



Interview with Ermon K. Jones

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
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Name of Interviewer: June West
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Mr. Jones: My name is Ermon K. Jones and it is a pleasure to be involved in this interview as it pertains to Monmouth County as we look back at the 20th century. We're here this afternoon in September preparing a document which will be a historical account of some activities which occurred in the past century.



Ermon K. Jones

I am a life long resident of the Township of Neptune and the County of Monmouth in the State of New Jersey. I was born in 1924 in the Township of Neptune on a homestead, which still stands at 530 Myrtle Avenue. I received my early education in the Township. I attended the school located on Ridge Avenue, which is an elementary school from grades K to eighth. I was in that school for five years and then I was transferred to the Whitesfield Elementary School, which is located in the western section of the Township. I attended Neptune High School, the single high school in the township for all the children from the five or six K-8 schools. I graduated in 1942, and that following spring I enrolled in Monmouth Jr. College, which today is Monmouth University. It was a junior college at that time, and it had classroom in the Long Branch High School. Long Branch is a city located about five miles from the Township of Neptune. I entered into the military services, the United States Army, in April of 1943, and completed the tour of duty in December 1944. In September 1945, having served in the military, I was eligible for benefits under the GI Bill of Rights. I entered Morgan State University, received a Bachelor of Science Degree, and only having six months left on my GI Bill, I received a masters degree from Teachers College, Columbia University in New York in 1951.

My early childhood in the Township of Neptune was similar to most youngsters and children who were born around that time. I actually lived in a neighborhood which was comprised of white and Black homeowners. As a youngster, I enjoyed most of those activities that most youngsters were enjoying at that time: stickball in the street, kick the can, and ring-a-lievio, and things of that nature. And incidentally, the participants were both Black and white youngsters, so they were activities which were integrated at that time.

After I returned from college, I commenced a thirty-four year employment at a military installation located in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Half of those years were in engineering. The final years were as Chief of the Equal Employment Opportunity Office. The duties and responsibilities were to provide for the equal employment opportunities in the federal government as far as promotions and job opportunities are concerned.

During the time of the Civil Rights Movement I was a participant as far as the community is concerned. I was a member of the local branch of the NAACP, the Asbury Park Neptune Branch, specifically. I served as the Education Chairman and then also as the Branch President for three years. I am a life long member of the branch and have been involved since the early 1960s.

My parents were originally from Virginia. They came to New Jersey to Neptune Township to reside and to raise a family. I am one of three brothers and two sisters. I guess the person who actually had an impact upon myself and the rest of our family was my mother, who was insistent that all of us attend college. As a result of that insistence we all did. I have two brothers who are attorneys. And it was because of her assistance that we attended college. And I guess it goes back to the days when I was a youngster; she was very active in the local Parent Teacher Association and was concerned about not only her children, but other children, with respect to educational opportunities. During my tenure year as President of the Education chairmen and President of the NAACP, I think we had a tremendous impact upon the educational opportunities in the Township of Neptune because we hassled with the local Board of Education alleging and claiming that equal education opportunities did not exist for African American students. As a result of that, a suit was filed and there was a change in the educational system in the Township of Neptune.

Mrs. West: You mentioned the Township of Neptune, did this action have any effect on any other towns in the county?

Mr. Jones: During this period of time, there was a claim by most leaders in the various communities about the type of educational opportunities that were being given to African American students. Asbury Park was involved and Asbury Park High School was just one single high school. The action also had an impact upon the public school systems in Long Branch, Red Bank, Freehold, and most of the townships along the shore where most of the students in one particular

classroom or school facility or district were predominately segregated. I guess that initiative had an impact upon my concern and interest not only for the educational opportunities, but also for the employment opportunities at Fort Monmouth, and then the area of housing opportunities. During that particular time, the late 1950s and early 1960s, the federal government was making available to veterans in particular an opportunity to purchase houses under the GI Bill of Rights. But most of New Jersey and most of the cities and townships and municipalities in New Jersey in fact were denying equal housing opportunities to African Americans. I, not only because I had the right under the GI Bill of Rights, but also as an American citizen, felt that I should be able to purchase a home in the area which I could afford, without discrimination. I ventured out to exercise that right, but was denied, and in 1959 I filed a complaint with the local realtor or developer who was building homes in the Township of Neptune exclusively for white home owners. We eventually had to venture into court procedures, even to the extent that we had it involved as a final jurisdiction the State Supreme Court. So it was three to five years that we pursued this case, and in the Supreme Court we were victorious, and our home was built in all white housing development. As a result of that, it had an impact on the area as far as the housing opportunities of residents and the Township of Neptune, and also on the surrounding communities and also throughout the state of New Jersey.

Mrs. West: Do you still find this existing now? This was forty years ago.

Mr. Jones: Well there's no question about it, there has been progress. As I said before, when we pursued our housing complaint, I think at the time there were six developments going up in Neptune Township and all of the prospective homeowner buyers were white. As a result of that, with the developments being built not only in Levittown, New Jersey (the biggest developer in the state of New Jersey), but also in Freehold and Red Bank and Long Branch and Asbury Park, there were opportunities available. There was an increase in opportunities available for African Americans. There has been a tremendous change in the County of Monmouth as far as housing opportunities are concerned, and not only with respect to the individual pursuits by African Americans. The Civil Rights Division's goal is to eliminate discrimination, not only in education and employment, but also in housing. So the Neptune decision has had an impact not only immediately, but also throughout New Jersey and the country. There are still certain incidents where housing discrimination may appear, but I think we all agree and share the point of view that the opportunities for equality of home ownership have improved over the years in Monmouth County.

Mrs. West: Are there any other historical events that have happened over your lifetime in the county?

Mr. Jones: Oh, yes. I can think of another specific area that I have been involved in in Monmouth County that has had an impact upon the county and the municipalities surrounding Monmouth County. It goes back to 1964 when the

federal government had a pursuit against poverty. As a component of this pursuit against poverty program, the Head Start program began. This was a program for disadvantaged preschool children that provided them an opportunity to get a head start before they started public schools. In the Township of Neptune, the act was passed in 1963. The implementation of the Head Start program depended on the facilities available. It was felt at the time, particularly in Neptune Township, that during the summer when most of our schools are closed, that the school should be made available for Head Start participants. Sadly, we and the parents had to prevail upon the local Board of Education to provide these facilities for Head Start children. It was necessary to demonstrate our concern by having demonstrations in front of the Board of Education to prevail upon them to make the schools available for Head Start. As a result of that, in the Township of Neptune, there was a Head Start program in 1964 and it exists today in 1999. I have been involved in it since then. I've been a member of the Board of Trustees for that program over all of these years, and it has had an impact upon the children, particularly those disadvantaged children, not only in Monmouth County, but also in the surrounding areas. We have thirteen centers throughout Monmouth County, and in Freehold, Keansburg, Red Bank, and Long Branch; we are serving over 500 disadvantaged children by providing Head Start services for them. It involved, in the initial program, implementation by the Board of Chosen Freeholders in Monmouth County, who were strong participants and who provided financial support and facilities for the Head Start program.

Mrs. West: Besides the advancements in education, what are your most prominent memories of Monmouth County?

Mr. Jones: Well, as far as the county is concerned, there may have been some times that I, as a resident of Monmouth County, have been dissatisfied and viewed some of the things which occurred in Monmouth County unfavorably. But I realized that politics is part of it, so I've been involved in that also. I served on the State Committee as a member of the Democratic party and I served locally, and I have found that as far as Monmouth County is concerned, politically it has provided opportunities. There have been changes and I think that all of this has been done in order to improve the quality of life in Monmouth County, which I have experienced since my early childhood to the end of this century.

Mrs. West: What would you say has been your greatest achievement?

Mr. Jones: I guess my greatest achievements would be in three areas: education, housing, and employment. I think I have demonstrated concern and interest and a sensitivity for these three areas of life here in Monmouth County. I had the opportunity to work towards the equality of employment opportunities based upon the person's abilities rather than his or her skin color. The second area has undoubtedly been education, which is very important, because it has had an effect upon my life and my progress, and on what I've been able to

achieve. I think it's a key element as far as youngsters are concerned, and this has been borne out of my many years with the Head Start program. I think the final area of accomplishment, and I think this is essential to any quality of life, particularly as far as the African Americans are concerned, relates to ownership of a home and housing opportunities. I have been involved in these three specific areas which I think have had an impact upon not only myself as a resident of Monmouth County, but I think on all African Americans as far as those three areas are concerned.

Mrs. West: If you had a map of your life in Monmouth County, would it be a rocky road map with ups and downs?

Mr. Jones: And that's expected, yes. Those things that I have experienced in my life in Monmouth County, you can anticipate to occur particularly if you're an African American and you are seeking out all those opportunities and rights and privileges that everyone else enjoys. So, I've seen some very unpleasant times that we have experienced in housing as far as neighbors and how they view someone different from themselves. I think those experiences that go along with the challenge for equality of educational opportunities in the classroom are expected, because it is noticeable when the child sitting next to another child is different from him or her. Discrimination is expected, because we all are human beings. We all have those same instincts and desires to move ahead and so forth, but all of those, if you want to call them, rocky roads exist. They not only have existed for me as an individual and an activist, but I think they exist for a lot of people who have that desire to move forward and to progress and to demonstrate their abilities and capabilities.

Mrs. West: What would you say is the most unusual thing about you?

Mr. Jones: Well, I don't know. Some of the things that I've said and how I've said them. There are times when I feel that it would be better not to say anything. I think I've been successful as far as all of that is concerned, because, you know, it's just like anyone else who's out there challenging things, objecting, demonstrating, making allegations, and all of those things. I think it takes a particular person. I've always felt that I have to be that person who has that type of charisma, which is necessary for solving human problems, and I think I've reached that goal.

Mrs. West: As a member of the Township and also of the County, I'm sure you must be aware of the respect and high esteem that the people have for you. And the high regard for you; this must make you feel very good.

Mr. Jones: Yes, I've heard that, but I think sometimes I've been involved in areas probably that I should not have been involved in. I can recall in the Township of Neptune that a lot of people viewed my involvement in trying to break down the barriers in the volunteer fire company as ridiculous and not necessary, because

nobody had to volunteer for it. But all that is a part of the quality life, and there are youngsters I feel certain who would have liked to become firemen but couldn't, because volunteer firemen, as I was growing up, were all white. There was no Black fireman that I can recall when I went to public schools, but still I felt that that was a part of society that should be available to all.

Mrs. West: As an activist in the community through the years, are there any particular headlines that stand out in your mind that might have provoked you to work on certain things or subjects?

Mr. Jones: Yes, I guess I'll have to refer back to those three areas because as far as the issue of the fact of segregation was concerned, that was a very sensitive issue. I think it had an impact on a lot of the residents of Neptune Township because it involved children, and it involved busing, and it involved a neighborhood school. We had incidents with the Board of Education to get them to realize that equality of educational opportunities did not exist. That was a tremendous area I think. I think it was because of those in the white community who shared the concern that yes, equal opportunity was provided. As far as discrimination in employment is concerned, I go back to Monmouth County particularly when they opened up the Freehold Raceway. This was a raceway in Monmouth County; the first, although it was harness racing, it was a raceway. A couple years after they were in operation, there were still no African Americans at any of the windows -- the teller windows, or the paramutual window, or anything. There was a person I sought out in the African American community to be the first person to be at one of those windows at the racetracks in Freehold Raceway.

Mrs. West: In what way is your life different or your mindset different? Have you accomplished all you set out to do, or do you want to accomplish more?

Mr. Jones: I think I have accomplished most of the goals that I set, and as I said before, those goals were in those three areas and I think that in all of them I have been successful. I think that the accomplishment in all of them has only come about because of concern, dedication, and most of all perseverance. I think that's been a quality I possess. If I set a goal, it may be difficult, but I feel I have to persevere. That probably comes from my involvement with the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity in college, because of those four cardinal principles of that fraternity. I've been involved in that fraternity since 1948, which is about fifty years. Those four cardinal principles have not only been gratifying as far as my accomplishments in the fraternity are concerned, but as they relate to society and real life and what I'm trying to accomplish. The cardinal principles of our fraternity are manhood, scholarship, perseverance, and uplift. I've tried to demonstrate them all in my life here in Monmouth County.

Mrs. West: You have received many awards. Is there any award that stands out in your mind more than another?

Mr. Jones: No. I view them all as equal. I spent fourteen years for example as a member of the Planning Board Township of Neptune where I had an opportunity to become involved in the planning of the Township. Those years were gratifying to me, and I was recognized for my accomplishments. During the Civil Rights Movement in the County of Monmouth, the Board of Chosen Freeholders were following what I was doing and what I had hoped to achieve and so forth. They recognized me, and Congress recognized me, and the representatives of the Township bestowed a single achievement upon me. The Township of Neptune recognizes and honors those students who graduated from Neptune Township High School and have achieved something after their graduation. I was selected as one of the first honorees in the Neptune Township Hall of Fame. I think that was an outstanding recognition. I think I have been recognized particularly in those three areas we discussed: my achievements at Fort Monmouth and employment, my housing encounter, and my educational pursuits. My local church in Asbury Park has been my church for these seventy odd years. I commenced as a teacher of a Sunday school. I was an usher. I replaced a person as Superintendent of Schools who had served for thirty years. I've been on the Board of Trustees of the church and served as its Chairperson for the last fifteen or twenty years. My faith and my religious participation have been a part of my life.

Mrs. West: With all this hard work for the County of Monmouth, did you pursue any hobbies to rest your mind?

Mr. Jones: I'm not a golfer. I enjoy and I guess my hobby would be more or less landscaping, building things in a home, watching sports; all of those have been a part of my hobbies.

Mrs. West: You beautified the county.

Mr. Jones: I hope so, I hope so.

Mrs. West: Anything else you want to say?



Ermon Jones with his wife, Blanche

Mr. Jones: I look back on my early childhood and how I was raised: my family and their concern and their interest in the things that we as youngsters did at that time as compared to what youngsters do now. Over the many years, I feel somewhat proud of myself and the things that I have done. I sincerely believe that they have had an impact upon other individuals and other residents in the County of Monmouth.

Mrs. West: Looking at Monmouth County, I can say they surely have. I appreciate you giving us this time and I'm

sure that there will be young people in the future who can take a lot from what you had to say. I thank you.