Aidsand Wright-Riggins:

Okay. So I was born Aidsand Wright-Riggins the third. Aidsand is a family name. I'm the third of the fourth in that specific line of Aidsands. I'm told that it is a name that comes out of an Arabic word that means either call to prayer or one who helps the weak. Franklin, as I've come to understand it, is another name for free man. And then Riggins is the name of my, I don't know if it was my great, great grandfather or great, great great-grandfather who himself was a slave owner. A slave owner, and my great great-grandfather was the son of a slave owner who ended up becoming a straw boss, that is an overseer for other slaves on the Riggins plantation in Washington County, Texas. I have now my son is Aidsand the fourth and my grandson is Aidsand the fifth.

When I married, a second marriage, largely because I saw how ... Really because of my second marriage, because I'd been married before, I saw how my first wife took on my name and she lost her own name. And that was just strange to me that she could lose her name. So when I married the second time I took on my wife's name. So I go by Aidsand Franklin Wright-Riggins. Wright-Riggins. And the name Ace was a name that was given to me when I was playing football in high school. And I was quarterback, captain of my football team in high school and I was given the name Ace, and that has been a nickname that stuck with me ever since.

I was born in 1950. I was born in Riverside, California. I was the third of four children. I was born out there as my father had just come ... Both my parents are transplants from Texas and Oklahoma. My father was in the Army and had just gotten out of the Army in Riverside, California, an Army base out there. And so I was born there. And then when I was about two years old, we moved to Compton, California. And then raised in Compton and South Central Los Angeles.

Age of nine, actually maybe even before that, I felt a very strong desire and urge to preach when I was seven years old. I was licensed by my church when I was nine. Actually on Juneteenth. Juneteenth, 1960. And so the only thing that ... I've always had the convergence of interest in both religion and sociology and politics since that age, and one way or another, I've been in that ballpark, in that arena for most of my life. And actually, I was on a walk this morning and as I was doing my walk, I was doing a little bit reflecting. Reflecting in terms of my own religious background and how religion has been used in such an oppressive way, period. And thinking even about Orange County as being a hotbed for much of that, I think it may have been a great idea to grow up with fear of religion. At this point, my granddaughter who lives with us, has a real suspicion, I would say a hermeneutic of suspicion, and I think that that's healthy.

It was interesting. I was born with a congenital condition that meant that I could not play a lot of sports until I got to high school. And then when I got to high school and started playing football. Originally started with a halfback position, did that first year. Second year, the quarterback didn't show up for summer practice. And they said, "Can somebody fill in?" And I knew what the quarterback was supposed to do and I came in and I became quarterback. And then in that position, we actually ended up with an undefeated season, all kinds of records. And so it was just amazing how that happened. I counted more about what was happening with that team than about me.

So our coach was tough. In fact, my coach was actually my across the street neighbor. So from the time I was five or six years old, I would go to the high school football games. I had watched the teams and I'd watched him, and he was just a task master. And if you survived, if it wasn't so much that you made the team, it was like you survived practice. And if you survived practice, you are tough. And so back then I was still short. Short, slight build.

What football taught me was tenacity. It taught me tenacity and it taught me discipline and it taught me never to give up. And so that has always stayed with me during tough, tough times that the

game doesn't really begin until you reach that edge of suffering and about to give up. And so sports has helped me with that in a very powerful way.

But it was amazing to me back during that period, the number of athletes that went on to play professional baseball and football. And in fact, we just began to expect it. It was kind of like, "Okay, you go through school, you go to high school and/or college and at a great percentage would go on to play professional sports." And we didn't even question it. But I think a lot of that had to do with the de facto de jour, segregation on our communities, and people just using the parks and the streets to become excellent at what they did.

I sometimes look back and feel that much of South Central Los Angeles, I still have ... Well, let me put it another way. I don't think I ever really left. Prior to moving to Pennsylvania to take on the CEO work of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, [inaudible 00:07:35], a number of other things, I pastored in South Central Los Angeles. Macedonia Baptist Church, right there in the heart of Watts. And I still maintain relationships and commitments to that church and to those folks and to that neighborhood. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever done was to move from the west coast to the east coast. But I do think that there has been a, at least from a religious political perspective, I think that there's been a real change that I've seen in the last 20 years or so, that just oftentimes makes me long to come back to do more work there.

Well, the first thing that I remember is the watch where I asked for my father's birthday, August 11th, 1965. And my mother and father had recently broken up maybe a year or two before that. And so my father lived on 97th and I think it was Juniper. And then I lived on 139th Street in Compton. So with my mother, I lived three miles away from the epicenter of the Watts riots. And my father lived six blocks from the epicenter of the Watts riot. I remember the day it started, I remember the terror of our communities being occupied by the National Guard. I remember my Watts cousins who lived right there off of 103rd Street being engaged in, I don't think they called it shoplifting or rioting, they called it liberating merchandise. [inaudible 00:09:30] lived in some of the projects right there. I think it was ... not [inaudible 00:09:35], but anyway, Jordan Downs.

I remember, for whatever reason, I was also playing baseball with a little league team, and I don't know, I left maybe after the first two days of the rioting. We went down to Mexico to Mexicali playing baseball. And I remember coming back that night with my coach, Coach Page, and driving down Alameda. And we got stopped by the National Guard. I guess it was nine or 10 o'clock at night. We got stopped by the National Guard. They told Mr. Page about a mile up there would be another checkpoint, "Don't worry about it. Just flash your lights." We're driving towards that point on Alameda Boulevard, he flashes his lights, the guards take their positions with guns behind these barricades. Mr. Page freaks out, goes faster. We start screaming. Finally, we stopped. They didn't shoot, but they took us all out of the car, put us up against the wall, checked us, patted us down.

That was probably the very first contact I ever had with "police military." Scared me to death. That's, what, August 65, I'm 14 years old. But I remember it starting as a result of police confrontation. And I remember the chance of Black power. I don't think though we were saying black power then. What we were saying back then? What was it? Wow. I remember that the signs on the businesses, black owned businesses. Burn, baby, burn. Yeah. I knew it was a B. It would have been black power. Burn, baby, burn. And that was important.

And even then I can remember, what would be the word, the paradox, the ambivalence, the wrestling that I had at that point, that on the one hand was terribly upset that my community was burning. But on the other hand, felt like, "Yeah, we need to burn this mother down," because of the conditions that we're happening in our community. As Martin Luther King said, "It becomes a language of the oppressed." That when you leave people with no other choice, that is what they're going to do.

And so while I think it's reprehensible and I don't philosophically, or religiously, spiritually agree and affirm it, I understand it. I get it.

I had been accepted to Morehouse and was going to be going to Morehouse. And King was killed in April of that year. Then my father in June was diagnosed with cancer, final stages of esophagal cancer. And it was really that summer that a number of us from my school got word that Cal State Fullerton wanted to bring a cohort of Black students to Fullerton. When my father was diagnosed with cancer ... He bought me a car, bought me a brand new car. He decided I was going to stay home, go to Compton Junior College, rather than go to Morehouse. I would drive my car to college, to Compton Junior College. And then got the call from Cal State Fullerton, which essentially said I can go to school practically free. And I would only be 25, 30 miles away from home.

So I had a brand new car, go to Cal State Fullerton. Brand new 1968 Volkswagen Rabbit. But Volkswagen. Volkswagen, not a Rabbit. Volkswagen. So that kind of made me a popular guy on campus. I was one of the few Black students that had a car. I may have been the only one, I think. Only Black guy that had a car, for sure, when I started school.

But going to Fullerton, it was a different world back then to me. First of all, the 91 freeway, wasn't there. So you had to take Rosecrans Artesia all the way out. So it really felt like you were going a long way.

I was amazed by just the geography. I was amazed by the space and race of Fullerton compared to where I grew up in Compton. The socio-economics were much different, although I would say that the Compton I grew up in was the middle-class Compton. It was an all Black community. And to move to Fullerton, that was an all white, except for, which are predominantly white, 99% white. Other than the students that were on campus, was a surprise and a shock and odd to me.

Literally up until April 4th, 1968, I had not ever had a face-to-face, one-on-one conversation with a white person my age. And why I remember that was because I was student body president of my high school. And on April 4th, 1968, we had a dialogue of leaders between high school leaders and the Compton Unified school district. And I went from Centennial Dominguez High School, at the time was predominantly white. And that was the first day I had one-on-one, eyeball-to-eyeball conversations with a white person my age. And then as I came home that afternoon, then got the word that Martin Luther King had been assassinated.

So, then three months later, being at Cal State Fullerton, that was a different kind of experience of being in an all white community. My very first week in town, I was ... I'm not even sure if school had started. No, I'm not even sure if ... Yeah, the school had started, but our very first week in town, there used to be, and may still be, a Denny's restaurant on State College Boulevard where I was refused service. And I, along with, I don't know if you've come across the name, Raul Tapia in your research. Raul Tapia, Hispanic student. I think [inaudible 00:16:57] Mexican, I believe. Both Raul and I were refused service at the Denny's restaurant back then. So that was my first experience with being denied service. And that set me on a trajectory of saying, "Wow, this is real serious stuff that's happening out here in Fullerton." And then I was also shot at while driving down State College Boulevard close to where the stadium is now.

On the one hand, it was the experience of being at ... Other than summer trips to Texas or Oklahoma, I had never been out of Los Angeles county. I'd never been out of Compton, really. So going to Fullerton was a very different world to me. And on the one hand, I experienced both refusal of service, being shot at on one hand. Then on the other hand, there was a lot of white liberal acceptance that was also happening on that campus at the same time.

I certainly made lasting friendships with African-American students and some lasting friendships with Hispanic students, Latino students Latinx students. But when I think about ... That's interesting. I don't believe I have any lasting friendships from white students at Cal State Fullerton. Yeah.

I actually went through at least one of the articles that you sent last night. And it was interesting to me. I agree that it appears, and maybe I was more upbeat. I wouldn't say necessarily about integration. I was certainly upbeat, and continue to be assertive about our need for dialogue and engagement and respect for those that we might consider other. What's probably not reflected there is something I was going through, that I would say the majority of African-American students were going through at that time, was this wrestling between King's dream and Malcolm X's nightmare. But on the one hand, there was this real pull towards ... King may have been an integrationist, but I would say this real pull towards engagement and acceptance of the other. And at the same time, just a weary suspicion because of seeing how we were treated.

That was a real turning point for me. Reagan makes a visit to campus. All right. And I'm not quite sure if it was as a result of that or some other thing, but student leaders are in the room with Ronald Reagan. And so we're in the president's office seated around this huge table, and I'm seated right next to Ronald Reagan. Right next to Ronald Reagan. First of all, I didn't like him as a conservative governor of the state, but I also knew that he had practiced housing discrimination in property that he owned in California.

So he's speaking and all of this and it comes time for questions. And I raised the question. And I raised a question like, "Well, Mr. Governor, can you explain why you would maintain these discriminatory, horrible housing," whatever. And so, from my perspective, it was like, "Well, I got you now, all right. I put you on the hot seat." And Ronald Reagan said it well and he started explaining. And as he's talking, he's looking around the table and he's explaining, and he's talking, and I'm sitting right next to him, and it was like, I am amazed. This guy is good. I mean, it blew me away how ...

I mean, I'd only seen him on television up to that time and I'd only demonized him, and it was like, "He's amazing." I was watching how he had these people in the palm of his hands. I was really impressed by how well he was escaping my gotcha question. And then just as he ends his soliloquy, speaking to everybody. Again, I'm right here next to him, and he ends it and then silently says, "Nigger." Just like that.

I didn't even know a human being was capable of this. But at that very moment, tears, this is the only time in my life this has happened. Tears shot straight out of my eyes. Really. Tears came straight out of my eyes and I was caught in this moment for a fraction of a second of profound ... The moment before that profound impression and respect for the skills of this man and then just horrified and angered by how he would call me a nigger sitting next to him. And I jump up and pound on the table. And then all of a sudden the room goes into pandemonium. It's like, "What the hell?" People wondering what the hell has happened to me because nobody else hears it. Okay. And I'm jumping up and everybody's running towards me like this crazy Black man, because I'm saying the governor has just called me a nigger. To this day, I don't really know what happened after that because administration did not believe me, nobody else heard it, and Reagan successfully was able to paint me as some crazy lunatic guy in the room.

And again, I don't recall if this was before or after the Bruce Church or Dave [inaudible 00:25:05] thing, but I was in that room when all that went down. And then I remember later the FBI or whoever was trying to get me to identify people and convict people and all that kind of stuff. But I had really gotten to a point at that point where I just said to hell with it. I mean, I knew exactly who was in the room. I could have identified every person in there. But because I was so angry around some of the things that were happening there, I just checked out. I decided not to cooperate.

But yeah. And what troubles me still to this day about it, besides that moment where I'm caught in being overwhelmingly impressed and then humiliated at the same time, nobody else heard it. Nobody else heard it. But it was like a kick in the gut that the governor. I wish you could see my study. The only degree I don't hang on my wall is the Cal State Fullerton degree, because it has Ronald Reagan's name at the bottom of it as Regent of the State of California.

Jim actually came a year or two before this group of students that I was a part of. And Jim really was a bridge that helped us become acclimated and adjusted to the campus. And at the same time, lit a fire under us. But yeah, I remained friends with Jim for many, many years. In fact, I did his wedding, he and his wife, Debra. I was able to perform their wedding.

I have no idea why I did this, but I went to first year in Cal State Fullerton. I lived in the dorms and I know I lived there for free. The second year, I was, what do they call it? A student housing dorm leader, whatever. Had my own room and I lived there free. And then for whatever reason, I guess I thought I was grown, decided I wanted to move out and get my own apartment, which I ultimately did. But a couple of times, denied housing. So it was in the Fullerton Anaheim area. I couldn't even tell you where it was 50 something years later.

Well, here's what I remember happening. I believe we began with Black studies, or at least beginning to have classes in Black studies. And we were really excited about that, and that was a wonderful, wonderful thing. And then we began to have more Hispanic students, Latin students, and they wanted a Hispanic, or whatever they were calling it at the time,

Speaker 2:

Chicano studies.

Aidsand Wright-Riggins:

Pardon me?

Speaker 2:

Chicano studies.

Aidsand Wright-Riggins:

Chicano studies. That's right. They want to Chicano studies. That's what they were talking about. And so that was cool. Let's have Chicanos. We have Black studies, we have Chicano studies. And the school says, "No, we're going to have ethnic studies. And we're not going to increase the resources for this, but we're going to put it in just one thing." And so that created a lot of tension between the Hispanic students and the Black students on campus.

There was a fellow by the name of Danny Estrada. I got involved in an incident on campus where I actually ended up being arrested and tried for assault on Danny Estrada. We were having this, right there in the quad between the library and [Langstrep 00:29:40], whatever the hall was.

Speaker 2:

McCarthy Hall.

Aidsand Wright-Riggins:

Yeah. Blacks, Chicanos were all out there talking, and we're debating this, and trying to figure out what to do about it, and we were at each other's throats. Or some of the Blacks and some of the Hispanics were at each other's throats. I was basically trying to say, "We all need to be fighting for either a bigger pie or two separate departments. This needs to happen." And I remember Danny getting really upset, and I thought he was upset with my friend next to me, his name was Leo. I thought he was upset with Leo because Leo was saying some things. Danny got upset and Danny started moving towards, I thought he was moving towards Leo, and he had a pencil in his hand. And I was like, "Oh, Danny, you are in trouble because the last person in the world you want to mess with was Leo."

And then I noticed he wasn't coming towards Leo, he was coming towards me. I don't know for what reason, but he thought I had said something or done something, and he's coming and he's jabbing this pencil as he's coming. And he gets right up to me with this pencil, and just as he does that, the next thing I did, I just hauled off and hitting in his ear, and it burst his eardrum and he fell to the ground. And that almost would it become a riot, would it become a real physical confrontation between the Black and Chicano students. But Raul Tapia, this fellow that I was talking about earlier. Raul was my really good friend. In fact, he ended up being the best man at my wedding later. Raul grabbed me. At first, I thought it was jumping on me, but he grabbed me and he pulled me and ran me off campus away from the Hispanic students, because they were about to ... Because I really had knocked this guy out and burst his eardrum and everything else.

But that created a lot of tension during that time between the Black students and Hispanic students. I ended up being tried. In fact, I was tried twice. But it ended up, I think I was hung jury the first time or something and exonerated the second time. And a really interesting thing about that, just as a point of ... I'm going on too long.

Speaker 2:

No, no.

Aidsand Wright-Riggins:

But I forget the guy. His last name was [Mendale 00:32:34], and Jim Fleming got me a lawyer. I want to say Howard Mendale. Got me this lawyer, Jewish lawyer, who was very impressed with me, very impressed with me and very impressed with Raul. He did my case for free. He wanted to send me to law school as a result of going through that. I said, "No, I'm going to seminary." He said, "Such a waste." He ended up sending Raul to law school. Raul ended up at law school, graduated Harvard and ended up working with Jimmy Carter's administration.

Oh, and then years later, Howard, I think it was Howard Rendale. Mendale. Mendale. Got me off, really worked with Raul. Raul becomes a lawyer and everything else. But then years later in 1982, I adopt a child and I go to the Orange County courts, and the judge, who's the judge that I meet, signs the papers for me, is the guy that was my attorney. Not only he had actually had my birth children to then sign the papers, which was unusual, also signed the papers that not only did my wife and I adopt our daughter, but our sons adopted their sister. So they signed the papers for adoption too. So that was pretty cool.

One person that I think was really influential. Well, a couple people I think that was influential at that time. One was the fellow by the name of Emory Campbell, who was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Fullerton. And Emory, why he was influential to me was, he was the first white minister I'd ever engaged with. And when I first met him, I was really turned off by him because he had this deep Southern accent. He was from Florida, really. And to me, he looked like the stereotypical white

southerner, and he had this drawl and everything else. I was put off by what he appeared to be and what he sounded like.

But he ended up being a tremendous influence in my life. What Emory used to do was I think it was on Wednesday nights, he opened up his church for dinners for college students. And of course we wanted to get away from the dorm food that we had often had. We would go over to First Baptist Church and that's where I met Emory. And that's where I began to see that you cannot count on simple appearances, but you really have to get to know people.

And so here was this white preacher, First Baptist Church. I did not know at the time that First Baptist was a liberal white church. I didn't realize that back then, that belonged to the American Baptist Convention, not the Southern Baptist Convention. But he made a profound impact on me, and ultimately became the person that recruited me into American ... Not recruited, but became entry into the American Baptist Churches, USA, and became a mentor to me and many years later. That was a profound impact. And I think he had an impact on race relations in the sixties in Fullerton.

And then the other person, it was James Carrington. James Carrington was the pastor of Friendship Baptist Church. And probably in some ways was responsible for much of the ongoing integration of the demographic shifts I think that happened in Fullerton, because as Blacks graduated from school around the greater Orange County area were offered positions. What became the Black community was no longer simply defined by geography.

One person that I forgot to mention was a woman by the name of Dorothy Strauss. Dorothy Strauss was my English teacher at Cal State Fullerton. New Education Horizon [inaudible 00:37:17] back then. They paired us up with families or different people in the community. And I'm not quite sure how they worked for other students, but I was paired up with Dorothy Strauss and my roommate [inaudible 00:37:31] was as well. And the Strauss's, I think her husband was a CEO, a COO of some huge corporation out there in Orange County. They lived in Newport. They lived in this big, beautiful house in Newport Beach. But they would literally have us over on the weekends. So once every four weeks, once every six weeks or so, we'd just spend the weekend with them. And it was so incredibly ... Bottom line, it helped me break down those walls.