

Henry Williams

Interviewed by Alyssa Lucas

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Corpus Christi, Texas

Transcribed by Alyssa Lucas

[Alyssa Lucas]: My name is Alyssa Lucas, and I'm here with Mr. Henry Williams to talk about his oral history as well as talk about, um, his life in the Hillcrest, Corpus Christi, Texas. Um, today is October 11, 2022. We are here in Corpus Christi, Texas, and just for the record, may I have your permission to record?

[Henry Williams]: Yes.

[Lucas]: Um, so can you tell me more about your background and family life?

[Williams]: Yes, my background and family life begins with my father—

[Lucas]: —Hm—

[Williams]: —Dr. H. J. Williams, and I am a third generation Corpus Christian. My grandfather lived in Corpus Christi. My father was also born in Corpus Christi, and he had a background of—he taught at Solomon Coles School for a number of years and then he went to medical school. Well, he attended college at Tougaloo College in Mississippi then he came back to Corpus Christi and taught at Solomon Coles High School for eleven years then he decided to go into medical school, and he went into medical school at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee and from there he did his internship at Freemans College in Washington D.C. He returned to Corpus Christi as a physician. At that point, he built a home in the Hillcrest neighborhood and at that time, I think I was about twelve years old, okay? That was when my life in the Hillcrest neighborhood began. I attended Booker T. Washington Elementary School, Robert Driscoll Junior High School, and my attendance at Robert Driscoll Junior High School began in approximately 1956 or so and the schools in Corpus Christi began integration at that time, and the Hillcrest neighborhood was a ethnically mixed neighborhood of black, Hispanic, and white, and we all lived together in the Hillcrest neighborhood. In high school, I attended Roy Miller High School. I was very active in athletics, basketball and track. I received—after high school, I received a basketball scholarship to Del Mar College in which I attended. Subsequently, I went into the United States Army, and I was in the United States Army for a period of three years from 1963 unto 1966 at which I spent those three years in Italy. When I returned to Corpus Christi—I returned to Corpus Christi. I entered back into—went to college for a bit, and after that period of time in college, I went to Houston. I was in Houston for a few years after which I returned to Corpus Christi, and I was married at the time. I was not during my return to Corpus Christi, per say, living in Hillcrest but living in the city of Corpus Christi, and I began my work life at that time, and I was employed with the state of Texas for a number of years after of

which—my period of time with the state of Texas was a very good employment time. I was employed with the controls office as a tax compliant officer. When my mother passed away, she—I was made executor of her estate and once those responsibilities were concluded, my residence in the Hillcrest neighborhood began again, okay? During that time in which I was in my full adulthood, I began to—there were problems in the neighborhood that needed to be responded to. There were homes that needed to be—people needed home repairs. There were problems in the neighborhood that needed to be addressed, and some of those problems had to do with, there were problems in the area of—there were some crime problems in the neighborhood. Those problems needed to be addressed, and I was a part of an organization that came together to address the problems of the neighborhood, whether it happened to be with the problems of the home owners or the problems with crime areas in the neighborhood, we began to address those problems, and they were addressed both by the people of the neighborhood and also with the Corpus Christi Police Department was very much involved also with addressing those problems, and this was prior to the founding of the Hillcrest Residence Association, and the Hillcrest Residence Association came together to also address the problems of the neighborhood and help the people of the neighborhood in addressing their problems and addressing the areas of crime in the neighborhood. They began to diminish as we began to reach out into the neighborhood to deal with those problem areas. The Hillcrest Residence Association formed—we formed an organization by that same name, the Hillcrest Residence Association, and we became a 501c3 tax exempt organization in which we were able to—we were a legal organization recognized by the Internal Revenue, okay, to deal with the issues that needed to be dealt with, and we also—we could receive funding, tax exempt funding. We began continuing to deal with the problems of the neighborhood and to assist the people in dealing with those problems, and we dealt with, was it, city government also. We needed the city of Corpus Christi to be responsive to the needs of the people of the neighborhood, and some of the problems that we dealt with were the closing of Crosby Elementary School, vacant properties that were left unkept or trashed, grass and weeds uncut, allowing transients to live in abandoned buildings, inadequate police control, inadequate street lighting, inadequate care of the historic cemeteries in the neighborhood. These problems began to be addressed, and our focus was to continue to deal with problems of our neighborhood. In, I think, 2015, the Port began their actions in dealing with the neighborhood having to do with the Harbor Bridge Project, and they initiated the Acquisition Relocation Program in which residents of the neighborhood who desired to relocate to other areas of the city through that program, they were enabled to do so, and there were those of us who chose not to enter into activities with that program, but we desired to remain in the neighborhood, and that is where we are today. There are those of us in there, I think the number's probably about one hundred homes and families who have desired to remain in the Hillcrest neighborhood, and what we are desiring to do is to build and to strengthen our neighborhood. The problems that we are dealing with today have to do with both the—working with the city of Corpus Christi in the area of they're fulfilling their responsibilities where maintenance is concerned in the neighborhood. Also, the city of Corpus Christi is desiring to place a desalination plant in the neighborhood, and it is called the Inner Harbor Desalination Plant, and what that plant would—we believe that it would be damaging both to the neighborhood and that it would be damaging also to our local waterways and that it would be a—it could possibly contaminate the bay. We are standing

against that, okay? And we are organizing with those who stand in agreement with the fact that the Inner Harbor Desalination Plant is a potential contaminant to the bay and organizations who agree with this positioning, we're standing together in doing so, and we're seeking to organize and to deal with that area as effectively as we can, and that is where we are today where our neighborhood is concerned, and we certainly—we're prayerful, and we're desiring success for our neighborhood, and we also are desiring for Corpus Christi to live up to the meaning of its name, the Body of Christ, and of the names of our city has been the Sparkling City by the Sea, and we don't want to see that sparkle dimmed. Thank you very much.

[Lucas]: Okay, um, so going back a little bit, um, you were talking earlier that when you were in the military, you were in Italy?

[Williams]: Yes.

[Lucas]: Can you talk about your time there?

[Williams]: (laughs) That was a—my time in the military was a very, very—it was a very, very good time for me, and there were certainly challenges. When I was stationed in Northern Italy, the city of Vicenza and Vicenza is one hour by train from Venice, and I spent quite a bit of time as much time as I could spend in visiting Venice, and I had acquired some very, very close friendships that exist to this day, and that has been, what? In excess of fifty years ago, and I also in my military experience the company commander of the company of which I was attached in during my time in Italy there, and I will mention this man's name. It was Captain William D. Georgia, and he has been one of the men in my life that has been very important to me, and he—because he assisted me in some ways that were very, very important to me. Also, during my time in Italy, I learned how to speak the Italian language, and I need to refresh upon that (laughs), but Italy has been very important to me.

[Lucas]: That's incredible. And you mentioned your faith a bit, I know you're a man of faith, could you talk about how your faith has impacted you throughout your life and impacted your life?

[Williams]: Yes. My relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of my life, and we're here at the Corpus Christi Christian Fellowship right now, and I am an elder here, but my life—my relationship with Jehovah God through Jesus Christ began very, in fact, as a child. That relationship began, but it came to its full cumulation during my adulthood when I began to deal with life's problems, and I found that I could not deal successfully with life's problems, even my own, simply by my own efforts. Well, to share an area that may be—it may assist someone who may be dealing with problems or issues in their lives, and they may not know exactly how to resolve those problems. There was a time in my life when I drank alcohol, and the day came when I wanted to quit drinking alcohol, and I tried on my own, and I could not stop, okay? I continued. The day came when I knew that in order for me to get victory in that area, I had to ask God for help and during the early morning hours of July 8, 1979, and at the time I was living out on Padre Island, but I got down on my knees, and I asked God to help me, and I asked him

to remove from me the desire and the compulsion for the alcohol, which he did, very powerful spiritual experience in which I received Jesus as Lord and Savior, and he removed from me that desire and compulsion, and he freed me, and I was able to enter in upon new life. I received a born again experience, and that has been the key to not only faith in my life but the key to the direction of my life at this time and also let me share that over the past twenty-six years, I conduct a prayer meeting at the Corpus Christi Police Department, and I and others have been doing that now for the past twenty-six years, and over that period of time, we began with Police Chief Pete Alvarez, In 1996, January 1966, Pete Alvarez became the Police Chief here in Corpus Christi, and there were very serious problems, crime taking place in the city. There were drive by shootings, children were getting shot in their homes, um, but the crime element was very, very—it was a very aggravating problem and when Pete Alvarez became police chief, he initiated seven committees from the citizens to deal with the problems of crime in the area. One of them was a spiritual outreach committee. I and a pastor by the name of Rafael Garcia went to his first meeting, and we volunteered to become a part of that committee. We initiated a monthly day of fasting and prayer for our city with an evening of prayer at the Corpus Christi Police Department, and there's a fifth-floor auditorium, and we began—the third Thursday of each month, beginning May of 1996 of having an evening of prayer. There at the fifth-floor auditorium praying for our city, for our state, and for our nation. Crime, violence, and lawlessness began to decrease in the city. We have continued to pray for our city, for our state, and for our nation over the past twenty-six years. We have a vision of what we desire the city of Corpus Christi to be, and we do not want out of control crime, violence, and lawlessness, and we also pray for our nation because our nation has a great many problems, okay? You know, problems in the cities, the major cities, with violence, murders, and shootings, um, there are shootings that take place practically every week, someone will begin shooting or killing numbers of people. We want this to stop. Also, there are manners of life in this nation that need to be brought back to God's righteousness. You know, there are areas of ungodly living in this nation, and we as the Church of Jesus Christ, we want to adhere to the scripture which says, "If My people were to call upon My name shall humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways then will I here from Heaven will forgive their sin and will heal their land," and our land needs to be healed. It needs to be healed of immoral conduct. It needs to be healed of the shootings, of the killings, of abortion, of sexual perversion. Our nation's problems in every area of government, you know, these need to be healed, and our nation needs to return to its founding Biblical principles, and that is what we pray for. I believe that our nation is a special nation under God, and we want to hold to that belief, and we want to work toward it and to pray for it. We pray for our leaders, and we pray for every area. We pray for the people of this nation, for the culture of this nation, that it would be all that God would have it to be, and we are one nation under God. We need to return to being that. That is the salvation of our land through Jesus Christ. We need to recognize who Jesus is in this land. Thank you.

[Lucas]: Okay, I'm just going to double check this real quick, okay? Sorry, I'm a little paranoid about that. Um, moving on, can you tell me a bit about, um, your career?

[Williams]: Excuse me?

[Lucas]: Can you tell me a bit about your career? Your career, your job?

[Williams]: My job?

[Lucas]: Yes.

[Williams]: (laughs) My working life had to do with—I began working in the financial industry in banking initially, also, then with the state of Texas, you know, with the Office of the State Controller. I was a tax official and as a tax official, it was my job to deal with businesses and taxes, and I enjoyed it very much because it gave me a great deal of both dealing with the laws, but I had the freedom to make decisions having to do with the people in businesses, and I enjoyed this very, very much. I also—I worked for a credit union for a number of years and then there came a day when it was time for me to leave that area of worldly occupation, and I worked for the Corpus Christi Christian Fellowship Church of which I am an elder in the financial area, you know, for a number of years. Uh, today, I guess I would say that I am, what, semi-retired, semi-retired (laughs), but my function today is as an elder of the fellowship, and that is being a godly man before the congregation. I also handle what is called the Benevolence Ministry, and the Benevolence Ministry has to do with the poor and the needy, and we assist the poor and the needy in our church and in the community with the basic needs of life, um, food, clothing, shelter, gasoline, problem areas of their lives because what is needed to begin the process of healing of any life is to come to Jesus Christ and enter into a relationship with him, to receive salvation, and spiritual rebirth, and that is—that is both my employment history and where I am today.

[Lucas]: Okay, um, going back a little bit, um, I know you spent a majority of your life growing up in Hillcrest?

[Williams]: Yes.

[Lucas]: Can you tell me about like what Hillcrest used to look like and like how it's changed over time?

[Williams]: There was more population in Hillcrest earlier on, of course, and over time, the population began to decrease and that is—initially, when I grew up in Hillcrest, we were a mixed community both of black, white, and Hispanic and over time, Hillcrest now is primarily—we still have a handful of Hispanics, and we have, I think, one white family that's still there. You know, and we're still very close knit, but the population and due to the Port's Voluntary Relocation Program, many people desire to leave the neighborhood, and they took—and they entered into that program, and the Port bought their properties, and they were—they moved to homes outside of Hillcrest, okay, and that had to do a great deal with the diminishing of the population in Hillcrest, but we have more vacant land now than we had at that time, and that is also something that we are dealing with because we want the Port to keep up, to keep clean the properties that they have received and also the city of Corpus Christi to continue to

maintain the properties in the neighborhood. Yes, and I live in the home that my father built, and Hillcrest has been home for me (laughs) over the years, and I, yes, and it still is home for me.

[Lucas]: Um, can you tell me about some of the events that caused people to decide to move out?

[Williams]: I think I would be going beyond myself to answer for other people. I can't do that, but those who chose to move, those who I knew, there were those who were living in homes that were very much in need of repair, which they could not afford to do, you know, therefore when the Port came, okay, and offered to buy their properties and to help them move to other properties, okay, then they chose to take advantage of that, and some out of necessity and then there were others whom I have heard who moved, and they were not satisfied, per say, with their moving, or they have moved into an area in which the local taxes were above what they were paying in Hillcrest, but I would not answer. The only person that I can answer for where it comes to either remaining where you're living where home ownership is concerned, each must answer for himself because that is just a—that is a highly personal decision.

[Lucas]: Okay, thank you. Can you tell me how you personally felt about the Voluntary Acquisition Relocation Program?

[Williams]: I chose not to become a part of it (phone rings), and, no, I did not—and I don't want to—I chose not to become a part of it because I did not trust the process, and nor did I want to move from my home because that's home for me, and it has been home for me, and I did not feel that I had anything to gain from, you know, the Volunteer Relocation Program, and I stayed away from it.

[Lucas]: Okay. Um, can you tell me a bit about your participation in the book *African Americans in Corpus Christi*?

[Williams]: (laughs) The book *African Americans in Corpus Christi* was a—it was really a delight to be a part of because there was a part of the history, the early history of blacks in Corpus Christi that I was not aware of, okay? You know, of Solomon Coles and Solomon Coles School, and I did not attend Solomon Coles School, but it has always had a place in my heart, you know, a great place in my heart. You know, and meeting with the people and their interest in gathering their information, and I was very honored that I was asked to be a part of it (laughs), you know, very honored, and I will say this, with a great deal of esteem, if you will, when I see the book and the names of those who were a part of putting it together and my name is there (laughs), you know, I must thank God and Jesus Christ for that and looking back upon the people who have participated in the history of our city, you know, those who have come through here, the heavy weight champion Joe Louis, some of the entertainers who have come through, some of the men of God who have been here in the city, Reverend and Mrs. Smith, First Congregational Church, and my family were members of the First Congregational Church, and they were just exemplary, exemplary people. Reverend Harold Branch and other pastors

and ministers, doctors, lawyers, professionals, you know, who were seeking to make life better in our city and not only for black people but for all people in our city. That is very important that we reach out to all of the people of our city, you know, and that is what we do today. We reach out to the people of our city because we're family, and we must love and treat each other as family and in our prayer at the police station, you know, we pray that there will not be prejudice or bigotry or racism, antisemitism, you know, those devilish attitudes in our city or in this nation. We pray that these negatives, these devilish negatives will be out of our nation and out of our city, and we thank God that things have continued to—life has continued to be better in the city of Corpus Christi, and we want our Hillcrest neighborhood to arise, if you will, and to be all that it could be, and that's our vision.

[Lucas]: Okay, um, can you tell me more about your role in the Hillcrest Neighborhood Association?

[Williams]: Well (laughs), I'm the president.

[Lucas]: That's a big role.

[Williams]: (laughs) You know, that means that I'm actually at the point of leadership, part of the leadership there and as the president I must be in leadership and initiate action, okay? You know, the founding of the 501c3, yes, and to a great extent, I was a part of initiating that, okay, and my signature is on that, and we keep the 501c3, we must keep it in order with the federal government each year, so that we can use it, so that organizations that can donate to us, tax exempt, we can do it and here recently, there was a lady who had a problem with her air conditioning in her home (laughs), and we took our 501c3, the organizational instruments to Home Depot and to Lowe's. They donated to us the needed materials so that we could assist this lady with her air conditioning, and we also—during the early years of the 501c3, we went to one of the refineries, and they contributed to us, okay, in assisting with home repairs, and they can do that tax exempt because we have the 501c3 recognition and as president of the Hillcrest Residence Association, it's just important that I stay abreast of the needs and initiate that which is helpful, and I know that—I think, probably, within the coming months, I and others will be speaking before the city council, not because—November eighth (2022) is the date for voting for new persons in office, and I know that we are going to go before the new city council and ask them to, if they would, not go forward on the Inner Harbor Desalination, and we want them to work with us in the neighborhood. I hope I've answered that question.

[Lucas]: Yes, okay, um, you've talked about the desalination and—are there any other issues within Hillcrest that you want to talk about, or have you listed all of them?

[Williams]: Hm?

[Lucas]: Are there any other issues with Hillcrest that you think should be addressed that we haven't talked about?

[Williams]: I don't think so.

[Lucas]: Okay.

[Williams]: You know, I think that—I certainly hope that this has been helpful to you.

[Lucas]: Yes, I'm almost done, sorry. And is there anything else about the history of the Northside neighborhood or Hillcrest that you want to share?

[Williams]: Well, let me say this. I was born on the northside of our city, and it's very special to me. I was born in the Washington-Coles area (laughs), and there was some people who are very special to me, and there was—at time, there was a, kind of a black business community there, which is no longer there, but there was a black business community, and there was both positive and negatives there also, and I think Booker T. Washington Elementary School, Holy Cross Catholic Church, which is still there, you know, and Holy Cross Catholic Church, and I'm not a Catholic (laughs) but during those—I attended kindergarten there though, and it was there at the Holy Cross Catholic Church kindergarten that—and I was six years old (laughs), but God spoke to me there at the Holy Cross Catholic Church. As a matter of fact, it was at recess, if you will. What took place was not—I and another little boy, we were playing as if we were fighting, and it was at recess outside, and I had learned some profane language words, and I was saying these profane language words, and I heard a voice say, "Follow the Man that was raised from the dead," and I stood up and I turned around, and there was no one there. It was just a voice that spoke, and I said, "Okay." I said, "Okay (laughs)," but when I got back into the classroom, the nun said, "Young man, come here. I heard those words that you were speaking during recess. Turn your hands over palm down," and she got the ruler, and she put the ruler on to the top of my hands, and I didn't have a problem with profanity after that (laughs), but, no, Hillcrest and the Northside, that's home. It's home for me, and it's very special to me, and my home is right across from the cemetery and that cemetery, we have the Old Bayview Cemetery, okay, which is also on the Northside of the city, and that cemetery, I didn't know that that cemetery that's across from me is called the New Bayview Cemetery, and it is a cemetery that has Civil War people, okay, and it is a very special place in our city.

[Lucas]: Let me just double check if I have any more questions. Um, is there anything else you would like to include in your personal oral history or—

[Williams]: (coughs) You know, what I am going to say transcends but includes our neighborhood. Our city, as a people, and I speak for myself as a Christian, we must have a godly vision for our neighborhoods, for our city, for this nation, and we must—we must remember who we are as a people. The eras of the past which have been very harmful and very painful, and we need to come to a place of forgiving the past and realize that as a people what we must do is come together in Jesus Christi to become a people who can walk toward the future and have a vision of both who we are and our future, for the neighborhoods, for the church, and I will say the church first, for our city, for our state, for our nation, and for this land, that God's hand, a blessing would be upon us, and that we would be the people that God has chosen us to

be and put the areas of racism behind us and be the people that he has chosen us to be, that we would not have—that we would love each other with no—and put aside and repent of any racism, antisemitism, bigotry (phone rings), and be a people of godly righteousness. We must be a people of godly righteous to put away wrongdoing, wrongdoing, ungodly ways, killing our children with abortion, sexual ungodliness, doing wrong in God's eyes, crime, violence, lawlessness, so that he will bless us and bless our land. Thank you.

[Lucas]: Thank you. That's a good place to stop. Thank you so much for your time (Williams laughs). Let me turn off the recorder.

(end of recording)