

Stuart King Interview Transcript

My name is Stuart Hinds King. I have been living in this neighborhood since 1959. My dad built this house in this neighborhood. We used to call it Rogers Washington Neighborhood Holy Cross Heights, because there was a hospital down the street called Holy Cross Hospital.

So I have two older brothers, a sister. Going to school was mandatory. We had to go to school. We had to get educated. That was mandatory. So I saw my older sibling, I'm the youngest out of four, so we really didn't have a choice, but after growing up and seeing everybody else going off to school, it was just automatic that I did so also.

So my parents were educators. They were at Huston Tillotson University or college back then, now it's university. So when we moved here, it wasn't that many homes here. So people started come – this used to be a cow pasture. My dad told me MLK, which was originally 19th Street, was a dirt road. When we moved over here it was a dirt road.

Further down, going west, they would call it East End. So you have this neighborhood, then you have McKinley Heights. Then it goes further east.

To this day, if I leave my trash can out too long, a neighbor will call me and tell me, put your trash can up. They will call when you need your grass cut. And, I laugh about it today, which is good, but other than that it's a great neighborhood. During segregation, great neighborhood. Mostly professionals, school teachers, mainly in this neighborhood.

There were kids in the neighborhood. We go from one house to the other. We eat at this house. We show up at dinnertime. But we had to be back before it got dark.

That was one of the laws of all the things you had to be home about before it was dark. And that's in elementary school. As all kids. We played baseball on the street. Football. We'd go across 19th Street, which is MLK, to the other neighborhoods.

We'd go north, to Manor Road, and Blackland ends at chestnut. That's where Blackland ends. And Washington Rogers goes from here all the way to Alexander, which is right before you get to railroad tracks. So this was a predominantly black neighborhood, but now things have changed. I've learned that the biggest room in the world is room for change.

So the change doesn't bother me. It used to, but I had to accept it and embrace it, or else I'd be miserable. But the neighborhood was great. Great to grow up in, especially with neighbors that everybody knew everybody. They would teach elementary school, so the neighbors would be teaching at a school that I would go to.

We got bussed, of course. I went to Blackshear Elementary School, went to Blackshear, from there, went to University Junior High, which they had a campus on UT. From there, they closed that, they built Martin, I went to Pearce and Reagan. So we'd catch the city bus on Manor Road, they'd take us to Pearce. Next year, they'd take us to Reagan.

My siblings all went to Austin High. My oldest brother graduated from Austin High in 1962. I was in the second grade to give an idea. I can count my grades by the year – 61, first grade, 62, second grade, and so forth. So it's easy for me to keep up with where I was by the year that it was.

Like all kids we get together, we didn't have house parties. We'd have to go to another neighborhood for a house party. Our parents didn't have the whole neighborhood over at the house. Like kids from other neighborhoods – they'd come over and play football against us. Baseball, whatever you have it. But as far as it was, it was a close knit neighborhood, Washington Rogers, where everybody knew everybody.

Of course, the kids were all play with each other. We all grew up together. Some of the kids that we grew up with are no longer here, a lot of them moved away. But some of my closest friends that we grew up with, it's only one, that stayed next door to Ms. Mims – Brenda Mallik.

There was a family that we were all around the same age. I'm 69 years old, so we're all around the same age, and the neighborhood has changed because the kids are gone. AISD is really hurting because they're no kids in the neighborhood to go. The charter schools have taken a lot of kids away from – they closed Sims Elementary school, they closed Rosewood Elementary where Ms. Kirk taught.

Ms. Betty Washington that lives next door a house down from Ms. Kirk was a librarian at Rosewood. They closed that. They closed Sims Elementary School, which is now Norman-Sims, which is off of Tannehill. So the dynamics has changed. The density is crazy. The park and neighborhood is crazy.

So many people have moved in. Everybody wants to come to East Austin when there was a time when nobody came across 35, nobody came to our neighborhood. It says it's changed because we're close to UT. We're close to downtown.

I'm sure y'all know in 1928, they made all African-Americans move this side of the city.

This was a dump in a cow pasture. It was the end of town, back then, that's why we had dirt roads, down MLK, which is 19th Street. And I tell everybody that moves to Austin it's easy to get around because all the number streets are parallel. The name streets are horizontal. In East Austin, for instance, if you Chicon you can go all the way down to second street, first street, second street.

When I was born, we lived on 16th Street.

My dad rented a house from the Timmons family. He was a football coach over at Anderson High School. And then in 1959, because I was born in '54, so we moved over here. So being in the first grade, we moved over here. We just come visit while they were building the house, the contractor was Arthur Parks.

We still had contracting, of course, during segregation, we had our own contractors, bricklayers, carpenters that were involved in building this house and the other houses in the neighborhood. So living here, a lot of memories, a lot of positive spirits. Don't hold that against me.

And I enjoy because I can still have a connection with the house that is hard to explain. Home is where the heart is, and I've been here for so long, I went away to school. The times I did go away to school, we lived in Nashville, South Boston, Virginia – which I love – and Atlanta.

But I love that southern hospitality that Texans have, most Texans – let me correct that – have in the state of Texas. Love Texas, and I love Austin. I love East Austin. I call East Austin, "East Austin, Texas." The reason being is growing up there were two Austins.

There was East Austin and the rest of Austin. South Austin had blacks. West Austin did not. We understood, we didn't complain about it. I remember when there was no 35. So when we would come back into town, Congress was I think 88, 80, before 35 to get through all these little small towns. Whenever you went into them, you'd go through the downtown area, pass City Hall, pass the courthouse.

At one time, Austin was like that. And then they built 35. Now they're talking about widening 35, which is that mobility project that I'm not excited about. But there's nothing that I can really do about it, the mobility project.

They're tearing down Erwin Center, they built the new Moody Center. It's just progress. And the build. They're gonna run out of property. Sooner or later, they're going to have to. The real estate market will hit a peak, because there's no more space. You see, knocking down a building, knocking down a house, putting two houses on a lot.

Like next door, that used to be one house – that was the Wright family. And then when they sold the house, the people that bought it knocked it down and built two houses on that lot. Down the street, Ms. James' house, which is across from Ms. Marshall, they bought that house and built a house in the backyard.

But now I don't think because of the historical district that now they say this is a historical neighborhood. I don't think they can do that anymore because of the code enforcement and the zoning. I don't think they can do that anymore.

And then, I get kind of disappointed with City Hall and what all it takes now to get something done in your yard, neighborhood. We have a funeral home on East 12th street, King-Tears mortuary. That's where I currently work. My grandmother started, we've been in business since 1901. So I've been a part of the family business since I can remember. Went away to mortuary school, got a license.

So I'm deeply rooted in this neighborhood just by the fact that we have a funeral home, so we know the families that built East Austin, and we know the families that came to East Austin from surrounding counties. So it's just a neighborhood that I love and hold dear. There's nothing that I don't like about East Austin, because I grew up here.

So it's part of me. The community is part of me. The people that are still here are a part of me as well.

The church that I grew up in is Wesley United Methodist Church, which is on San Bernard. But David Chapel, which is that we used to walk up to Vacation Bible School in '63. I have a little certificate saying that we used to walk up there, as a group of us kids, to Vacation Bible School, which we really enjoyed. We played Little League baseball at Mabson Field, which is on 12th Street, which is where you have Downs Field. We'd walk there and play.

We'd even go to Patterson Park, which is going north, is across from Mueller. We go to Patterson Park, we'd ride our bicycles, all through that side of Manor Road, we'd call that the white part. Because you had Blackland. And on that side of Manor Road was the white part, so that's what we'd call it.

We'd ride our bikes all over, going north, 35. What really blows my mind is we take our bicycle to the fire department. They had a fire station, which they call East End, which is where the baseball stadium is, and we could get a license plate for our bicycles. You don't see it anymore.

But we take our bikes to the fire department and get a license plate that we put on the back of our seats. That's something unique about the time growing up here. That also with the Harlem Theater, which you mentioned earlier. If we didn't go to church, we couldn't go on Sundays. We had to go to church. Then we could go on to the Harlem Theater, and that's basically all we had.

My dad just talked about going to the Ritz Theater, which is on Sixth Street, then the state and the Paramount theaters. We had to sit upstairs in the balcony. We couldn't sit down where the regular people sat, I say regular – well where the white people sat. We'd have to sit in the balcony.

I remember certain restaurants we couldn't go to, like the Piccadilly. I think it was on the corner of Congress and ninth. I have a picture on my phone where we were with this organization called Jack and Jill. It's a social organization of families, and they kind of nurture their kids with plays, orchestra music.

It was kind of like an education that we got because they'd take us places. And during segregation we picketed this ice rink that was on Airport, where we couldn't go. So I have a picture in my phone of all of the Kirk's, my brother, my sister, where we're holding signs, picketing the skating rink, which is on airport – now it's some kind of warehouse.

It's between 38th and MLK, or 38th and Manor Road, which is where this ice rink was. And we couldn't go, we didn't know any about it, but you we we picketed that. I remember doing that, as a kid in this neighborhood, that was kind of unique.

We never got in any trouble.

Of course, as kids, we play softball, baseball, and break somebody's window. That was a thing. We raided people's pear trees and plum trees, jumping over somebody's fence. Ms. Tolliver, she had a pear tree, and we'd go and jump over and go grab some pears and run and get out.

Ms. Jane, lived down the street, she had a candy dish in the living room, and she would only let two people in to get candy to take to the rest of the kids in the neighborhood. Miss Jane, she was. She was a sweetheart. She's not here anymore, of course. And Ms. Tyler was her sister. Ms. Tyler would stay catty corner to Brenda. And then the Hurst family was next to that. Cathy.

It was just a good time. You don't see that anymore, where kids run through the neighborhood, jumping people's fence, grabbing pears off the tree. Plum tree, peach tree, fig tree. You just don't see that anymore. So that was a great time in my life to experience those kind of things with everybody grew up in a neighborhood.

It was kind of mischievous, whatever you want to call it. But, Ms. Tolliver, she was the only one that didn't want us in her yard, so we'd have to sneak in, jump the fence, and hurry up and grab the pears and come back over the fence and leave. And we did it while she was at work.

That was the best time to catch Miss Tolliver and her pear tree. That was the best time, because we get out of school and she was still at work.

There is a whole generation that is going to be not having those communication skills. Those skills are talking to people, learning people, asking questions because they're stuck in the house. We were glad to get out of the house because we didn't have computers.

All we had was a TV to show black and white, maybe on Saturday morning to watch cartoons. Other than that, TV went off at 10:00, a black and white TV before they had color, go off at 10:00. We had maybe one radio station, the LBJ radio station and TV station that the former President Lyndon Baines Johnson owned. Then we got another television station, then another one in time.

But we didn't have those luxuries of a computer and games. The only games we play with monopoly, checkers, football, baseball and basketball. Candyland. And that was about it.

Mousetrap. I remember getting a mousetrap game for Christmas, one year, and that was about it. But mostly we were outside all the time. And then, like I said before, we had to be back in before dark.

But that was just a great time. The kids don't have that experience anymore, and it's sad that they don't. Because I don't see – they used to make us leave the house and get us out of the house. And plus, we enjoy getting out of the house. We get home from school, put our books up and head straight outside, do our homework when we got back.

Sometimes we couldn't leave the house too until we did our homework.

Growing up around a mortuary, a funeral home, I used to go stay with my grandmother because I was the youngest.

So when she'd go to work, I'd go with her, next door to the family business. And all of us did. So it was really nothing really to us because we were around the business so much. It was a family business. So we knew that was expected of us, to be able to go to the funeral home.

Nothing scary, you know, we'd run through the chapel, hide behind a casket, try to scare people. in the funeral home. And back then they had an ambulance service. When I was at work today, I printed out the history of Tears and King Funeral Home, then it became King Tears Mortuary. So that's how I got to know a lot of families because of what my family did as far as the funeral home.

Close connection to churches, to pastors, to the clergy in the neighborhood, which made me grow. And also 11 and 12th Street, which was where – that's all we had. We didn't go down on Congress. I remember when we couldn't eat at Woolworth, we didn't have them all to go hang out in.

Everybody go downtown, even up on 12th to the Harlem. The Carver Library, we used to take field trips from Blackshear, because Blackshear is not too far from Carver Library. Kealing was there. And then we take a field trip. We'd walk from Blackshear over to Carver Library. Back then it was much smaller. By the time I left junior high school, they had enlarged the Carver Library.

But back then it was just the one building. The oldest building, if you passed by, is the oldest part. That was a library. That was exciting. And also in elementary school, they used to take us to the Austin Symphony. I remember that very well. That was a field trip where they would take a bus all of little black kids, would go to hear the symphony. That was a lot of fun.

We do field trips, ButterKrust bakery, the ice cream place, Superior Dairies. Superior Dairies was an ice cream place that back then was on First Street, now it's on Cesar Chavez. And what's amazing to me is they would deliver the milk to your house.

My dad used to have this big, glass container of milk that Superior Dairies would deliver to the house. That was a trip. Also, we had these little neighborhood stores that we don't have anymore. Thomas store, which used to be on 14th and chestnut. All of the neighborhoods had a neighborhood store.

It wasn't a grocery, but it was a store where we could go and get two for a penny cookies. They had milk, but other than that, we had to go to HEB. I remember when HEB didn't sell beer, HEB has been around since I was a toddler because I used to go to HEB, the one on San Jacinto, which is the closest one to us, and walk around holding on to my mother's dress.

I can remember that, I can remember Safeway. Safeway was another grocer. Piggly wiggly was another one that we could go to during segregation. A lot of places we just couldn't go, but it was okay. We didn't think nothing of it. We didn't think anything was wrong.

Like my grandson, he has no comprehension why I went to an all black school. Jamie is fifteen. And, when he was maybe going to Pease elementary school, I said, "I went to all black elementary school."

He could not fathom that because that did not happen to him. And he asked me why, you know, and that's when the conversation started that I didn't start going to an integrated school until 1967, seventh grade.

And that was by choice. It wasn't mandatory at that point. It became mandatory, I think, in '71 when they closed down Anderson. the reason I asked in high school, I think that's, when they started bussing kids out of the neighborhood. and I'm going to say this with all sincerity is that they weren't going to close Anderson High School, but the white parents were not going bus their kids to Anderson High School across from the projects – that just was not going to happen.

Especially a school across from the projects, I think it's Booker T projects. That wasn't going to happen. This is just me talking, this is what I could see, from where I was at that time, because I was at Reagan High School when they closed it, and we just couldn't see parents bussing their kids over to a black neighborhood.

So I think that's the reason why Austin School District, it wasn't Austin Independent School District. The schools I went to were Austin School District – I can't think of the year when it became independent school district. But growing up, going to school, it was Austin School District. Now, of course, it is all independent school district.

So that's the changes that I seen that's happened in East Austin is the education that we got was top notch because teachers could use the board of education on you when you did something wrong in class. It was just totally different times than it is now. And those are the changes that are devastating to a community and to a city because they're not getting a quality education like we got, growing up.

I want Rogers Washington Holy Cross to be remembered as a neighborhood that cared about the neighbors, a neighborhood that would speak to their neighbors. Because now we have neighbors that don't speak. I make them speak.

Nobody walked a dog around here growing up. I can't remember anybody. The Kirks had a dog named Banjo. And next time you talk to Connie, ask about Banjo. Banjo would bite everybody in the neighborhood, and that was that was the truth. So we kind of stayed out of the yard. But I could go over there, and Banjo wouldn't bother me, but Banjo would bite everybody. I never will forget that.

And they're really the only ones that had a dog that would bite, which is, now that I look back on it, it was kind of funny because it did one of the Burdess in the face one time, the youngest boy. Across the street is five boys in the house, mother – hard worker. Dad worked for AISD.

And that was it. But those are the changes that can make or break a community.