

Isiah Dennis, by Julie M. Luker

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Isiah Dennis
Narrator

Cole Steinberg
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Interviewer

Landmark Associates
Transcriber

August 2, 2023
Minnesota

ID: Isiah Dennis

CS: Cole Steinberg

CS: This is an interview conducted as part of a larger faculty and student research project initiated by Dr. Julie Luker of Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today is August 2, 2023, and I'm here with Isiah Dennis. My name is Cole Steinberg, and I'm an undergraduate student at Concordia University, Saint Paul. Today, I'll be talking to Isaiah about what life was like growing up in the Twin Cities. During this interview, I'm going to ask you to reflect on your childhood life experiences as they relate to a variety of social topics from that time period. For the purposes of this interview, we have defined childhood as birth through 17 years of age. To begin, please state and spell your full name.

ID: Isiah, I-S-I-A-H, Dennis. D, as in dog. E-N, as in Nancy, N, as in Nancy, I-S.

CS: Please identify your race and gender.

ID: I identify as a male and I am black.

CS: Please state your date of birth.

ID: June 20, 1990.

CS: Please share where you grew up, such as the name of the neighborhood or a nearby street intersection. Include any major moves you made during this time period.

ID: Born and raised in Rondo, I grew up on Iglehart in between my houses, Chatsworth and Oxford, so a block away, up the street of Jimmy Lee [Recreation Center]. I've been there, grew

up, the majority of my life. I grew up there with my grandparents and my mom, as well. That's my neighborhood, born and raised.

CS: Thank you. I would like to learn more about your family life. Let's begin with the memories you have for immediate and extended family. Please share some memories that you have about these relationships.

ID: Definitely. Growing up in the neighborhood, it was unique for me because I grew up with my grandparents, so in the house that we grew up in, I had my grandma, I had my grandpa, and I had my mom. Then some streets—blocks up later, on the same street, near MLK was my uncle's house, and my uncle lived there, so I could easily just go up the street, further up, to see my uncle, my cousins, and my auntie. We all lived on the same street, just different spaces, but growing up with family is a big—It was big for us, and then my little brother was born later on, and we all grew up together.

We lived at the same house. One time, my mom moved across the street from the house, across the street, so we lived at 1006. My mom moved across the street to 1005, and so it was like, we were right across the street from each other. *[Laughter]* It was cool to just have family, all in one area. It's like, "Okay, if I don't wanna be at Mom's, I can just walk across the street, to go chill at Grandma's. If I don't wanna chill at Grandma's, I can just walk across the street, and go to Mom's.

It was cool, to be like that sometime, but it was really big 'cause we was a spot for our family to come in, including family from out of state. Basically, everybody knew where we lived in the neighborhood 'cause in the neighborhood, growing up, people knew each other. People knew each other families, and we all just was like—it's just community. I enjoyed growing up in the neighborhood I lived in.

CS: Which family members did you engage with the most, growing up?

ID: I would say all of them, mainly my—me and my brother was brought up together. My grandparents, a lot. My fond memory is my late grandpa. He passed away in 2011, but growing up, every single day and heavily on the weekends, my grandpa was always barbecuing. 'Cause my grandma and my grandpa are both from Mississippi. My mom—she was born in Nebraska, and me, my brother, and my cousins—we're the ones who were born here in Minnesota. My grandma's been in that house for over—since 1960s, 1970s, so we've been in this neighborhood for a while.

What I remember as my fond memory is that my grandpa, every weekend, barbecuing so you would always see his smoke from the back of our garage. You got some beef and pork rib tips,

full slabs of ribs, some grilled chicken, and everything. Everybody came in the back and had a good time, chilling, playing some old school blues, R&B. Just listen to music, having a good time, barbecuing, and people always being at the house all the time, so I'm used to that. *[Laughter]*

CS: Did you have any family pets? If so, please describe them.

ID: Yeah. We had chihuahuas. *[Laughter]* My first chihuahua—her name was Precious. She was well-behaved. I loved her so much, but she got ran over, so she died when I was in sixth grade. Then later on, when I was in college and my brother was starting junior high, we had a family dog, who's still alive. His name is Tiger. He's a chihuahua, as well. *[Laughter]* He is 12 now. He is a big dog, and just love him, and everything.

We also had a family cat. One of our cat—her name was Grace. She got ran over a few years ago, so she passed away. We had a few cats here and there, and I found out I was allergic to cats, after having a cat. I did not know I was allergic to cats 'til I had one. *[Laughter]* Mainly dogs, particularly chihuahuas, is basically a favorite. Small, cute, and they're like my little babies. Love my family dog.

CS: How are household chores divided between members of your family?

ID: About that. *[Laughter]* Mainly growing up, when it came to household chores, I really did a good amount of chores. My brother did, too, as well, but mainly for my grandparents. When grandmother used to work, my grandmother worked for the county, for Ramsey County, for 20 years, helping those who are disabled. My grandpa was retired. He used to work in the meat packing industry.

When it came to chores, I remember we all—everybody did different—do a chore for Saturdays. We'd just deep clean the house, and my grandma was at work, and I got the house—and I always had the house to myself. I would just deep clean the whole entire house, from head to toe, from upstairs, downstairs. Wash everything, make sure everything's vacuumed, swept up. Deep clean it, and then my grandma come back, she come to organized house, and clean, and everything.

I'm used to doing it, so that was kind of like my thing, but Saturdays was usually the days that we all cleaned. My mom usually helped with the washing—the washing the clothes. I'm usually helping out with dishes, taking out the trash. Me and my brother—we usually always shoveled together outside, taking care of things outside. Mainly we'd just help out where needed, but when it came to cleaning, I'm more the clean freak. I'm more the organized person, so I mainly just took care of it. Because it was relaxed—it relaxes me, and I enjoyed it.

CS: Can you share a memory to help describe what mealtime was like in your family?

ID: When it comes to meals with my family, usually a lot of times, we work. *[Laughter]* Even though we had a dining room table, we'll stay around the table, or we'll be in the living room eating, while watching something together. Watching the news, watching Wheel of Fortune. My memory is usually, when it's dinner time, we're either watching Wheel of Fortune, watching some kind of sport. If it's baseball season, my grandpa—the TV's on baseball. No if, ands, or buts about it. You ain't gonna win that battle. *[Laughter]*

Well, yeah. It was just memories like that, where we just ate and spent time together. Particularly, when it came to the holidays, like Thanksgiving, I have family from out of state, particularly, my family from Nebraska, who come up here. When they came for Thanksgiving, just being around the table and just having family, cousins, extended family, all coming around together, and having the house full, it's always been a joy. Usually, the holidays—the grown folks is upstairs, while us kids are downstairs hanging out, and eating, and chilling.

CS: Thank you. Next, please describe the ways in which your family's economic status influenced your childhood.

ID: My family—we were low-income. We was low-income, like low-middle, but low. But we made it work. We basically used the resources that we needed to make sure that we ate, we got shelter over our heads, and everything. With my grandpa—he barbecued, and he sold ribs, and everything like that. The one thing is that, even though we were low-income, we never—I never felt like I was poor. They made sure we had everything that we needed, so I never felt poor. I never felt like I'm missing out on anything. I didn't know that was low-income until after I got out of college. We didn't make a lot, but we never felt like we lost anything because basically, what I had was also for everybody.

CS: Who in your immediate family was employed, and what did they each do for a living?

ID: Like I said, my grandma—she was working with—my grandma was working with Ramsey County, helping out with those people who are disabled. My mom—she worked with Cub Food. She was working hard, even a little bit as a kid. Then afterwards, she worked at Cub Foods in the Midway, for over 20 years. Then also, my grandpa—he was retired, so mainly he retired. He used to work in the meatpacking industry for a while, so just living the retirement life, had a good pension and had good Social Security, and everything.

Living that life, but just barbecued and grilled on the back, just to sell. Ribs, and all that stuff. Then later on in life, I worked at Target in the Midway, when it opened, at the Super Target. I was there, at the beginning. That was the income in the house, and we just made do, what we do.

My grandma retired when I was in high school when I was 16. Was, what, 15, 16, when my grandma retired, after working for Ramsey County for over 20 years.

CS: In what way has your family's financial circumstances shaped your spending habits today?

ID: When it comes to my family's financial habits, I stay true to the core tenets of making sure I got a roof over my head, food on the table, clothes on my back, and a vehicle to get to point A to point B. I make sure I take care of my basic necessities as—first, and then organize my bills as best as possible. I think I would say it's just the part of a little scarcity, a little bit, just not spending a lot, but just making do with what you have.

As a kid growing up, I did—The shoe store we always went to was Payless. *[Laughter]* I really didn't go to Nike or Footlocker for a lot of shoes. I've maybe got some—my first pairs of Nikes and stuff from Footlocker when I was in high school, but growing up, Payless was our spot. Or Sears, or Mervyn's California. It was like, I never paid over over 100 bucks for a pair of shoes. It was less than \$80 for a pair of shoes.

CS: Great. Now I would like to know about your experiences with religion, such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, *et cetera*. Describe what you can recall about your family's religious practices when you were growing up.

ID: My family is Methodist, so we grew up in the—particularly in the United Methodist Church. Growing up, my home church is Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church, up in the Frogtown area, off on Dale and Fuller. My family have been members of that church since 1960, 1970, so growing up, church—it always played a huge role, and that's where I got heavily involved.

Currently, I'm a pastor of Prospect Park United Methodist Church in Minneapolis. When it comes to faith, every Sunday, my Sunday routine usually goes as follows: Wake up in the morning to, usually, rice with some butter and some sugar, with some toast. Then on the TV, 8:00 with Bobby Jones Gospel. 9:00, her video gospel came on, but usually, when Bobby Jones is on, after I get ready, I usually wait for the church van to come pick me up, or I ride with my grandma. But usually, wait for the church van pick me up, bring me to the church.

We have Sunday School, and then after Sunday school was the service. We used to have just an 11:00 service, and then it went to 8:00 and 11:00. Usually going to church on Sunday, and then growing up as a kid, I was at my church Monday through Friday with the after-school program called Project Spirit. Project Spirit was a after-school program focused on the African-American community, and black-focused, black-centric, particularly. It was breaking-- a break off-- after Freedom School, 'cause I did Freedom School, as well.

Being a part of the church made me understand what is important—being important when it comes to community, and also, having my faith be a strong center point in my life. The church played a huge role [*laughing*] in my life, but I didn't get forced to go to church. I wanted to go to church 'cause it was fun. I made community, and it was beyond just coming to church on a Sunday, but really embracing the commandment about loving your neighbor as you love yourself. They really embody that.

They're just doing the work, and I felt the call for ministry, and I got involved a lot. The church really helped me grow as a leader, be involved in my community, and being reminded of the proverb about, "It takes a village to raise a child," but also, to be reminded to never forget where you come from because my community—no matter where I go, I'm a Rondo kid, through and through, so I'm never gonna forget my community. The spirit of Rondo still lives within me, and even though the highway took it down, we still here. Yeah. Religious upbringing played a huge role.

CS: Well, you kind of already answered this, but you can elaborate on it, if you want to. How important or relevant is religion to you now, as an adult?

ID: I helped me really grow in my faith and religion, when it comes to just having to put like—For me, I cannot picture my life without God. I can't. It's hard for me to do that, and really, it's more because I have a relationship and just really, when it comes to just helping me really be who I am, and understanding that I'm in love, no matter what.

'Cause for me, like I said, religion was never shoved down my throat. My grandma brought me to the church, like she got me involved and stuff, but she gave me the opportunity to make a decision, and she never wanted me to force me. She just wanted what's best for me. I got a chance to meet God for myself, and as an adult right now, being a pastor, I had the opportunity to undo stuff that I felt was harmful, that I was taught.

'Cause I'm an openly queer black man, and I'm being a part in the faith and get a chance to just really be authentically who I am, and understanding that God loves me, no matter what, it helped me out. Faith played a role because it really helped me out, from the principles, to just—for prayer, but just really, just having a relationship with Christ particularly, and just knowing that I'm loved unconditionally.

CS: Now, I'd like to learn more about the neighborhood in which you grew up. If you moved during childhood, you may wish to reflect on more than one neighborhood. This is fine to do, but please indicate as you do it. Please describe what comes to mind when thinking about the neighborhood in which you grew up.

ID: The southern University Avenue area, but Rondo neighborhoods where I grew up. As a kid growing up, I remember always going to Rondo Days the third Saturday in July. I always looked forward to Rondo Days. That was my celebration. A time to celebrate love, community, and the neighborhood. I remember as a kid growing up, my *[unintelligible 15:43]* to Rondo Days, I was like, “So why are we all here? What the heck is Rondo Days? Where’s Rondo?”

I remember hearing someone like, “Boy, you live in Rondo right now!” I’m looking like, “Oh.” Was ‘cause I never—when I hear people say, “I’m from the east, I’m from Merriam Webster’s neighborhood. *[Unintelligible 15:58]* looking like “What neighborhood am I in? I don’t know. Nobody said anything.” Growing up in Rondo was just really, the heart or spirit in the community ‘cause—like due to the Federal Highway Act that happened in the 1950s, that destroyed the Rondo Street, the street in Rondo neighborhood, and... When you look in the map and barricades, see, that we’re still here.

It took the main street, Rondo, but we’re still keeping our spirit alive. Just because the Main Street is gone, you still got the neighborhood here. I like to say I’m a modern-day Rondo kid. Rondo’s still alive. I honor those who lived in the neighborhood. I’d honor those who were a part of who *[unintelligible 16:39]* how I honor and live—and say the names of those who lost their houses and everything, because that trauma’s still real.

Growing up in the neighborhood of Rondo really teaches you the importance of not forgetting the story, knowing the history of the community, and making sure it don’t repeat itself, but also, making sure that we always look out for one another and always loving upon one another, and just really thrive. We’re not just here to survive. We’re here to thrive.

My community, being a part of Rondo, helped me a lot when it comes to thriving, and being proud from where you come from, and not being sad about it. Just keeping that spirit alive, and keeping that story alive, and not letting it die. I’m grateful for my neighborhood, growing up, throughout my whole years. I’m a born and bred Rondo kid, where we’re Rondo. We’re representing my neighborhood, no matter what. Yes, it been through a lot of changes ‘cause I know we’re facing—gentrifications been happening, but we’re still here.

CS: As far as transportation options, how did you typically get around town?

ID: Before I started driving, transportation was busing. The faithful 21 and *[unintelligible 117:51]* 21-A, to be pacific, and *[laughing]* also, on the 16 with my friends, where they came to meet, getting home. I would—16, get off on Lexington, to walk straight down, to go home, or take the 21, get off on Selby and Oxford, and just walk straight down the hill, to go home. That’s the way I usually get around, or I had family members sometimes, or friends who would be able to take me places, but usually public transportation was my friend.

CS: How well did the residents in your neighborhood know each other, and what were some of those relationships like?

ID: Oh, we knew each other. Some, obviously, went to the same church. Or just saying hello to people, so you knew—‘cause down the street was—I know one of our neighbors was my older sister on my dad’s side. It was her family, and they treated me as family, and people knew my family in the block, so we all knew each other in the neighborhood.

If you were new to the neighborhood, usually, my grandpa would be the one who will bring you a slab of ribs and say, “Welcome to the neighborhood.” It was a good experience, and the people who are still—live in the neighborhood to this day, who I now—‘Cause one of the things is that if anything happens in neighborhood, we wanna make sure we know who they are, and how we can be of support.

One of the things that I won’t forget was—one time, one of the families had their house on fire and they were out of town. We was able to get a hold of them, to let them know. Someone knocked at our window, and they didn’t feel scared. I’m already like, “Oh, *[Unintelligible 19:24]* and we just make—and everybody in the neighborhood pitched in, to make sure everybody was safe.

CS: How safe was your neighborhood when you lived there, and what factors made it that way?

ID: My neighborhood was safe. I know sometimes, living where Jimmy Lee’s is, we have some gang violence and things like that. There’s some people like that, but the police was there in the neighborhood, but I never felt threatened, like I had to watch my back.

I just felt comfortable about it. I’d stay because just, people knew each other, and everybody knew, if you were gonna act up, they can call your mama or your daddy and you didn’t want to have that happen, ‘cause people knew who your family was. *[Laughter]* Yeah, I never felt threatened or scared or anything because it was my people. *[Unintelligible 20:14]* where I lived at was a block away from Saint Paul Central, and so I think just where we was at. Yeah, there might be some gang violence here and there, but everybody knew to take care of each other and not try to do no crazy stuff, particularly with some of the elders or people in the neighborhood.

CS: If you had to describe the best part about growing up in your neighborhood, what comes to mind?

ID: The community. Just the community in the field where like for me, my neighborhood felt more than just, “I’m just living here.” It felt community. It felt home. Every time I come to my

neighborhood, I feel peace, and I feel like I'm just chilling at home with my family. It feels like a family reunion, every time I come in.

Not only do I feel community, but I just think about, just the Rondo Days celebration. Just seeing so many people, particularly so many black people, just come together, celebrating, from the drill teams to the black-owned products and foods, and everything like that. Just celebrating culture, history, heritage—I just love that. The spirit of Rondo. If I can say—summarize it altogether, the spirit of Rondo is something that lives within me. It's something that I will always treasure, and I'm grateful for my neighborhood to have. Keep that story alive and keep that spirit breathing.

CS: Next, I would like to learn about the values shared by your family and your neighbors. Values are principles or standards that help guide behavior. What memories come to mind that demonstrate what these values were for your family and your neighbors?

ID: Always stay true—What I would say to the values is, always stay true to who you are, and basically, just be unapologetically you. Don't apologize for who you are, where you come from. Just be you and know that you are loved, and that you're cared for, and that, no matter what, if nobody—if people who feel like they don't love you, know that you got a God who loves you.

Just really be unapologetically you, and also just to take care. Take care of each other. I really would just say, like if I had to go [*unintelligible 22:21*] on it. [*Laughter*] The greatest commandment about loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself, I will say is something—the value that I basically build up for my community and for my family.

How do we truly love one another, and how can you really love someone if you don't love yourself? Really making sure to use your gifts and talents to be a blessing and also, help make it better, not only for yourself and for what's currently happening right now, but also, make it better for the next generation. Yeah, I would say just really embodying the greatest commandment, being unapologetically you, and always looking out on ways on how we can make it better for the next generation will be some of the principles I gained from my family and from my community.

CS: Today, how closely do you feel your current values reflect those of the residents currently living in your childhood neighborhood?

ID: I'd say it's still aligned. It still aligned. 'Cause even right now, I know we got—I know Rondo Days hadn't happened in a while. We had a block party. There was a block party that happened. I couldn't make it because I had COVID at that time, which sucked, and I was salty about it. [*Laughter*] But one about the block parties that just people just continue to keep that

legacy going. I got one of my friends who's going for—to try to become City Council for Ward and Warren, which is where Rondo lives in, and she's a product of the neighborhood. *[Laughter]* Overall, it's just keeping—I would just say, yeah. It was just like my—r

Right now, to this day, the values are still there, and always looking out for one another, I think the one thing that we're still building on to bringing that spirit of community back more, since a lot of people who used to live in that neighborhood moved out, we had to, unfortunately, sell our family house *[laughter]* in the neighborhood. We didn't want to, but due to medical assistance for my grandma, and for other stuff, we had to, and dang, reverse mortgage. Skip reverse mortgage. I hate reverse mortgages. *[Laughter]*

Financially, we didn't have the means to keep it, but overall, though, I feel like we're bringing the community back, but also, like I said, gentrification. 'Cause it was a lot of black people living in the neighborhood, and we had some—It was diverse, but it was a hugely black neighborhood, and now, since it's getting more diverse in the neighborhood, it's great, but also, how do we keep the story of the neighborhood alive and not let it die, or people forget what went on here? and just keep it going.

Because no matter where you go, no matter where you move—each neighborhood, each house—everybody has a story. We don't wanna lose the stories of that neighborhood because that's wisdom that could be shared. That's history, right there, and that needs to be spread. 'Cause we lose that history—that's someone's story. That's someone's life that we're missing. That could be an integral part of keeping that history alive, and play an integral part of keeping that wisdom, keeping that thread, that quilt of the neighborhood story connected.

CS: Now, I'm going to ask you all about leisure time. Describe some of the ways in which you, your family, and your neighbors engaged in leisure time, when you were growing up?

ID: Leisure time for me, was just always either going down to Jimmy Lee all the time... Be outside in the parks, on the swings, or everything like that. Going down the street on Lexington, hanging out at New Asia, or hanging out at the parks or at my house in high school, chilling at Central.

From MLK, I'm chilling over at different parks and then Jimmy Lee, or just playing basketball, playing sports, walking around, just walking and talking, riding bikes, and I can name all the stuff, but it was just really just enjoying company and chilling. Or sometime going each other places, just hanging out. Playing some video games, here and there, like that, but mainly just going out and having fun and chilling.

Also, one of my leisures is also the library. I know the library that used to be off on Lexington and University, the Lexington Library, that now was closed and moved down to University and Dale became the Rondo Library. The library on Lexington was also a spot I used to go to, just to read and also get homework help, and chill over there.

I didn't know we had a library in the community 'til my grandma showed me in high school. *[Laughter]* I was like, "Oh, we had a library here? Oh!" *[Laughter]* I'm late in the game. Yeah. Just hanging out in different places, even go to like—yeah. Just hanging out. MLK, rec centers, walking around, just chilling.

CS: What kind of books would you get from the library?

ID: I love horror books, so Goosebumps, R.L. Stein. I will be binging on those books. I like Animorphs, so I read all the Animorph books. When Harry Potter came out, every new book, I was ready. I could read a whole book of Harry Potter each day, so when books that came out, for a whole day, I'll read. I will finish each book until the new book comes out.

Yeah, so basic fantasy, action, horror, thrillers. I just love to read, and I think this is why my grandma—like they say, "Candy is a kid's best friend," books were my best friend, thanks to me being a product of Freedom School. My grandma—when she saw the Scholastic Book Fair, she was like, "Oh, no." I'm like, "Hey, Grandma!" "No, no, no, no, no."

My grandma and my mom were one, 'cause they know, I will break your pockets at a bookstore. Skip Toys-R-Us. Skip Target. A bookstore, a Book Fair, and everything? Oh, I'ma clean your pockets. *[Unintelligible 27:54]* They'll get broke. *[Laughter]* Yeah. They limited me when it came—The library was my friend, and they're like, "Oh, yeah, the library is gon' be your friend, bitch. You ain't gonna break our pockets on books." *[Laughter]*

CS: What types of television shows did you watch, growing up?

ID: Nickelodeon, old school Nickelodeon. Disney Channel was my favorite area, so from That's So Raven, to either Suite Life of Zack and Cody. As a kid growing up, All That, particularly on the Saturdays. All That—the original cast. I love All That. Either Cousin Skeeter—I remember Are You Afraid of the Dark?

I can go on, but Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, MTV, BET were some friends. 106 & Park were some shows, when Saturday comes on, Recess, Yu-Gi-Oh!, Pokémon, Digimon. Yeah, I can go all day talking about shows, but yeah. I was a TV buff, and at the same time, like watching game shows. From Wheel of Fortune, to Price is Right, to Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?, I loved watching game shows with my family.

Wheel of Fortune was my favorite one, and Price is Right is something that I watched with my grandma with Bob Barker and then now, Drew Carey. If I'm on Price is Right, I will be beating that. I will be on that show and win, but one show particularly was my favorite as a kid, was Legends of the Hidden Temple, which was basically based with Olmec being the ancient Mayan God and basically speaking from a rock. You got to beat Olmec's temple to retrieve a hidden historical fact. As a kid, to this day, even to now, I always wanted to be on that show 'cause I will beat Olmec's temple. I want to be in that temple. *[Laughter]*

The Legends of the Hidden Temple, Magic School Bus, and Carmen Sandiego, and Zoom were some of my really, really favorites, that got me into history, science, and just loved—They brought—basically helped me nurture a love for learning, and I feel like, as a kid growing up in the 90s and early 2000s, they catered a lot of shows for us and it made it—helped us have a love for learning, and different things like that.

CS: Which bands or music genres were your favorite?

ID: R & B, hip hop, pop, gospel, jazz, smooth jazz. I liked a lot of those in the 90s growing up. Nineties, 2000s NSYNC, Backstreet Boys, Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears. R & B, from Mary J. Blige, Blackstreet, to TLC, my favorite musical group. Destiny Child, SWV. I can go with Tupac, Biggie, Nas, Common, Erykah Badu.

I can go all day, but a lot of those genres. Gospel music—Kirk Franklin is my favorite gospel artist. Grew up on him and Christian hip hop, too, with Lecrae, Trip Lee, Tedashii. All them, so yeah. I listen to a lot of music, but mainly gospel, hip hop, R & B, smooth jazz, pop. Just mainly what's on the radio, but I listen to other people.

CS: As an adult, have you kept in touch with any friends from your childhood?

ID: Yep. I'm still in touch with a lot of my friends from childhood. One of my friends, one of my best friends when I connected with my dad's side—'cause my dad side also lived—my uncle on my dad's side not lived that far from me. When I connected with my dad's side for the first time and meeting some of my family members, one of my best friends lived up the street from me.

We found out we were cousins this whole entire time and never knew so *[laughing]* that was crazy, and I got a chance to officiate—he had my first wedding that I did, too, as well. 'Cause we've been best friends since elementary and we're like, "We've been best friends and we've been cousins this whole, entire time and never knew this? What kind of crap is this?" *[Laughter]*

Yeah, I'm still in touch with a lot of my friends. He's one of my best friends, my cousin, but also, another one of my best friends—we grew up down the street from each other, and me and his family—we're close and we're still in touch to this day. A lot of people who I grew up with, I'm still in touch, in different ways.

CS: Next, let's discuss your experience with schooling. Please describe what it was like going to school as a child.

ID: My schools I went to—elementary, I went to Benjamin E. Mays Magnet School for Communication Arts and Leadership, now known as Benjamin E. Mays World IB School, Capitol Hill Magnet School, and then Saint Paul Central. I loved my high school spirits. I loved my elementary spirits. Junior high—not so fun. *[Laughter]*

Elementary school—my principal was Dr. *[unintelligible 32:44]* and it was my first—my first elementary school was when I had a black principal. My second-grade teacher was black. Ms. *[Dutrell?]*. It was really black-centric, focused on Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, as the center point. Communication Arts, the Magnet School, in different ways, helped me growing as a leader, and I enjoyed my public—my elementary years.

Because even with elementary, we went to Camp St. Croix. We got a chance to go to the different enrichments. Got a chance to go to Wisconsin to see a dairy farm, which is—Smelling milk for the first time, before it had been pasteurized and everything—fresh milk will make you gag your way to throw up because I didn't know that cows' milk smelt that bad.

[Laughter]

I didn't know it had a odor, either. Elementary—I was part of community choir called City Song, which is part of University of Minnesota and helped me bring my love continue with singing. Through City Song, I got a chance to be on few CDs. One CD, which traveled with Teaching Tolerance, and with Teaching Tolerance, I got a CD called—that I would travel with over 30,000 teachers, 30,000 teachers from around the nation.

We got a chance to give the city—'cause we work with—We worked with JD Steele of the Steele family with one song. Yeah, but elementary—had a good time. Learned some entrepreneurial skills, 'cause we had a school store. Taught me how to cook. The first thing I learned how to cook was eggs and pancakes. That *[audio cuts out 34:10]* first thing I learned how to make. I thought was Chef Boyardee. I thought was Chef Gordon Ramsay after I learned how to cook those two. Elementary helped me grown a lot, and I enjoyed my experience.

Middle school, Capitol Hill—it was cool. I didn't—why I wasn't fond of my middle school experience was because I felt like, even though it's in the neighborhood and everything, it was really a gifted and talented magnet school. Not a lot of minorities was in that school, and I felt

like an outcast, a little bit. I couldn't find community, and I felt I dealt with a few aspects of racism [*laughter*] and prejudice in the school, a few times and different ways.

It wasn't overt, but it was covert, in different ways, and I felt it and made me—I just didn't feel community. It didn't feel like I belonged, even though I won a community—even though I won an award at the school for being represented a good student, I didn't feel I belonged. One of the teachers who played a good role, to help me encourage myself to press forward—his name was Mr. Scott. He was my first black male teacher in eighth grade, and he really seen the best of me. 'Cause he challenged me a lot. He'd be like, "Isiah, I know you're smart as hell. I know you are. Show it." [*Laughter*] Because I was—with the sense of community, I didn't feel community at that school. I was smart. I understood the assignments. I rebelled and didn't do work. All the teachers—they're like, "We know you're smart as hell. Just turn in the work. We just wanna see it! We know it! Please!" to help me, encourage me to push me to do—press forward 'cause I really—that was a struggle for me.

High school was where I found more of my voice. Saint Paul Central. That was the only high school I applied for. That's the only high school I wanted to go to. I was not gonna go to any other high school but Central. End of story. [*Laughter*] I'm grateful for my time at Central. I was involved. I'm the class of '08, so I was involved heavily in school with Student Council, all four years.

Served on the management team my senior year. I was part of the Central Minority Education Portion program which we had a partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank. Our college—our Mission Possible, now known as College Possible. The one thing that drew me to Central was Central Touring Theatre, which was the Black Box Theater Program, which did improv, social justice theater.

Because I saw them tour when I was in middle school, and a few people who I went to church with, who I knew in high school, were part of that program. When I saw them in middle school, I was like. "I'm going to be there. I'm going to be a part of this group," and I got a chance to be a part of the group my senior year. I'm grateful 'cause I—one of the main reasons I wanted to go to Central—be a part Black Box. Be a part of theatre.

I found my voice, gave me a passion for the arts and theatre. Been a poet and helped me grow as a person, and a teacher, Jan Mandel—I'm grateful for her. Through the Black Box, we founded a program, See the Change, a mentoring group for African-American men and their allies. I'm part of the inaugural group, and it stayed alive for a little bit, and they evolved from being an at-school program to the African-American Male Initiative with [*unintelligible 37:16*] It evolved to that, but generally it—yeah.

My school experience—I enjoyed it. I went to the University of Minnesota. Graduated there, two degrees: Bachelor of Science in Youth Studies, Minor—African, African-American studies. Master of Education in Youth Development Leadership, and then got my Master of Divinity. Graduated last year from Luther Seminary through the accelerated program. Did this in two years, compared to four years, so I had no life, and I started this in the pandemic, during the uprising. Had no life. *[Laughter]*

My K to 12 at my neighborhood, just education—it helped me find my passion, find my voice, and we really—I’m grateful for the teachers who believed in me, who really seen me through and all the supports that I have. Elementary—like I said, Project Spirit earlier. That’s where I went to do elementary, during the school year. After I got done with school, went to Project Spirit, did my homework, had the lesson, had a meal and everything, at the church, and got picked up afterwards.

Then later on, but during the summer, I did Freedom School during elementary. A product of Freedom School—passionate when it comes to reading literacy, culture, history, and more. Then did stuff with *[unintelligible 38:31]* summer theatre one year. One of my years in high school, Central and Saint Paul connections, at the time, where you could do at-school enrichment during the summer. In other words, I was heavily involved in the school. Got involved in any place, shape, or form, but I’ve grown a lot. I’m grateful for my education experience. I wouldn’t change it.

CS: For our final topic, I’m going to ask you to reflect on local and global issues, such as war, poverty, discrimination, social unrest, *et cetera*. In your opinion, what were some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your neighborhood, when you were growing up?

ID: Gun violence. Gun violence was the big thing during my time growing up, because of people who were getting shot and killed over some stupid things and what you—gang activity and basically people just speaking up, and just trying to put the guns down. Not only that, but also with drugs, as well. I remember they brought, what, the DARE Program—Drug Awareness Resistant Education. I remember that in elementary, where they would be pushing that hard and making sure we don’t do drugs, and everything like that.

I remember even talking about sexual—like teen pregnancy and STDs, everything like that and just abstinence stuff. Hard on abstinence, and I feel like it could have been better if they just taught us like, “Okay. Abstinence is one way, but if you plan on having sex, hear what it means to have safe sex.” They just had the talks, instead of just being scared and just like—’cause as teens—

Teens: “We wanna have sex.” *[Laughter]* They’re just down. *[unintelligible 40:05]* but teens and youth are going to have sex. They’re gonna be experimenting. They’re gonna do it, as much as you want them to wait, but if you can teach ‘em properly to make—the safeguards and the

resources around, I feel like that would have been more—better compared to just avoiding it, by all costs.

Mainly gun violence, teen pregnancy, and drugs is what I remember as a kid being spoken up about. Just really trying to advocate to stop this, stop the shooting, stop killing, and stop the gang activity, and really just work on just living in the community.

CS: How safe or unsafe did you feel, in light of these issues?

ID: I felt safe. The only times I felt unsafe growing up was—yeah. Actually, I felt safe. I really didn't feel unsafe, honestly. The only time I felt unsafe is if I heard a gunshot. Then I'm like, "Okay, I don't feel safe and I need to get somewhere safe," but I'm more concerned about not losing someone who I know and making sure my family—we're all okay. That's the only time where I feel unsafe, if some of my family was vulnerable, if I was vulnerable. Other than that, I'm fine.

CS: What messages did you receive about how to treat people who are different from you in some way?

ID: Love 'em, no matter what, and learn how to see people as human, or see people beyond who they are. Because as a black man, I—and understand I grew up [*unintelligible 41:38*] the concept of race and understanding about having to talk—like the talk when it comes to police. Like, be polite. Have your hands out. Make sure they don't see anything. Just say, "Yes, sir," "No, sir." "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am," and everything like that.

I grew up knowing all that stuff, but even if I see—particularly, if I see white people, I might see them, and I'm still gonna treat 'em as a human being 'cause the way I was grown up is to always see the best in someone, and I got a big heart. [*Laughter*] Sometimes, I feel like it's a good thing. Sometimes, it could be a barrier, I feel like, sometimes. I grew up to see the best in people and not see the worst.

Because at the end of the day, we're all going to find some way to live together in harmony, and it'll be better for us to work together than to be divided 'cause united, we stand. Divided, we fall. Also, let's really see each other for who we are and not dismiss our race, and dismiss color every day. 'Cause we all different, but we could still live in harmony, and we can still be diverse and still live in unity.

CS: In your opinion, what are some of the biggest local or global issues affecting the people in your childhood neighborhood today?

ID: I would say, right now—well, I'd say, gentrification because of the building of the soccer stadium. Because I know the soccer stadium took away a bit—like a part of the Midway. They could have built that down in Highland Park and the Ford Parkway area. That would have been a perfect spot. Or where the old St. Paul Saints Stadium was—That could have been a perfect spot, too!

But, nah! You wanna destroy parts of the neighborhood—and then like further away in Hamline, too. And just destroy that area for a soccer stadium, which I'm like, "For what? You had other places. You got ample space, but y'all went straight to a area for the community." Then on the Midway, how we got At Home now. That used to be a Wal-Mart, and before Wal-Mart, it was a K-Mart. *[Laughter]*

Kmart was okay, but when they brought Wal-Mart, that Wal-Mart was one of the busiest ones, that was always active. It didn't make no sense to shut down, to put an At Home, which—they might get business, but I feel like that's rarely got business and you're just catering to an audience that's not gonna cater to community.

I feel like gentrification is taking a huge role because it's catering to people who are not from the community, and just basically ignoring the needs of what the community actually need. Just basically trying to push people who live in this area away, to bring in a new demographic and just basically—yeah.

I feel like we're just getting—people in my community are getting pushed out, just to make way for other people, who don't know the history or origin, don't respect the history or the heritage, or people who don't understand the importance of why people live where we at and just understanding the significance. 'Cause that's people's houses that might have been in their family for a century.

There might be stories. There might be historical—maybe a historical moment right here, that might be destroyed, 'cause people didn't know, so I feel like gentrification is playing a huge role within the community because just the stories. There's some history that is being lost. One of the things that you reminded me of—and this can maybe be added somewhere else, and I apologize, if it sounds like I'm rambling. *[Laughter]* I think about Tiger Jack. Tiger Jack is someone in the community a lot of people know. His old shed that's on Dale, off—on Dale and Concordia. His old shed, right behind St. James AME. *[Laughter]* His shed is always there. He always had candy. You could always grab anything from Tiger Jack, and that shed is still there. They keep it in the family, but I was just thinking about how I'm 33, and I still remember that shed and it's still right there.

His family kept it alive. How can we find ways to keep things alive? Like, I'm cool with changes, and I'm cool with understanding—with making moves and things, but how can we keep the spirit alive and not feel like we're getting pushed out, away, just to make room for anybody else and we're just being ignored for our needs?

I'm worried about—since the move of the soccer stadium, are they gonna try and take away the Cub Foods? My mom been working there for over 20 years. If they try to take away the Cub Foods—'cause they are making a lot of redevelopment in that area—that means it's going to be a food desert and people are going to have to drive far away. “Well, you got Aldi's.”

Aldi's is not gonna be good enough because a lot of people in the neighborhood rely on that Cub Foods for their groceries. Not a lot of people got money for Whole Foods, Mississippi Market, some of the high-end grocery stores not a lot of people got the money for. I'm just kind of worried about how this gentrification and different things like that are hurting some of the resources that's needed for the community, and basically not making it possible or making it hard for people to get their necessities.

CS: This is right before the end of the interview, but do you have anything else that comes to mind, through any of the topics, that maybe you forgot, and wanna mention before we wrap it up?

ID: The only thing I think is if—I forgot if I add into there is, I'm thinking about the light rail. The light rail has been a great—It's been great to have down the Green Line, but I remember before, when we heard about the Green Line, it was a protest in the neighborhood because we would make—'cause what the Green Line—was brought [*unintelligible* 46:50] because it reminded, even though I grew up after the destruction of Rondo, I could still feel it.

Just because I didn't grew up at that time, I could still feel the ramifications. I could still feel the trauma. I could still feel what happened, the energy and the violence, and all that. The Green Line brought those wounds up 'cause a lot of us were worried about, “Are y'all gonna do what you did to us again at Rondo—displace us, remove us, not give us any kind of conversation or no anything to help us?” Like, “Y'all gon' do what y'all did to us, again.”

I remember that as a kid, growing up, and now, the Green Line's—Green Line started building when I was in college, but it—yeah. It's not helpful for the community, but I'm grateful that they honored and made sure they respected the neighborhood in different ways, shapes, and form, and they really listened to the community. I'm thinking now, for the new land bridge just discussed about—for the ReConnect to Rondo.

I'm wondering how, what's—if they're gonna bring the land bridge over what used to be Rondo. One, I can't remember—I don't know if, with the land bridge, are they going to keep that name back as Rondo, when Rondo Street is back up and running? Are we gonna have any—some of the businesses that used to be there, come back alive?

I know they're bringing new houses. There gonna be new things, but I'm just curious to know, like how this—What is the new chapter for my neighborhood gonna be looking like? And how are we gonna make sure that this don't happen again? Is this land bridge gonna be more permanent, or it is just a temporary thing, where, next thing you know, maybe 20, 40, 50 years from now, they're gonna take it away, and bring it back to how it is right now?

I'm wondering, just, in general, what kind of legacy—how Rondo's going to stay alive. Are we going to have maybe—for me, I feel like having a marker that shows that this is a historic neighborhood would be respectful, because we recognize Cathedral Hill as a historic neighborhood. We have Summit Hill, recognizing some other historic neighborhoods.

How could we have Rondo be recognized as a historic neighborhood, instead of just us telling you about the history, it can be recognized? Because it wasn't 'til 2016, 50 years later, when we had a monument for Rondo and where the city apologized for what they did. Fifty years. We shouldn't wait any longer. That's all the other stuff I will share.

CS: This is the end of our interview. Your responses are invaluable, and we really appreciate that you took the time to do this today. Thank you so much for participating.

ID: Appreciate it. Thank you.

[End of Audio]