquor store. Lonnie recognized the man as someone he'd gone to school with who had served in Vietnam and was now troubled. To Lonnie's children, also in the car, the man appeared to be much older than Lonnie's 33 years. When he was in his 40s he used to go to more funerals for his peers than for his parents' peers.

[36:45]: Lonnie was asked, “What about Montclair is special to you?” He responds that it was the relationships and friendships he formed. The town is changing now, and that’s one of the reasons why he retired at age 54 (also taking advantage of a state buy-out for public employees at the time). He wasn’t too happy with the changes he saw coming in Montclair and impacting his day-to-day work; the economics were also advantageous to retire. But, the memories that he has in Montclair are priceless. The friendships are priceless. He is still best friends with John McGill, his mother’s best friend’s son. They are only six weeks apart in age and because of their mothers’ friendship, their own goes back to before they were born!

[39:44] Lonnie describes a West African charm he is wearing on a beaded necklace, when asked about it by the interviewer, explaining that it symbolizes the omnipotence of God and was a gift from a friend who visited Ghana. He jokes that his affinity for beads is a left over from his time growing up in the 1960s.

[41:00]: Lonnie explains his own interest in history. He majored in History at Wagner College. In the 1970s, he advocated for more African American studies in the school, as that movement was just becoming popular. He got expelled from school in 1970 for demonstrating with 28 other people. They went to Federal Court to get reinstated where it was proven that due process had not been followed when the school expelled them. Although many of his friends chose not to go back because of bad treatment they received, he did return to continue towards the goal to get more African American enrollment and courses, as well as faculty and administrators of color. He did see some improvement and serves on their alumni board now.