

Melvin Carter Jr., former St. Paul police officer

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Central Presbyterian Church, St. Paul,
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Q My name is Melvin W. Carter, Jr. I live in St. Paul at Western and Fuller.

A You grew up in Rondo; what are your earliest memories?

Q University ran parallel with Rondo, a couple blocks just to the north. I was born on Rondo. I was born at 1717 Rondo and the Carter's and the Moore's and my immediate family lived up and down Rondo. We had a lot of real estate there. Rondo had a lot of hustle and bustle. Next street over, University, had a great deal of activity – hustle and bustle and big trucks. I remember the sky being bluer and colors being much brighter and more...a more cooperative, interactive neighborhood. But University was a barrier. Kind of a racial barrier and people hardly ever crossed it. I mean, the kids didn't; for some reason it was just unspoken, it just didn't happen. And we had a derogatory name for that over there. We called it Paddyville. In our minds, at that time, Paddy was kind of derogatory as we could think of as equal opposite to the "N" word, you know? So that was the truth. But in reality, it really wasn't. Because no word could even approach that. When we were kids we'd ride our bikes all around. So one day I, along with a few other guys, decided to be adventurous and cross University. And we went down north about one block. Nothing happened. Couple more blocks – nothing happened. Couple more blocks – nothing happened. We made it about up to maybe Front Avenue, which is about half a mile in there and then said, uh oh we better get back. Because we was playing, we thought it was like Russian Roulette. So we started racing and coming back and I got a flat tire. And so everybody left me, man, cuz they weren't going to wait around for me. So I'm walking back with my bike and there was a family – a father and son, actually – out in their back yard. And they saw that I had a flat tire and they called me in and gave me some kool-aid and fixed my tire for me. It was a nice visit and they did their good deed, got me on my way and I rode my bike back. Crossed University by myself and got back safe and sound, lived happily ever after.

Q Talk about Rondo.

A Well, you say commercial...that's right. There were some bars, there were the Elks, some churches. The streetcar ran up and down Rondo. I remember my mother would give me what they would call, "car fare." You ever heard of that term, "car fare?" And they'd tie it in...they'd give me like 15 pennies and tie it in a handkerchief in a knot. I think it was even ten cents at first. Then I'd get there and I'd count out my one pennies into this little thing that you drop into and go to St. Peter Claver up here and.... Lexington was kind of the unofficial, unwritten western-most barrier, where few people lived beyond that.

Q So most of the population north of University was white...

A Yes. But the interesting thing was Rondo was not exclusively black. You'd see people of all colors, all races, all everything, from all over. Well, you wouldn't see very many...well what I'm saying you'd see a lot of black and white people up and down Rondo.

Q What kind of stores or businesses were there on University?

A Oh, University now...University and Rondo were two different things. University had everything – car dealerships, drug stores, food stores, I think Mattoway's clothing department store where I worked. I got my first job putting dividers into boxes – two cents a divider. Oh and the YMCA, on University and Fairview. And there was big buildings up there that were busy that nobody really...we didn't know what they were doing in there. But we played quite a bit, once I got a little older, we wound up, as our realm of travel expanded sometimes we'd go up there on 1000 University and play in the parking lot at Curtis 1000. And they made batteries.

Q How old were you when the deconstruction of Rondo happened?

A Yeah, it's clear in my mind as anything. Imagine being about 6, 7 and somebody trying to describe to you why your house is being torn down so that a road that takes up a whole block wide could be built. I recall not even believing it. I mean, because we're used to roads and streets and suddenly they're going to take out this whole block to build a freeway? I remember it well. My father had a house that had kind of a wrap-around porch. It had steeples and balconies and a weather vane. It was kind of like two and a half stories. And it had a room in it. What I mean by a room is that in those days a lot of black folks couldn't come to places and stay in a hotel and so they would come and find a room, a room to let, room to rent. And there was a room for folks to come in there, too. My father also, because he inherited a lot of property up and down Rondo, and worked hard all his life, he had one of the neighborhoods first televisions – black and white, was about this little. I remember on Gillette Fight Night they would take that room, the renting room and set up chairs and make popcorn and there'd be like, everybody from the neighborhood would come over and watch the Friday night boxing matches.

Q How did your grandfather come to settle on Rondo?

A Rondo's a place where African American immigrants came to. My grandfather's brothers – Mac and Foster Carter – they were here back at the turn of the century. They were playing music and running on the railroad up here. My father's family was from Paris, Texas before my father was born – my father was born here, in St. Paul. There was a big fire and I'm told that the whole town of

Paris, Texas, just burned to the ground. And somehow my uncle Mac and my uncle Foster, who I've never met – they were gone before I got here – but they helped my grandfather come up here and set up household, and my grandmother, and they came up here and worked.

Q So you're the third generation....

A Yup. And they played music, too. They were musicians – my father's family is said, according to Jim Griffin, was said to have been the first African American family to play I guess it was on one of the radio shows – maybe it was WCCO, if I remember correctly. But also at the St. Paul Hotel, I guess, which must have been a big thing at that time. And also, according to Jim Griffin, my uncle, Uncle Mim, played piano with Lester Young. You ever heard of Lester Young? He's world-renowned from previous generations.

Q Can you remember any discussions when your family was told about the freeway coming through?

A My father, particularly, he really didn't want to bother kids, children with adult stuff. So he owned a business building next door where the Elks, it was the Elks and a barbershop and then there was a funeral home. We didn't own the funeral home, but he did ok. He didn't talk to me about that. But what I remember about that, after we moved – because it was a beautiful house; the house was built in the late to middle 1800s – and I remember sitting with my grandmother, my father's mother. And after we had moved over on the 10 hundred block of Aurora – 1026 Aurora – we were watching on the news and the fire department...since the house was condemned, the property was condemned and being taken from us at salvage value. And they were just going to tear the house down anyway, so the fire department used 717 Rondo – where I was born into, along with several other siblings – they used that house to practice for training. So they set it on fire. And I remember my grandmother just cringing because...I didn't really understand that as much as I do now because when you think about it now, the need for one generation to send wealth down and have wealth for the next generation so that they can be well, so they can get educated, so that they can buy property and be self-sufficient – that was to be their gift to us. And she just began to tremble. Her name was Mary Carter and you will see her in a lot of the Rondo material. And I'm thinking, we had a nice house over on 1026 Aurora, and I'm 9 years old and I don't get it. But years later, I always wondered why did she cringe? She always wanted her house to be saved. Because it was a beautiful house; it was the one that had the weathervane and the towers and it had balconies and a huge wraparound front and side porch and colored windows, stained glass windows, picture windows, hardwood floors.

Q Talk about your memories as teen or young adult.

A White Castle – we'd go there after parties and flirt with the carhops and they'd bring food out to the cars. There was a place called Three Bears, a fast food place, and they really had the best hamburgers. Why they shut down...I imagine just a business thing. A thing that's noteworthy, though, is that I was – along with another guy named Jimmy Beal – we were the first black people to have a membership at the Midway YMCA over there on Fairview and University. And to me, to go from the inner city across Lexington in 4th, 5th grade, was a major expedition. And it was an adventure. I also attribute that experience to some of the successes that I've been able to accomplish over the years.

Q Where did people go when they had to leave Rondo?

A I think some of both. I remember people just getting moved. Ironically Skeeter, who lived across the street from me...he was the first person, he was my age, he was a little older than I am. He was the first person to tell me that we were moving. But he was telling me...I thought he was just kidding me because he put me on sometimes, rest his heart, bless his soul, may he rest in peace, but he kind of put me on sometimes and he lived on the side of the street that wasn't going to get torn down. So he was explaining to me how this big street's going to come through here and they're going to tear your house down but they're not going to tear mine down but it's going to take up this whole block. I'd disregarded that for a long time, til I looked up and...you know when they finally tore it down...well there was a time between when the place was vacated and the time it was finally torn down and I remember riding my bike through there and they had the best plum trees, the best apple trees, and you could play in there. But what I remember was getting a sense of riding through some ruins, just like you would when you'd go through ancient Egypt or ancient Rome or Greece – it felt like that. And this word, "progress." And please let me say this: there was a holistic spirit there and I think of it as a continuation of what must have been an agricultural society, because agriculture was a lot more prevalent in those times and in an agricultural society if somebody's house burned down everybody...when somebody had an emergency, neighbors would come to your rescue. If you needed to borrow a cup of sugar, folks would knock on your door. I remember people knocking on our door wanting to borrow a vacuum cleaner; my mother would give them the vacuum cleaner. My momma wants some ready made coffee and my mom would give them the coffee. Not only did we know when each other was getting a new bicycle, but everybody knew when somebody was getting a new pair of shoes. And everybody kind of knew each other. I remember that there was hardly any homicides. I remember being able to play and there was never any drugs. Hardly anybody was going to prison in those days. You'd hear about it, but there'd be a homicide like every couple of years, and it was rare. And it was a holistic thing. Now I think of that area that we seemed isolated and secluded from the rest of the world in many ways, especially other black communities because we're way up here and the nearest black community was Chicago and we didn't have the freeways then, obviously, and so people didn't come up and see us. So we were kind of marooned up here

in some ways. But we had kind of a holistic bubble that was burst in the name of progress and probably in the name of integration as well, by some definition. And I think that when that bubble was burst instead of that community being so much greater and embellished because of progress, we lost a lot. Progress for who? For what?

Q Talk about changes on University Avenue.....

A I recall never seeing Asian people at all, ever. And then, now they're here and they're doing very well and they're flourishing up and down University. So you will see them when you go up and down University. So that's a big change. And then you see East Africans. They have a lot of businesses up there. And one thing that happened, that was kind of monumental back in the 50s and the early 60s was that there'd be a lot of drag racing up and down there. So we'd go up there at night – me and Fatso would go up to University – and watch. And some of us knew who the guys were just by virtue of watching them. We didn't know them personally but we would know what cars to expect. And that was the days when the '57 Chevy was the craze. That was a big deal. So people would go up there sometimes and watch, get some hamburgers and go up there and park, the carhops and watch some of the drag racing.

Q What other drive-ins or restaurants do you recall?

A White Castle was big. White Castle was the place. And the White Castle never closed and so that was the place to go after all the parties. But just down the street, where there was previously a car dealership, there was this place called the Three Bears. And Three Bears they had a big hamburger and they'd give you a basket and they'd load you up pretty good. They were in business for, I guess, a handful of years. A lot of St. Paul folks. And then there was Sandy's. Sandy's was not on University, that was Lexington, but that was another place where I seem to recall some carhops. It was a hamburger place. And then McDonald's came...before McDonald's...I never heard of McDonald's but those were the places that I think McDonald's probably put out of business ultimately. Then there was Henry's right across the street from the Y. So you'd go there and play hard – you'd swim, you'd run and jump and get in a couple fistfights – and then you'd go across the street and ask them to load your hamburger up with pickles and onions - whatever you could get free on top of that thing just to get some volume because you only had enough for one hamburger.

Q Talk about the YMCA in the Midway.

A Perhaps the first. I would guess probably 1960, '61. Going to the Midway YMCA was like visiting another culture, visiting another group of people that was well outside my neighborhood. They even spoke a different language, in a sense, with inflection. I remember talking with a guy, another young fellow my age, we were talking about what we were getting for Christmas. And this guy

was getting all kinds of stuff. I'm going, man, you guys, you're getting all that? And I was glad to get a watch or something, and he was getting all kinds of.... I could compete athletically very well, except for swimming. I was never a strong swimmer, but I love to swim. And every now and then somebody would accidentally let the "N" word slip and you'd have to help them appreciate the errors of their ways. And they'd...you had to deal with that. And in those days, you know folks kind of almost encouraged young boys to fight stuff out and get it over with and then you'd be friends afterward; you'd learn some boundaries. It was just a matter of pecking order, I guess. I mean, going up there and getting called the "N" word and maybe punching somebody in the mouth and getting punched back, was part of the...part of the good time. Well St. Peter Claver, for one, it's changed location and I can't tell you the ones that were specifically, directly on Rondo. But I think because of some shifts that I associate in my mind with the movement, people moving out and people moving in, a number of churches existed. They were small churches that just don't exist now. But the church that was very important to the Carter's and my father, who I'm very blessed to still have – he lives down on University and Fairview – and my grandfather, where my grandparents were buried in, and my mother was buried in, was St. Peter Claver Church. It was a Catholic Church and they did a lot to educate the African American community. St. Peter Claver was a predominantly black church, a black body. They always had a white pastor but we had African American nuns who took no crap off of nobody. And they'd smack us around and...we didn't need Ritalin and Prozac in those days because they could beat our butts, you know? You'd have to pay attention because if you didn't the consequences were immediate, swift and sometimes harsh. And I'm not criticizing them because I had a, I had the hardest head and the hardest behind and they knew what they were beating into us and they knew what they were beating out of us. I owe that, I attribute that to my becoming who God wants me to be.

Q Are churches still playing a role today?

A Yes they are. And they're trying hard and they're struggling just like everyone else. People are struggling and the churches are supported by the people. I think churches really do what they can do. My bias is - and I'm criticizing myself too, because I'm a member of Pilgrim Baptist Church which is a historic church, so I'm indicting myself too - but when you think about how the churches led and influenced everything up until the Civil Rights Movement, which really should have been called the Human Rights Movement, I think the churches really need to step up a lot more, cooperatively and with a lot more intentionality and also address the kind of holocaust that's happening to black kids right now. Moses did it.

Q Talk about your professional life on the police force.

A You know I was a police officer for almost 30 years in St. Paul. The only way I got to become a police officer was by way of affirmative action. That's right – affirmative action. I'd have never gotten on the St. Paul Police Department had it not been for affirmative action. And the community at large – and that included white folks and black folks and women and men working together making sure that the St. Paul Police Department hired somebody of color, eventually. So I was very self-conscious to show back up in the neighborhood where I experienced my crummy kid years. Suddenly I'm showing up in a police uniform. I remember people looking at me like, seriously? Seriously? So that was a unique experience. I did patrol, I did SWAT, I did detective work, I did internal affairs and I consider myself a recovering police officer. You know, when they're issuing you all that gear I'm going, man survival needs to be more than just getting some gear and surviving this brutal stuff out here. Survival was the thing that's got to be, go beyond that, and had to be with keeping my familying up with a vengeance, over-parenting my children, being overprotective of my children, being overly involved in my children. Yeah, I did it and they didn't appreciate it then and they evacuated and got out early. But my wife was wonderful enough to stay with me through all those years. There was a time when I was known for my self and my wife and my children were known as my kids, my wife and my children. Now I'm known as Toni Carter's husband, Melvin Carter's father, Annika Ward's father, Alana Galloway's father. And also by my children-in-law as well. So now I went back and got me a degree, well after the fact. I graduated when I was like 55 years old, with a bachelor's degree, which was a mission impossible back at one time. I work with boys who are in trouble and I'm a writer and some of my writings are coming out now, beginning to come out.

Q Where did you do your police work?

A There's no place in the city, there's no nook nor cranny that I didn't work.

Q Do you have any interesting stories from University Avenue?

A When you lock it in to University.... I was a detective and there was a 7-11 over on University and Chatsworth. And a young man who I was really trying to help...he went over to a car and the car window was open and he was pulling a purse out. His fingerprints were on the window, they had witnesses and some of it was on video because he went inside the store. So I'm trying to give this guy a good deal because it was an act of stupidity, but it was one of those crimes where you could really make it sound like the worst crime or you could make it sound – depending on where you put the inflection, where you dot the "i" - I'm saying, look man, admit to this, own up to this and take ownership. Confess to it and we can get you something less than a felony. His momma came into the office and just told me off, called me all kinds of names and it didn't matter that I was the only African American in there and she was an African American person in there. And she was trying to tell her kid...she thought that because I was trying to get the boy to admit to the crime because you're absolutely caught, no

point in denying this. Own up to it and we can get you a misdemeanor. And by the time the mom got through telling me off and cussing me out and calling me all kinds of Uncle Tom's and stuff...and he's going, Mom shut up...but I was forced to have to throw the book at him. But I started an agency called Save our Sons and we work with boys. We're pretty renowned for working with boys who are in trouble, boys in the system. We work with the system itself and help the system have better outcomes with boys and help the boys have better outcomes while in the system. And also now we're showing the community how to stay involved with these boys while they're in there, so when they come out it's not a desperado against them, but they're a part of each other. So when boys are successful, the community embraces them and applauds them. And when they're not as successful, we still...we don't unembrace them but it's our business. And it makes a lot of difference.

Q How do imagine University Avenue in 4 or 5 years?

A Well, I think it's something that really has to be done with a great deal of deliberate intentionality. We've got to make sure that it's something that serves the people that live here, rather than just extracts the resources and goes out someplace else. We have to protect the businesses there and we have to make sure that they're done deliberately. Because we can't just leave it to whatever happens, happens. And I think it's going to take a lot of cooperative people, spirit, people kind of dropping their guard and say, OK this is coming. We can protest it, we can resist it, but it's coming. Like someone said, Saturday's coming. You can protest it or not, but it's coming and so what we've got to do is make the most of it. And I think we can. I think we must. We have to make sure that it serves everybody – people coming into, and people coming out.