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The Bridges that Carried Us Over Project

Interview Summary

Interviewees:

Denise Diggs
Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Interviewers:

Makaley Montano, University of Redlands & NextGen United
Kendall Green, NextGen United

Interview Date:

March 12, 2021

Interview Location:

Remotely via Zoom

Length:

00:58:10

Media format:

Digital Video (mp4)

Interview Summary completed by:

Makaley Montano, 2021

Description:

Denise and Richard Diggs discuss their experiences growing up in San Bernardino, on the westside and mostly in the east near Valley Truck Farms. They share the story of the Collins family which moved from Imperial Valley to Redlands, their grandfather Jerome Collins who owned and rented out small homes in Redlands and was an early Black real estate agent in the area, and their mother Natalie Collins Diggs who grew up in Redlands in the 1930s and became the first Black teacher in Rialto. They share early memories of schooling and playing near Norton Airforce base, and discuss their experiences working in law enforcement and experiences confronting bias in policing and their perspectives on how racism has evolved over the years.

Keywords:

- San Bernardino (Calif.)
- Norton Air Force Base
- School desegregation
- Racism
- Education
- Railroad

- Law enforcement
- Black Lives Matter movement
- Police brutality
- Social organizations
- Family history
- Cosmos club
- Fraternities
- Rialto (Calif.)
- Police reform
- Teachers
- Real estate
- Black Student Union
- Valley Truck Farms
- San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department

Spatial Coverage:

Name of Site (if relevant)	General Location/Address
Property family owned	<u>1228 Alta St. in Redlands, CA</u>
San Gorgonio High School	San Bernardino, CA

Temporal Coverage:

- 1930s (Redlands, CA)
- 1950s - 2000s (San Bernardino, CA)

Interview Index:

Media Format	Time (hh:mm:ss)	Topic Discussed
Digital Video	0:02:16	Births in San Bernardino, father's move to work at Norton.
Digital Video	0:03:50	Memories of living near railroad on westside, then on the eastside near Norton Airforce base where friends lived in base housing.
Digital Video	0:05:55	Rural life near the Valley Truck Farms, seen as the country cousins

Digital Video	0:08:20	Graduating Pacific High, 4H Club
Digital Video	0:09:02	Memories of school integration and occasional tensions
Digital Video	0:15:58	Collins family history in Redlands, Jerome Collins
Digital Video	0:19:42	Natalie Collins Diggs becoming first Black teacher in Rialto & home teaching in San Bernardino county.
Digital Video	0:22:40	Founding member of Cosmos Club (along with Dorothy Inghram)
Digital Video	0:24:20	Experiences in BSU & community service in school and career
Digital Video	0:27:50	Leadership in national Black Police Officers association and NOBLE (National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives)

Full interview transcript can be found below.

Interview Transcript

Start of Interview:

[00:00:00]

Makaley Montano

Alright so we are here today doing an interview for the Bridges that Carried us Over Archive of Black History in the Inland Empire. My name is Makaley Montano.

Kendall Green:

And I'm Kendall Green, and today we have the pleasure of interviewing Denise Diggs and Richard Allens Collins-Diggs, um, maybe both, please spell your name for the tape.

Denise Diggs

Denise. D-E-N-I-S-E Diggs. D-I-G-G-S.

Kendall Green

Mr. Diggs we cannot hear you.

Makaley Montano

Some technical difficulties. It might be his headphones, maybe.

Kendall Green

No, we he still can't hear you

Denise Diggs

We could hear you fine before, so it must be your headphones.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

No, not now either?

Kendall and Denise

Now we can hear you.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Okay, must have been the Bluetooth, I guess.

Okay so, Richard, first name R-I-C-H-A-R-D. Middle name, Allen A-L-L-E-N. Collins C-O- L-L-I-N-S dash Diggs. D-I- double "g" as in going, S.

Kendall Green

Alright, sounds good. Thank you both for that. Um, so just to get started just a couple introductory questions. Um, can you tell us a little bit about when you and your family first moved to the Inland Empire, and why you moved, what kind of brought you to this space.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs:

Well I guess I can start because she's 14 years younger than me so she had no idea.

Denise Diggs

Well no. We were all born here. Richard and my sister and I, we didn't move here from anywhere else. We were all born here.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs:

So, I was born in 1945. And I don't know much other than my mom lived in. She was not married prior to my birth, well prior to my sister's birth, my oldest sister. My dad moved here from Gallup, New Mexico to work in Norton Air Force Base. So, and that was the beginning of his life in the Inland Empire.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs:

And then of course they were married. And my oldest sister was born first, in 1943, March 23. And then I was born August fourth 1945, and then my baby sister was born August 20, 1959.

Kendall Green

Sounds good. Sounds good.

Denise Diggs:

Well, what we actually left off, my dad was actually married before he married my mom and he has, we have an older brother, half brother, who's passed away now. So my dad was married before, and then he married my mom when his son was five. So we had an older brother. In fact, Peter, the one I was telling you about Kendall is his great grandson.

Kendall Green

Okay, sounds good. Thank you for that. Um, can you guys share some stories that might help us better understand what it was like to live in the Inland Empire growing up.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Okay, well I guess I'll start because we have such a difference in age. But well what I can recall, my first real experience was we lived on the west side of San Bernardino, just the other side of the railroad tracks that are still there. And we were west of that.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

We were about two doors down from the railroad track and I can remember as a small child that the house would shake when the Big Trains with the heavy cars would come down at that section of the railroad.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

But I was too young to remember more than that. I didn't go to school till we moved out to where I lived, most of my life on the eastside of San Bernardino, okay, near the county jail so.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

But my first year in school was Monterey Elementary School. And I can remember that most of the friends I had, lived in what was called "The Projects". Although they weren't really, they were housing for the Norton Air Force Base.

Kendall Green

Okay

Richard Allen Collins Diggs

During a period of time I lived there they actually went to the base down for a period of time they demolished all those homes. And that was kind of a playground for us kids in the neighborhood, because they had all these cement foundations that were all broken up into different little piles of, I guess rubbish really.

Richard Allen Collins- Diggs

Yeah. And I remember elementary school. So, I'll let my sister go. Denise.

Denise Diggs

I have a different memory, because I had friends who lived in Base housing down from Norton. My friend, Corinne Lopez, her parents... her father was a mechanic, an airplane mechanic at Norton, and they lived in Base Houses and so did my friend Tammy Wall and her parents. Her father was a pilot in the Air Force.

Denise Diggs

I don't really remember when they took base housing out, and maybe they phased it out in different sections, but I remember going to visit Tammy Walls and Corrine Lopez, and visiting their families when they lived in base houses.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And it was really rural. I mean it was very rural.

Denise Diggs

Yeah it was. It wasn't even considered city property or city land then.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Right.

Denise Diggs

Where we lived was considered the unincorporated area of the county. It got rezoned to the city. I think maybe, I don't know when I was in middle school. They renamed the street because the street we grew up on was called Cardiff, originally, and when they rezoned it they renamed it to Rialto Avenue. But um we live in an area where people

had, there were large properties. We had an acre, maybe close to an acre. And so, people had horse properties and directly down the street east of us was a family, the Holmes family and they had cattle and horses and pigs and all kinds of animals and chickens.

Denise Diggs

And I went to school with their son John.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

We did as well and we had my father raised chickens and beef and pork.

Denise Diggs

And calf mmhmm.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

For probably when I was maybe about 10 or 11 we started with chickens, and then like I said it was a very small working farm for many, many years. But yeah, that whole area was very, very rural.

Denise Diggs

Mhm. It was normal to grow up riding horses and, you know, that we were in the cut. Our cousins called us the country cousins, because they were from the Los Angeles area and we lived out in the middle of nowhere, they thought so.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

There was a lot of places to go and things to do but it was different than our cousins who lived in LA. Right. And so...

Denise Diggs

Right the metropolitan area. Yeah, we would, you know, be gone on our bikes all day and not come home until he and I went to the same Elementary School. In fact we all, Richard and Diane that's our older sister and I had all gone to Monterey elementary school.

Denise Diggs

They went to a different middle school. I went to Curtis junior high school. They went to Sturgis, didn't you?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

To Sturgis right.

Denise Diggs

Sturgis junior high school and then all three of us graduated from Pacific Highschool, which is still there.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

We were in the 4H Club, my sister and I.

Denise Diggs

Mhm. Older sister, my sister Diane.

Denise Diggs

And they raised the calf, named Honey, I remember that. Yes, I remember because my brother kept telling my sister not to name it, because she'd get attached and she named it Honey, and got attached.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And we had to kill it.

Denise Diggs: And she took it really hard.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs: And she was overwhelmed with grief and I said I told you not to get personal with it because it's beef.

Makaley Montano

Nice well I'm glad you brought up your school memories a little bit. Do you recall any memories of desegregation fights and other Civil Rights organizing efforts during your time as a student?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs Well, in high school, you know I don't remember. Junior high school was kind of a mix of north, north end of San Bernardino, went to Sturgis, the west side went to the Sturgis, and where I live, where I came from, went to Sturgis. And then there was Golden Valley, which was the far North-east section. There was Arrowhead junior high school, which was just above Highland.

Denise Diggs

Is it Arrowhead or Arrowview, Richard?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Arrowview.

Denise Diggs

There was a catholic high school. It was a private school. It was um

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

St. Bernadines

Denise Diggs

No, it wasn't. No, it had a different name. it was one word. Wendy's friend, Grace, went there.

Makaley Montano

Aquinas?

Richard and Denise

Yes.

Denise Diggs

Some kids went to Aquinas.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And there was one more junior high school, it was down off of Mill. Can't think of the name of it.

Denise Diggs

Oh, Oh, yeah you're right there was one.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Most of the kids there lived in the Valley in the south, in the southeast, Southwest portion of San Bernardino and went to the school that was right off of Mill. But I cannot remember the name of it.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I remember competing against them and track and football and Basketball but I don't remember the name of it. Anyway. But no. As to segregation, so, so my, my first experience in junior high school, no, because it was a melting pot of Hispanic, Black, white, not that I recall, many Asians, but in our community where I lived, there was that same blended community of three or four different groups. Oh there were Asian people there, I'm sorry. Because there was an Asian market around from our house.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

So, there were students that went to Sturgis that were both Asian. So, it was pretty much that way all the way through school. But when I went to Pacific, we were a minority, because you might know it is in the Northeast portion of San Bernardino.

Denise Diggs

Where predominately whites lived. In the northeast part of San Bernardino.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

So they were the dominant group

Denise Diggs

Right, right. So there were probably less than 2% people that were of color, Black or Hispanic at Pacific when you went and maybe I'm sure when I was there also.

Denise Diggs

I don't remember any incidents of race, except in my 11th grade year and I don't know what started this but I remember I was sitting in my biology class, and the vice principal

came and told everybody told the teachers that they needed to lock the doors because there were a group of kids from San Geronio High School, which was down the street, the same street as Pacific. San Geronio High School. There were white kids that went there and there were Black and Hispanic kids at Pacific, and they were all boys and something had happened. There were boys from Pacific who had been on their campus or vice versa and there was a conflict and a fight and there were lots of kids involved. And I remember them saying that it was race related, but I don't know that if that's true because I wasn't involved.

Denise Diggs

and it was over pretty quickly, security, you know, kind of sent people off campus and I called my dad and he came. I think that was in 10th grade because I wasn't driving yet. He came and got me, but it wasn't anything where adults were involved. Where they were mistreating people because of color, nothing like that.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

My only incident was in my junior year, and we played the basketball game against Ramona High School in Riverside, and our forward Gene Crawford was called a N word by a player on Ramona's team and the fight broke out on the basketball court and continued outdoors.

And there were like four members of the team, I think, three, three members were black on the team. Me Merkle Williams, and Gene Crawford. And I remember police got involved not with me but I remember police got involved, at least they were called to school.

And we got on the bus and then for that probably that rest of that week. They were counseling us and trying to explain to us what happened or why there's some people like that. And of course the kid that said it denied it and there was a week of tension on the campus once it got out to the campus, everybody I guess took a side or position on it.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

But I remember that very distinctly because. Well, anyway, I remember that. But other than that we didn't have any real major incidents with color. There, there were underlying things. I found out from a friend of mine who was the Student Body President, Jim Kennedy, who was white. That a friend of mine, Ray Williams, was going with a Sue Pratt who was white and my friend was black. There was a lot undercurrent of this whole thing because they were the only known couple that were dating, and there were a lot of whispers and I guess, private conversations about that. To the point that my friend Jim Kennedy went to Brickley, who was the vice principal and said hey what's up with this? Why is everyone so upset? And the principal said to him, you need to stay out of this. This is not your business or something to that effect.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Anyway, that's the only thing.. only two incidents I can recall, where the some kind of conflict between races. But I'm sure --

Denise Diggs

Of our generation, of our generation but I was telling my brother earlier actually going through some of my mother's things I found an article that she clipped. It was from 1997. And it's Redlands history includes evidence of anti-black bias and our grandfather's mentioned in here because he was part of the Five county civic league, he was the president. It was a branch that was formed in Redlands, that championed racial progress. And so our grandfather John Collins was a President and it mentions some of the other objects. I'll send this to you Makaley.

Makaley Montano

Yeah for sure, thank you.

Denise Diggs

Because I'm sitting around all these things that I found that belong to my mother and there's more in the garage. But they mentioned is it speaks to the fact that there was no actual legal segregation in the Inland Empire. But as my brother said I'm sure there was always an undercurrent of how people felt, because even though it wasn't in the law. You can't necessarily change how people feel about things.

Makaley Montano

Right. Yeah, no, definitely. So you mentioned your grandfather on the Collins side, is there any other family history or stories you have from the Collins side or Diggs side of the families that you want to share today?

Denise Diggs

I do actually. I have some notes from someone like others, some things about our grandfather, John Collins. One of the things. Well, he met my grandmother in Robertson Texas and they got married in the 1900.

Denise Diggs

They were both teachers and one of my oldest cousins, two of my cousins actually said that they were told that they left Texas, because they had helped to hide a man who is being harassed by whites in the town, and because my grandmother was so fair skin, there was this issue between... My grandfather was very dark and she was very fair, of people believing that she was white, and those things kind of precipitated part of the reason I guess they decided to leave that part of that area move west.

Denise Diggs

He was a rancher and a farmer in the Imperial Valley. Also he was a real estate agent, my cousins believed he was licensed but I'm not sure and I don't know if they had any verification yeah but they said he was a licensed Realtor.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

He had a sign out front that said he was a “licensed realtor”

Denise Diggs

Okay.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I remember my mom saying that he had taken the Realtors test without any instruction. In other words he had studied on his own which from my understanding was very difficult to pass a real estate test but he passed it and got his license and that's for the most of my knowledge of him was all he ever did. Other than, he had some property that he rented out and maintained the house that he lived in, but that was it.

Denise Diggs

Yeah they said that he used to rent these little. Well now we call them tiny Homes, but they were called bachelor houses back then. And they were people that were going to be staying in the area for a short period of time, maybe a few months but not necessarily years. And actually one of my cousins actually remembered the address of one of the houses and she said I don't know why I know this address. But it was 1228 Alta St. in Redlands, and she also remembered going with him down to the local newspaper, The Redlands Daily Facts, to place real estate ads every week.

Denise Diggs

She also remembered that he was involved in the Valley Trucks Farm organization, but she doesn't remember a lot about it. I remember my mother telling me that she used to drive my grandfather to political meetings at night. And she wasn't, she wasn't old enough to legally drive. She was about 14 years old but she would drive him. And I was shocked at that but she said you know Redlands was very rural and you know, kids can do that without having a lot of problems, I guess.

Denise Diggs

And my grandfather also was a preacher at the Gospel Hall in Redlands and then in that was a church that they attended.

Denise Diggs 14:23:44

And let's see, my grandmother was a domestic when she first came to the Redlands area. She worked for an attorney who helped her purchase the house that they actually ultimately lived in.

Makaley Montano 14:24:02

And what was your grandmother's name?

Denise Diggs

Her name was Callie Hammond, was her maiden name, and it was Callie Collins.

Makaley Montano

You also mentioned a little bit about your mom. Can you tell us a little bit about your parents' experiences, I know she had a lot to do with education in Rialto..

Denise Diggs

Yeah. In fact, I actually have a letter here that's framed. I'll send you a copy of it. It's from the superintendent of the school district. Um my mother was the first African American teacher in the Rialto school district. And she was also a home teacher for years before that.

In the, where is it, in the Banning, Yucaipa, Calimesa area.

And one of her students, Debra Menning, who I'm friends with. Debra's probably in her late 60s, maybe almost 70 now.

Denise Diggs

Um, in 1994 Deborah who was one of her home students, when she was at Cal State she had to write a paper about someone who had a lot of influence in her life and she wrote this about my mother and found a way to send it to my mother, And she talked about actually. Deborah was white, and the area where my mother taught students they were all white students that were homeschooled because they had illnesses. I think Deborah was asthmatic, and she couldn't attend school.

And she talked about how she had never met a Negro until she met my mother. I think she was second grade, third grade maybe. But in this paper she talks about how through my mother coming to her house. Deborah learned a lot about race, because when my mother.

One day and I'll back up but one day, when she was there, teaching Deborah. Deborah's mother came into the room and asked my mother. When you go to lunch, where do you go when you have your lunch time? And my mother said I go around the corner to a park, and sit and read and have my lunch.

Denise Diggs

And Deborah's mother said well I don't want you to do that anymore I want you to stay here. And when you leave at night my husband's gonna walk to the car because there have been some people in the neighborhood that are not happy about you being here. And we don't want anything to happen to you.

Denise Diggs

So she talked about the bravery of her mother and my mother, and their friendship and how her mother easily could have asked for another teacher to come to avoid any problems with their neighbors, but she refused to do that.

Denise Diggs

So I'll include this too, um, and my mother was also an originating member, sorry, for being out of camera... of a group called the Cosmos, which was a civic organization, formed by some African American women in the 1940s, and their goal was to, many

things they gave scholarships out to African American students. They organized charitable events. They were politically motivated to help blacks in the community.

Denise Diggs 22:40

And I have a picture here of the original members, my mother's the one here on the end. And if you guys can see it.

And I also have her scrapbook from the years of the Cosmos Club. From 1941 to 1991, and in it, are newspaper articles about them. Dorothy Ingram, Jennifer Tilton, is part of your archive. Dorothy is in this photo as well with my mother. They were two of the original members. So there's a photo album, and my mother was the keeper of all kinds of historical things related to her life. There's a lot.

Makaley Montano

Yeah I'm sure. Now was the cosmos group based in Rialto or San Bernardino

Denise Diggs

San Bernardino

Denise Diggs

And.. oh go ahead. I'm sorry.

Makaley Montano 23:38

I was going to say, speaking of social organizations, were you guys, both you and Richard involved in any of these social organizations like the Swans, masonics or sororities that you want to share?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I don't know I never really thought about that. My brother and cousins were Kappa. Sister in law is a Delta, but I just never was drawn to that, even when I was in college I just, I never placed a fraternity, just kind of didn't have that feeling, for whatever reason,

Makaley Montano 24:20

Interesting. I believe I read an article Mr. Diggs about you being involved in the BSU. Do you have any stories about that?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I was the president of Cal State BSU, I kind of got the position by default. I was actually the Vice President and the president resigned for reasons I can't remember why. And I got promoted to president but that was in my last year that I was at Cal State.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

But it was only for a short time. I mean, we did a program at the gymnasium and we brought a lot of minority students onto the campus to give them an idea of what campus life was like, and then gave them a tour and sit in classes for a full day. And that was kind of the final project for the BSU you at that time now.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I had been prior to that in junior college involved in some marches. One March that I can recall on the west side on Mount Vernon Avenue. But other than that, I think, shortly after that I kind of went a different direction. I wasn't that civilly involved in, you know, problems with the community. I think I took it upon myself to do an individual kind of mentorship throughout my career. I was involved in helping other officers learn the .. I have to think about how to say this... to learn the system in law enforcement because there is a system in law enforcement and a way to get to you know a position that you would obviously try to get to a promotional wise assignment wise, things like that, how to kind of make the system work for you. So I did that. But nothing community wise, after the BSU, no.

Denise Diggs

Oh I was going to say like my brother I didn't join a fraternity or sorority. I was also the president of BSU but in high school. And I do a lot of charity work out in the community I've been involved in. Well, and the sheriff's department, I was a member of the EEOC for five years. And so, and the website actually that the sheriff uses for the EEOC, I helped design, myself and another employee, and we received the commander's award for doing that. And well this isn't related, well yeah it kinda is. I am a Youth Court judge for the school district in San Bernardino County, which predominantly affects children of color and poor children in the school district. Because the schools that are affected are in the lower income areas. So there's a lot of minority students that are involved in that. And Cal State has lots of students not lots, and there's a group of students at Cal State that are part of that program as well. I think there's sociology and psychology students that are part of mentoring and helping these kids, kind of turn their lives around.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Oh I did have two things. Go ahead sis, you finished?

Denise Diggs

Yeah I was trying to think what Makaley said

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I don't know why I didn't think of this. I was in two black organizations, they weren't involved in our community per se. But I was involved in the National Black Police Officers Association for many years.

Denise Diggs

I was also. Yeah. And then when I was promoted to captain, I became a member of NOBLE which is, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives. So I was in both those organizations for pretty much, I would say, three fourths of my career, I mean, I joined when I was about in my fifth year on a department, and I did 30 years and I think I was a member until I retired so 25 years I was on one or the other of those two organizations. So yeah, which is, you know, not local per se, but law enforcement

nationwide, actually worldwide. NOBLE was worldwide, but the NBPA was just, you know, state to state. So, I was in those two organizations for years.

Denise Diggs

And that's what I was trying to think of the Cosmos Club that I was talking about that my mother was a member of. In the 90s, the ladies were getting into their 80s, and they didn't want the organization to die out. So they talked to all of their daughters, myself, my brother's wife, and my sister into creating a group called the Cosmos Affiliate, which was a group of young black women who would carry it on and unfortunately it didn't last. Because unlike my mother and her generation, those women were friends first, and then formed an organization. We didn't know each other. We were just forming an organization, and there wasn't a bond there to kind of keep us together. So after a couple of years people just kind of dropped away. So I have pictures in this book my mother put photos of the Cosmos Affiliate, and we're all in there also. So, I just thought about that.

Makaley Montano 29:45

I noticed you guys both brought up some of your experiences and organizations that you were a part of for law enforcement, I'd like to know a little bit more about your experiences there. Can you tell us how you decided to become an officer and also what it was like being a Black officer? when you first started.

Richard Allen Collins Diggs

Well, it was a pretty simple decision. I was out of work. I'd been laid off from Lockheed. And I really kind of decided before I was laid off that I didn't know if I would go spend a lifetime in aerospace, because that was kind of the constant thing you were laid off, you go to another place, like you'd go up to Seattle, Washington hire on there with Lockheed, you'd be the last one being hired and then you'd be the first one out the door. And then you'd have to go to Utah, so I kind of decided I didn't want to bounce all over the country, to follow the industry

So, a friend of mine who I'd known prior to even going to Lockheed suggested I, you know, apply to this sheriff's department. He was a deputy there. And I said, Okay, why not so I applied to both the Sheriffs and the Marshal's office. And I got called by both of them within about a three day period, I got called by the Marshal on a Monday and I got called by a Sheriff on a Wednesday. And I'd already accepted the position with the Marshals because I was out of work, and didn't know that I'd get a call from the Sheriff's department so I took the offer, and I spent about 12 years with the Marshals department. And then we merged with the Sheriff's department. And then I became a Sheriff for the remainder of my career, my career.

Richard Allen Collins Diggs 31:20

Let me say this, law enforcement is a difficult position, just on its own, without even involved in the structural and administrative portion of that. And it's a fine line that you have to walk as a Black officer because you're not comfortable in your community because they don't like police. And you're not comfortable in their community because

they don't like black people. So you really have this line you're walking on a daily basis between these two different positions in society really.

Richard Allen Collins Diggs

For the most part I didn't confront racism, by and large. I had incidents where people would call me names and those kinds of things, but all officers get called names. They had a few extra for me because of my color. So that was pretty much accepted that it was going to be that way for many, many years. Internally, there was a significant amount, and probably still maybe a significant amount of racism or bias in law enforcement. Just in the industry.

Richard Allen Collins Diggs

My sister and I talk about this all the time. One thing that people always like to do in law enforcement is make themselves better than the other agencies. Like we're better than the San Bernardino PD, and the San Bernardino PD felt better than the marshal's office and the myself feel better than you know constables and so on and so forth, LAPD. So there's all these kinds of conflicts among law enforcement. And that was a little bit to get over, but it wasn't a race based, it was just, you know, I'm better than you because I'm a sheriff.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

My commanding officers. There were occasions that I can recall one in particular that a captain before I ever got promoted left a joke on my desk in the squad room. That was absolutely a racist joke. And I called the Marshal at that time on it. And he wanted me to sit down and talk with this, Captain, but promise him I wouldn't hit him.

And I said I'm not promising you anything. Well, he said talk to him first. And of course the conversation didn't go anywhere. I mean, of really value to me. It certainly didn't make me feel any better about the department I was in. Because the joke was left during a command meeting. I should have mentioned that. They had a command meeting in the squad room that I was in, where my equipment was. And this joke was left on the table after they all left. And these are all the commanders of my department. From the marshal down to the sergeants. So, Marshal, captain's, lieutenants, and sergeants, they were all in this meeting. And they left this joke. So I know that the joke had been passed around to everyone in that department. That was in that meeting.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

So yeah, there was a significant amount of racism coming in. Once I got the position of Captain obviously those things for the most part, went away. I mean I'm sure there are other captains who didn't particularly like me, but I didn't concern myself with that. So that's kind of it, I guess.

Denise Diggs 34:28

For me, because I joined the sheriff's department in 1985 and I had been been an intern in 1978 and 79. In the Sheriff's department when I was in college. Yeah, there were

people that had uh racist ideas um that didn't have a problem speaking those ideas or treating people in the public, less.

Denise Diggs

Let me backup a minute, Richard just kind of touched on this. The way law enforcement is, the culture of law enforcement in order and it's kind of like how the military trains people, they train you to be part of a group. And you have each other's back and you stand together as a team, and all of that kind of, the Brotherhood or the Fraternal Order police. You may have heard those terms, kind of sets people up for an idea that it's us against them when they're dealing with people that don't wear the badge.

And one of the things that my brother and I did. I used to teach at the academy and one of the things I would tell the deputies is. Well I stole it actually from my brother, which is that badge covers very little of your chest and none of your behind. Basically, you got to learn to talk to people. Everybody's not your enemy. Everybody's not trying to hurt you.

Denise Diggs

So, if you, if you are white, and you already have issues with people of color, or you're not comfortable with people of color because you've never been exposed to them or you have a preconceived notion about them that's negative. And now you're put into a situation where you have a job, controlling people, where your making decisions about people's lives. It can create problems.

Denise Diggs

So, everybody isn't that way. But it really only takes one bad. one bad cop to shadow the whole organization with all cops are this way. And I did work with guys that should have never been police officers because they were clearly the wrong kind of person to do that job. And then I worked with people that were amazingly the opposite of that. That white, Black and Hispanic and Asian that treated people with dignity, that treated people with respect. So, It's kind of a mixed bag.

Denise Diggs

Unfortunately the public doesn't get to see a lot of what goes on that's good with police officers. They usually see the bad that goes on. And that kind of shadows and greys out their impression of all police officers. Unlike my brothers, my brother was actually a police officer, I was a civilian employee. So because I wasn't a police officer, I had more freedom to speak about things that I thought were wrong, and not worry about the good graces of my command staff. Where when you're a police officer in you rise and fall on the evaluations you get from command and if you say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing it can definitely make a difference in how you get promoted or what assignments that you get, as an employee I didn't have to worry about. And so when I thought something was wrong, I was able to speak about that wrong.

Denise Diggs

And there were instances. I have a clear memory of an occasion, and this was after the Ro-- this was the day after the Rodney King incident. And a Lieutenant, whose name I

won't mention had said to me, he heard about something going on. We were all talking about it. He knew something that happened with Los Angeles PD, and I was telling him about it because he'd been away at a conference and hadn't seen the news. And when I described what little we knew at the time, which was an African American man had been pulled over by the Los Angeles Police Department, pulled out of a car and beaten. That was all we knew. We didn't know that he was a parolee. We didn't know his name at that point.

Denise Diggs

He made a comment that I'm sure there was a good reason they did what they did. And that kind of spun into a conversation about why he believes that. And he implied by his answer that a black man being beaten is not an aberration, that there's obviously a good reason. And I said, Well, I don't think we know that at this point we know very little.

Denise Diggs

And I gave him a scenario where his racism clearly came out. I said if I was driving through the town you live in, in an expensive car, would you put me over, and he said yes.

And I said, based on... and he said the fact that you don't make enough money to have an expensive car. I said no no I'm not Denise Diggs that you know who works for you. I'm just a stranger driving down the street and a very expensive sports car. And he kept saying yes he would pull me over. And when I can be asking what the probable cause would be he just kind of dodged it. He just kept saying you don't look like you would have a car like that.

And it got to the point where, like I said his, his bias was coming out of that conversation. A black lieutenant who overheard it, stopped him from going any further and walking back from the comments he was making, but I have bosses that were like that, and I had bosses that weren't like that, you know, it's kind of a mixed bag.

Denise Diggs

But um it's because of the people that wear the uniform are people. They are people with biases and implicit biases and prejudices and preconceived notions. They're just people, and they wear it. Sometimes they take that into the job that they do every day.

But I would say that my experience overall with the sheriff's department. I had more good experiences and bad. That's for sure.

Kendall Green 40:50

Thank you for that. Um, so kind of like as a follow up question to that as past law enforcement officers, um, what is your perspective on the current Black Lives Matter movement?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Well I support it. For one.

Denise Diggs

I do too.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And...but I also understand the difficulty it's going to change the direction of law enforcement. And my sister and I've had this conversation over and over again. Because one of the things that you have a problem with and she could talk about this, when you have a deputy who works for you, that has these biases or these prejudices. Even though you know that, it is very difficult to get them out of the agency.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

As a commanding officer I can tell you, I've only had the opportunity to fire two people. One who I was sure was a racist, but not because I didn't fire him he resigned. And another who was just a bad employee, but the process to get someone out of an agency is very difficult. And the associations, police orders and all these associations, go to bat for them, like it's life and death matter. And it is because their theory is, I know he's a bad cop but I also will there are bad commanding officers, and so we have to fight for him, even though we don't particularly like having to fight for him, we have to fight for him because another officer who was a good officer may be beaten down or oppressed by some bad commanding officer, so they fight for these guys.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And if they had a choice I think they probably wouldn't. I say two things can happen. One, they have to have a new understanding of what these police agent organizations that are protection for these officers. And they have to put their officer on more of a risk, risk reward situation where things that you do may come back to you personally. If you're indemnified from any punishment, other than the criminal by the way. But lots of these officers have a history. I don't know about the new one Chauvin in this, George Floyd matter, but lots of officers have a history and commanding officers know who they are and they know the history of them, but in some, some would like to kick them out of the agency and others this may not.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

But that's where it's going to start, is going to give commanding officers more power to remove these officers, take them off the street and not just put them in a pigeonhole somewhere behind the desk. But actually get them out in that career, put them somewhere else where they're not able to do the things they can do as officer. So a huge mountain to climb. Not that it's impossible but it's going to be very difficult to find the means to change the mindset of law enforcement.

Denise Diggs

Very hard. I totally support Black Lives Matter, it's not a simple solution. Defunding the police, as we know, just those words alone are now incendiary with most people because it sounds like that means we're not going to have police anymore. The idea of really allocating funds to work better in the communities and have more community policing and taking up the report that President Obama did on 21st Century Policing,

and the ideas of changing the warrior to guardian. All of those things. I believe in. But, like my brother said, changing the culture of law enforcement is an uphill climb, it's very difficult to do.

Denise Diggs

And part of the reason is because when police officers hear those changes. It sounds like power is being removed from them and their protection to be safe is being removed from them. And I think the biggest thing is getting police officers to understand that, having a connection with the people you serve makes you more safe, not less safe. And a friend of mine who was a commander. We used to teach together and he used to say that to his officers all the time which is, you know, getting to know the people in the areas you patrol, and knowing a little bit about who they are, doesn't make you less safe. If they know you, it makes you more safe because they feel like they have a connection to you.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Yeah.

Makaley Montano

Yeah thank you for that. Kendall, if you want to ask the next question.

Kendall Green

Yeah, yeah, thank you both for that answer. Um, so this next one is, how did how have you both seen racism change over in your lifetime?

Denise Diggs

Oh boy.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I already told you about my friend who was the student body president. He was, you know, he was in the north you know, he lived in the north end. He was white, I am black, and we have played golf over the last year. Many times and had these conversations that we never had in high school together, because even though we were in high school and we knew each other because we were on the same track team. And we both were of two separate worlds, and he never realized that our worlds were that different. He thought everybody lived the way he was living. And so I had to really kind of educate him to know, no, my high school was not like your high school. It was the same school but it wasn't the same for us. And we've talked about it I told him.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

He asked me the other day last time we played he said "do you think that things are better or worse now than when we were in high school?" And I said, honestly, I think they're worse.

Denise Diggs

I do too.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

He said “really?” I said well. In high school I didn't know that half the country would follow a racist president. In high school, I had no idea that half the country would support a misogynistic, bigoted, racist, president and live and die on his every word. I don't know, I mean all the presidents that I can recall may have had those same feelings but they weren't as obvious, and they certainly weren't as known as this president and they would have put him back in office another four years. So yeah, I think it's worse now than you know when we were in school. For sure.

Denise Diggs

I think so too. You know growing up, I had friends who were white. I mentioned Tammy Walsh, she was a white girl I grew up with all through school from Kindergarten on. And my friend, Corrine Lopez, is Hispanic and white and we didn't think much about race and we were just all kids. And those weren't conversations that we had.

Denise Diggs

It probably wasn't until I was in college, that, you know, coursework was directed in that, ethnic studies. And you have more conversations but even then everybody that I went to school and even in college seems more open to the concepts of acceptance.

Denise Diggs

But as I've gotten older, I don't know whether like I agree with my brother. But what's happened in the last 12 years in this country, I would say since Obama was elected. Race has been more kind of in your face, prevalent, where it's discussed more. And there's a lot of friction between people because of their belief systems, and I never noticed it as much. Maybe it's because I've gotten older, maybe my life experience and maybe it's the things happening in this country, or even around the world, that it made it seem as if things are worse to me too. I think people are more vocal about their feelings. Negative viewpoints about race.

Maybe that was what was different, maybe there was a kind of a veil of, we don't talk about it and nobody's going to say anything that's offensive. And now that's been kind of pulled back and people feel emboldened to say the things that they felt for a long time. And so now it seems like we're very divided in a way I don't ever remember feeling in this country before. I never cared for my safety in this country before. I never feared that if I went into a store and there was a group of people that were all white that someone might harm me. And I'm not saying that I think about it every day. But I think, I think about it more than I did in the last four years I think of somebody's deciding they don't like me because of the color of my skin. I never thought about that much. And living here out on the West Coast I mean maybe if I was raised in the south, that would be more prevalent thought, but I don't remember having that thought. In before.

Makaley Montano

Interesting. Do you both wish that those conversations between friends and any other colleagues about race like during your high school experiences growing up. Do you wish those happened earlier?

Denise Diggs

Oh, yeah, I think people, when they talk about. I always believe that talking about things and exposing people with different ideas is always a good idea. It may be difficult and painful, but it's always a good idea.

Um, and I and I have had this discussion with my black friends. Often they say to me when someone white asked me a question about my culture or my hair or my whatever, my black friends are often offended, they're like, why do you answer that question? Why do you let them ask you? Because if they don't ask if they're afraid to ask me, How come your hair is like that or why do you do things that way or why do you eat that food, whatever it is. If I don't open up a space for people to ask, then they fill that space with what they believe and it's usually wrong. So I would rather somebody ask and my white friends and white people I don't even know that well. They always start with that and they said I want to ask you something. I hope you're not offended they always start with that and I would say go ahead and that. I think that kind of communication has to happen for people to get any kind of idea of what anybody's life is like.

But I don't think it's easy.

Denise Diggs

I think people come away wounded sometimes and they feel put upon, and beat up and that someone is blaming them for what their ancestors did, and it's not an easy conversation.

Richard Allen Diggs

When I was in high school yes it would have been a good idea to have those conversations but we lived in to really separate worlds. It wasn't it wasn't set by any particular rule or understanding, other than in the campus for example, all the white kids are in one section of the campus and the Hispanic kids in another and the black kids were in another. Now, no one said you have to only be in those areas. But that's kind of where everybody gravitated to and other than like sports for example you interact with people.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

But in class I can remember teachers, one teacher, not many, but one teacher who was a history teacher. And I look back at that experience that I see so many things that I probably if I had known could have said or asked questions about how he taught that class. But he has focused on being what I say now the reincarnation of Abraham Lincoln, and he actually looked like Abraham Lincoln and wore his hair the same way, wore his beard the same way.

So all his focus when it was talking, talking about history was about Abraham Lincoln from his perspective. And had I known I'd probably know what I meant. And by the way, I should have mentioned that I met him, years later, as a grown man, which was a total different experience when I was in this classroom, because as a man I could see him as another man, and I think I'm told tell my sister this, I realized that he was crazy. He really had a problem.

Denise Diggs

You mean your other sister, you never told me.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And, you know, as a child, young teenagers 16/17 year old. I had no idea how to evaluate this teacher, but nowadays, students can really see the teacher for more than just being in charge of the classroom. And they can see the biases, and maybe some of the statements they made. I'm sure he made some, but anyway that does this something I love to have gone back in time and said, Yeah, he and I should have a conversation with the person I am today when I was 17. Because there would have been much different than when I was 17 and he was 37 years old as a teacher. But yeah, I would have loved to have those conversations. Yes.

Kendall Green

Thank you for those answers. Um, so kind of as a wrap up question. If you could give advice to the next generation would you want to say?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Oh wow. Well, next generation of everybody? or people of color? Or what?

Makaley Montano

Um it's completely up to you I know it's a bit of a loaded question so however you want to approach it.

Denise Diggs

Oh, I would say that I would tell the next generation and this is what I tell kids at Youth Court and deputies when I'm teaching. Is trying to always keep an open mind and try to put yourself in the other person's shoes, as much as you can. Don't assume you know what someone's life experience is, even though on the face of it. It may be, it may appear a certain way everybody is made up of good and bad and darkness and light and and our life experience shape who we are. So I would say just moving through your life try to always remember that while you're judging other people, people are judging you too. And you don't want to be judged harshly on your choices, maybe, or your mistakes as harshly as you might be judging someone else.

If possible, it's not always possible to do but if you can try to reserve judgment and keep an open mind because you, you'll find that you'll learn more from people, if you just get a chance to get to know them before, and I used to say this my employees that were

quick to judge inmates and police officers. Everybody, you know, you don't know what everybody is going through or what their life is like so.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

I guess my first thought would be to tell them to remain hopeful. That there is a future that things can change and can become better. Secondly I'd say, I heard this. I love these kind of great sayings. You're never as bad as people think you are, and you're never as good as you think you are. So, that's kind of the other thing that I reflect on.

Denise Diggs

That's true.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And finally, I remember I used to think of this all the time because we had these big huge command staff meetings. And, and you had a right to speak up and, and state your position on whatever came up in these command meetings, but they'd be like, about 35 or 40 command officers in these meetings. And I always thought going into the meeting I would always kind of remind myself okay someone's gonna say something in this meeting and for you, myself, what are you going to do?

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

And I would say to myself, someone say something? Should they say it now? And should you be the one to say it? And after I'd go through those three items, bullet points, then I'd decide at the end whether I actually should respond and I did sometimes, not always, but I always kind of, I always kind of preset myself to not, don't be, you know, caught off guard and someone's gonna say something and now you have to see for yourself are you going to respond to it. And those things kind of helped me, you know, to somebody say I shouldn't be saying, said now and Are you the one that should be saying it so. Those things are things I think, for the next generation coming in all those areas.

Denise Diggs

And definitely hope, because everything is cyclical. Things get bad, things get better, things get great things but you know if there's no sadness there's no joy, there's no challenges, there's no triumphs, all of that, you know, everybody has been just, just hold on. Cause life can spin on a dime. When things look the worst. Just Hang on, things can get better.

Makaley Montano

Well thank you both. That is awesome advice. I want to be conscious of our time. I know we're hitting a little over an hour. So again, thank you both for this opportunity to interview you and learn more about your family history. I'm sure we'll be in contact again. I know you probably have lots more to share. But again, thank you so much, and yeah.

Richard Allen Collins-Diggs

Yeah, thank you.

Kendall Green

Thank you guys, it was nice meeting you.

Denise Diggs

Thanks Kendall, thanks Makaley.

Kendall Green

Okay, guys. Have a good weekend.

Denise Diggs

You too enjoy your weekend. Oh, and Makaley don't forget to remind Jen to send me that waiver.

Makaley Montano

Alright, yes I will definitely follow up with you. It was great meeting everyone.

Denise Diggs

It was great meeting you too. Bye bye.

Makaley Montano

Bye.

End of Interview:

[00:58:10]