



Interview with Warren Booth

Under the Auspices of the
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Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Name of Ms. West: June West
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Ms. West: Good morning Mr. Booth. Thank you for giving us this interview. Please tell us a little bit about your early history, please.

Mr. Booth: I was the second son of Eugenia and Russell Booth. I had two brothers and a cousin who was also raised by my parents. We lived in Red Bank, New Jersey. Right after the Depression, we were taught many skills and different things by our parents. My mother was very, very keen on us all becoming educated. During our early childhood, we all showed an interest in sports. On the high school level, we all played basketball and other sports. All of us received scholarships to college, and all of us graduated from college.



Warren Booth and his wife, Sonya

Ms. West: You were educated in Red Bank, New Jersey?

Mr. Booth: Yes, in Red Bank, New Jersey. My older brother went to Howard University, I was at West Virginia State, my brother Russell went to Syracuse, and my baby brother went to Dartmouth. We all completed school and came back to various areas to live.

Ms. West: Could you tell us something about your childhood in Red Bank?

Mr. Booth: There are several people who were very key in the Red Bank area. They were key people to me. One was Dr. Parker, Sr. He was an idol to me and to mostly everyone else in Red Bank.

Ms. West: Why was this?

Mr. Booth: Well, not only did he give me birth, but his views and opinions were so tremendous. I used to go home at night and go over whatever he would say to me. Sometimes I would go to visit him after school and just talk to him, to hear his views. He was a very intelligent man.

Ms. West: So he had a profound interest in youngsters and in your life?

Mr. Booth: Yes. He gave a lot of information to me and to my brothers. He was also instrumental in telling all youngsters that they needed an education. I was so happy that I was able to share his life. After completing high school, I went to West Virginia College and then came back to this area, not knowing just what I wanted to do. So I went to work doing various kinds of things. When the opportunity came about teaching, I applied for a job at Red Bank Regional High School.

Ms. West: And what year was that?

Mr. Booth: In 1957, I think it was. And then I also started coaching track. An opening came in basketball, so I applied to be the head coach in basketball at Red Bank Regional High School. I received that job, and I coached for fifteen years there. I coached the track team for twenty-some years also. During that time, I had the pleasure to send many a youngster to college on scholarships. As of now, they come back and the feedback is tremendous. I have a tremendous feeling to see and hear from them.

Ms. West: So what locations in Monmouth County will have a personal significance to you?

Mr. Booth: All of them in this county.

Ms. West: And why is that?

Mr. Booth: Because I could see how it goes. When I was a youngster coming up, there were very few vocations that a person could choose from. Most of the areas here in Monmouth County were farm areas, and that was the main type of vocation for people in this area. We had one or two factories that you could work in. But to see how things just grew from the land is unbelievable.

Ms. West: So did you travel extensively throughout the county?

Mr. Booth: Yes. I have traveled over most of the county. I adore some parts of it.

Some parts where the farmlands were are not farmlands anymore. But I can still look back and identify them. Red Bank also had a very, very important thing that I was proud to be a part of. They used to have a professional baseball field in Red Bank. We used to see all the professional Negro teams play here. We used to see House of Davids, Satchell Paige, Josh Gibson, and just the gamut of all the players. They had night baseball there, also. As youngsters, we used to play there.

Ms. West: This is a field that just Negro teams played on?

Mr. Booth: No, all teams played on it. But I did have the privilege of seeing some of the great Negro teams play there.

Ms. West: And that's in Red Bank, right?

Mr. Booth: It was in Red Bank, but it's not there anymore. It's a housing development now. A lot of changes happened in the area. As I said, Dr. Parker was my idol. Coming up, I used to wonder why. When I was young, I didn't look at things like I do now. But I noticed that most of the people in Red Bank were either homeowners or intending to buy. You didn't have any hotels, and you didn't have any places for people to live other than a home. And I thought at first that was a bad thing. And then one day I was discussing with Dr. Parker the impact it would have on Red Bank to have other kinds of housing here. And he said we didn't need any low-income housing in Red Bank. He said if we got it, they would put it on the West Side of Red Bank.



**Dr. James
Parker, Sr.**

Ms. West: Why the West Side?

Mr. Booth: Well, that's where most of the Negroes lived, on the West Side. And Dr. Parker said we didn't want that here. He said that would be when Red Bank would lose control of Red Bank. And I didn't realize what he was saying to me. I heard the words, but I didn't know what it meant. It had no impact on me. So as I grew older, I kept that in my mind. And then I watched Red Bank accept loans and grants from the government, and then they put up a low-rent project. And I saw Red Bank deteriorate.

Ms. West: And it was put up on the West Side, as Dr. Parker had said?

Mr. Booth: On the West Side. That's where they built it, so his foresight was tremendous. He knew the outcome. It was unbelievable. As I got older, my parents passed on, and I moved back into the home where I was born. And this was after this project was built. I stayed there two years, and I couldn't sleep at night with all the noise, etc. And then I knew exactly what Dr. Parker had meant. And Red Bank couldn't control it, because federal money was put into this project. And then the government controls things like that. People then lost interest in their homes. Prior to

that people took pride in their homes and property. After the project you could see a decline in Red Bank. I have always said that was a tremendous decline, and I was forewarned of it by Dr. Parker. He said it would happen, and it sure did. It was a very sad situation. I moved to Tinton Falls, and stayed there for about twenty-five years. Then I moved to Neptune. When I first married, I had to live in Neptune because it was the only place where you could get an apartment. There were no other apartments. There were none in Red Bank and none anywhere else.

Ms. West: So you are saying that was the only place you could get an apartment. Could you elaborate on that, please?

Mr. Booth: We had no places for Blacks to live. There were no apartment buildings for Black people to live. I am going back into the 1950s, and there were no homes, either. We were told many times, "Why would you want a home?" or "You would have to have too much money" and all kinds of different things to discourage us from buying a home. But it was hard even to get an apartment. You had to put your name down, they had to interview you, and getting an apartment was like buying a house. But Neptune was the only place where young Blacks could rent an apartment.

Ms. West: Entertainment-wise, what did Black people do in the county? Was there anything here for them?

Mr. Booth: Oh, yes. Musically, you could always find entertainment. We used to go to the theatres, and mostly the nightclubs in Asbury. You could get entertainment if you liked music. Your theatres had entertainment as well, like Long Branch and Asbury, and sometimes in Red Bank. The Count Basie Theatre sometimes had entertainment. It used to be called the Carlton Theatre. Every so often they would give a show or would have some type of a talent.

Ms. West: Live entertainment.

Mr. Booth: Mostly the entertainment was live back then. We saw Bo Jangles. Most of the entertainers would come to this area because of the shore. And we used to see them then. We had an Armory in Asbury Park where you could go and see live entertainment. Every Friday and Saturday night, they would have somebody there singing or playing. And that's the way we received our entertainment, unless we went to New York.

Ms. West: Going back to your youth before we get too far into our conversation, what type of student were you? Did you like school or have any particular interests or favorite subjects?

Mr. Booth: I liked school, not as much as I should have as a youngster. I was a boy that loved outdoor activity. I had a boat at a young age, and I used to spend time out on the boat with my dog. I went fishing, hunting, and those kinds of things. I could have spent more time studying, as I look back now.

Ms. West: So where would you take your boat?

Mr. Booth: Oh, we would go all up and down the Navesink River. Sometimes we would go all the way down to Sea Bright on the river. And sometimes we would take it and go up all the way up to Shadow Lake up to the Pike.

Ms. West: Where was Shadow Lake?

Mr. Booth: That's the lake up in Lincroft. We used to follow the river where it meanders all around, and I had a little kayak, so I was able to pick it up and carry it. It was a little two-seater, so it made it nice. When I went to college, I left it for my brother, and he ripped it. And that was the end of the kayak.

Ms. West: So you have good memories of your youth?

Mr. Booth: Yes, I do. We had a lot of areas that we could play baseball, football, basketball, etc.

Ms. West: What were your favorite games to play?

Mr. Booth: I used to like basketball, and swimming I loved. Every summer they used to have swimming down at the boat races in Red Bank. A couple of years I won a race down there.

Ms. West: And what boat races were these? Did they have a name?

Mr. Booth: Regatta. And after the Regatta, they used to have swimming races for youngsters in the area. And it was a big thing for the kids back then.

Ms. West: Who sponsored that?

Mr. Booth: The town of Red Bank. They sponsored most of the activities back then. There was not a Parks and Recreation Department back then, but it was the borough that sponsored those activities. Now you have activities sponsored by your different clubs in Red Bank, and the YMCA sponsors a lot of activities. So the youngsters are able to get a good outlook.

Ms. West: Do you have any keepsakes or memorabilia from your youth?

Mr. Booth: No, I played on an all-star team when I was in high school. I played with some guys in college who were tremendous athletes, and I had the privilege to play with them. One of them played in the NBA and went on to become a coach of the Detroit Pistons. I had a brother who was very, very high in the eyes of people in the professional sport of basketball until the War broke out.

Ms. West: World War II?

Mr. Booth: No, the Korean War or Conflict. After that, he decided he had better raise a family and just didn't bother with it anymore.

Ms. West: Did you like to read books or anything when you were a youngster?

Mr. Booth: Yes, I did. I liked to read, believe it or not.

Ms. West: Did you have a favorite author?

Mr. Booth: Shakespeare was great. Books were precious. One book that we had to read was the Bible. We spent a lot of time reading that. I used to have to go and read to my uncle almost two or three times a week. He would insist that we do that. And he used to check us out on our reading.

Ms. West: Before the advent of television, did you have any favorite radio programs?

Mr. Booth: We only had one: we used to listen to *The Lone Ranger*. I think it came on three times a week, and we were only allowed to listen to it one night a week. We had to do our studies and homework, and we had chores to do. We didn't have time for too much radio. I had to go to choir practice, and things were different then. Then you had to involve yourself in different kinds of things like choir, which would take two nights a week. Then you had school activities you were involved in, like we were involved in basketball, and that would be two nights a week. Saturday night, more or less, you would spend with the family or went visiting. And Sunday was church.

Ms. West: You come from a very close-knit family with a very strong background.

Mr. Booth: Oh, yes, very close. Years ago, your mother was the ruler of the house. She was the ruler and your father was the enforcer. Our mother was five foot eleven and she could take care of each and all of us. She had a pretty good size on her, so we obeyed her.

Ms. West: Did you have any heroes or heroines?

Mr. Booth: I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Parker's wife's cousin in West Virginia. He was a doctor, and his name was Dr. Jones. He was like Dr. Parker, and he was one of the first Black professionals in Charleston, West Virginia. He was a dentist, and Dr. Parker was a doctor. I used to leave campus and go to Dr. Jones' office on Saturdays and visit and talk to him. He used to inspire me, when I was in West Virginia. He was quite a man. I spent a lot of time around older people, and I have always had that feeling for older people. I felt I could learn so much from them. Years ago, I thought that the younger people would be playing and distracting me from what was going on, but you could get knowledge and learn things from the older people. So I spent a lot of time with older people. Today, I also do.

Ms. West: I was thinking of Dr. Parker in medicine. How has the practice of medicine changed here in the county from when you were a youngster?

Mr. Booth: Dr. Parker would come out to your house years ago. I thought that was tremendous. He would be right there. Before you could get off the phone, he would be right there taking care of you. And he took care of all of Red Bank and other places, as well. But medicine has progressed, and his son is a tremendous doctor and person, as well.

Ms. West: And he is still practicing.

Mr. Booth: Yes, I enjoy talking to him. We both have an interest in jazz, and I listen to a lot of jazz.

Ms. West: Do you remember the first movie that you ever saw?

Mr. Booth: I would rather go play basketball or football. I'm still not a movie person. My children and grandchildren go to movies. But myself, I'm not a movie person. When I used to go to the movies, the movies used to watch me. I wouldn't watch the movies. That's like television. If it's not something that has a lot of activity to it, it will watch me. I won't watch it too long.

Ms. West: Who is the first President that you remember?

Mr. Booth: Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Ms. West: What do you remember about him?

Mr. Booth: I thought he was a tremendous man.

Ms. West: And why was that?

Mr. Booth: Some of the things he did for the working class of people. WPA and different programs that he instituted.

Ms. West: And what was the WPA?

Mr. Booth: It was a work program for people who are unable to have jobs. They created jobs in Monmouth County, where there was a big work program.

Ms. West: And you remember the New Deal?

Mr. Booth: Oh, yes. I remember some of Roosevelt's speeches, especially the war speeches. He said he didn't like war, no one in his family did, and even his dog didn't like war.

Ms. West: This is World War II you are referring to?

Mr. Booth: Yes. I thought he was a very good President.

Ms. West: You say you like jazz. Did you always like jazz?

Mr. Booth: I always loved music, and my middle name is Hayes. My mother said that is because she thought I was going to be a singer because I used to holler all the time. So she said she would name me after Roland Hayes.

Ms. West: Oh, ok, now I see the significance.

Mr. Booth: But I cannot sing, I can only listen. And I listen quite a bit.

Ms. West: As a teacher in Red Bank, how long were you an educator? And did you always work in the Red Bank school system?

Mr. Booth: Always in the Red Bank school system.

Ms. West: In the high school?

Mr. Booth: Yes, always at Red Bank Regional High School. It was Red Bank High School, and then it changed over to Red Bank Regional when the three towns came together. I became the first Negro basketball coach in Monmouth County. I had quite a few experiences when that happened; so did my team and people in the area.

Ms. West: Please relate them.

Mr. Booth: There was the experience of people accepting the fact that Black people could coach as well as anybody else. On one occasion, I had the misfortune of almost having a riot at one of our games. It wasn't by our team or my players or anything, it was started by this other team calling names to our players. Our team was a mixed team, white and Black. One of the white youngsters came over to me when they called time out, and he said, "Coach, you better speak to that other coach because their team members are calling our guys some bad names. The names are such that I'm becoming mad." I did call time out, and I spoke to the coach about it. He said, "Oh, my guys would never do anything like that." And I told him the young man who told me this was not lying; he wouldn't lie about something like that. So I asked him to please speak to his team about it. We came down here to play basketball, and this isn't a name-calling contest. It went on such that it got very heated, and we were winning the game. Then the other team really became upset and started name calling worse than before, and it got out of hand. We had to call the game. It was very unfortunate, and it was the worst experience I ever had as a coach. And that was in basketball. Coaching track, I never ran into anything like that.

Ms. West: What year was that, do you recall?

Mr. Booth: About 1975.

Ms. West: Oh, that recent?

Mr. Booth: Oh yes. It was very bad. But we never had that problem coaching track, because it's more of an individual thing with running, throwing, or jumping. I think you had a better attitude when you are involved in track.

Ms. West: Yes, because you wouldn't call that a contact sport. Is that the reason?

Mr. Booth: That's one of the reasons, I think so. I was fortunate to be asked to go out to Colorado Springs to the Olympic Training Center twice, and that was another great experience. I had several youngsters who were competing on the national level, and I went out there.

Ms. West: Who picked you to go?

Mr. Booth: The Olympic Training Center.

Ms. West: But who sent you?

Mr. Booth: The school sent me after the invitation that my athlete and I received. They had a very profitable fundraiser and they sent us out. I went out with the young lady who is now Assistant Dean of the University of Virginia.

Ms. West: You have never spoken of your family...your wife, your children, etc.

Mr. Booth: I have eight children.

Ms. West: Eight?

Mr. Booth: Yes, eight children, eleven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

Ms. West: How long have you been married?

Mr. Booth: Well, this time I have been married twelve years to my wife, Sonya. We don't have any children together, but she has children by a previous marriage, as I have. All of her children and mine have finished school, and the youngest one is going to college now. So we are very happy for that. Now we just try to spend time with the kids. We visit them and the grandkids.

Ms. West: Do any of them live locally?



Warren and Sonya Booth with Mr. Booth's grandchildren

Mr. Booth: We have two in this area, but they are all over the world.

Ms. West: I guess like most families, the world has become so small. Before you had one little nucleus, and that's where generations were. But not any more.

Mr. Booth: The family stayed in one place years ago.

Ms. West: What would you say is your greatest achievement in life?

Mr. Booth: I try to help others. I have always tried to help youngsters, and I have spent a lot of time with young people. During my years, I have done just about anything you could do with a youngster, like the Boy Scouts, teaching them how to play sports, and how to become better people. You always have to bring in that power of belief. And youngsters, to me, are very, very fascinating. I spend a lot of time with young people.

Ms. West: Did you ever have any hobbies?

Mr. Booth: I had several. One is that I like to collect jazz albums, records. I like to do that. That's my main hobby.

Ms. West: Who are your favorite jazz artists?

Mr. Booth: I like all your older artists, like Basie, Ellington, Sarah, and Ella.

Ms. West: So Count Basie, Sarah Vaughan, and Duke Ellington. Two hundred years from today, someone will pull this up, and we need their full names because they may not know them.

Mr. Booth: Count Basie was from Red Bank. They used to call him the Red Bank Kid. Duke Ellington. And Sarah Vaughan was from Newark. Then you had Ella Fitzgerald, and that is another favorite of mine. One of the younger ones that I like is Kenny G. I love Kenny G, he is tremendous. And I have several others.

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

Mr. Booth: Unusual? The ability to listen. I like to listen.

Ms. West: That is unusual, because most of us don't have that ability.

Mr. Booth: I like to listen, and that's why I like older people. I used to let them do the talking, and they used to like people to listen to them. And I am a very good listener.

Ms. West: You are a rare breed.

Mr. Booth: Young people like to talk today. So I can listen to them. I have a date

with my granddaughter in a little while. I like to take her out to dinner, and I know she is going to be talking.

Ms. West: If you had to describe your life as a roadmap, how would you describe it? Smooth? Rocky? Up and down?

Mr. Booth: Well, it wasn't too smooth. I would say it was just like any other road that you would travel down. You have your ins and outs and your ups and downs. But it wasn't too smooth. But then again, when you look at it, life has been smooth. The fact that I wake up every day is the most positive thing that I know. It gives me a chance at the wonderful things that are here, so it gives me another shot at things. So I enjoy the fact that I am waking up.

Ms. West: As you look back over your life and see the things that you have accomplished, have you accomplished the things that you thought you would? Did you do what you thought you would be doing? When you were sitting down as a child and doing a little bit of dreaming, has any of that come to pass or is it completely different?

Mr. Booth: Well, I hope I never reach the point in my life where I say that I have completed everything. There still are so many things I would like to do.

Ms. West: Such as...

Mr. Booth: Help people.

Ms. West: Help them in what regard?

Mr. Booth: Help all people to get along, first of all. To help them understand and listen. Those things are so important; to love one another is important. These are the kinds of things I don't think we are experiencing in life today. I try to let most of the people I come in contact with know that, and I tell them to pass it along to anybody they know. I just hope I can continue.

Ms. West: If a youngster came to you today, or one of your grandchildren, what kind of advice would you give them?

Mr. Booth: First of all, I would tell them that you have to honor your parents and obey them. That is the first starting point. You have to believe in yourself. If you can believe in yourself and believe in God, then you can believe you can do something. I also would tell them that you have to strive for the highest point that you think you can make. The only way to do that is by studying and learning as much as possible. As you said, that's where you want to start. You can learn so much on the Internet. And we try to impress that on our children. I try to get on the Internet every day so I can learn something new. I like it. So I would tell the youngsters to learn as much as they possibly can.

Ms. West: What would you say are the milestones in your life?

Mr. Booth: That's a hard question. I don't look at life as milestones. I look at it as if I have never done enough, and I never can do enough. Accomplishments, I don't look at them too well. I think those are things that we all should do, things that we must do. Whatever I have that I can offer to another person, I just do it. And it's done out of my heart. And I don't look for any reward or recognition or anything. I don't think we should look for those things.

Ms. West: What important legacy would you have to leave to your family, friends, or whomever?

Mr. Booth: As I tell my family and children, spend as much time with the people you care for when they are alive, regardless of where they are. You make a point to go visit them and spend time with them. You love them, and you love everybody that you come in contact with. Love is a very important thing. It's very, very important.

Ms. West: What point of your life, if any, would you like to relive?

Mr. Booth: I feel as if I'm just starting to live right now. (laughter) So the rest of my life I would love to relive. As I said before, every day is a blessing. So I would love to relive the rest of my life. I would not go back and change anything, I don't believe in that. I would just like to continue.

Ms. West: What major changes have you seen in the county and in the country over your lifetime, or as part of your life, because you have a long way to go yet?

Mr. Booth: One of the things I am still trying to deal with is the lack of respect that children and youngsters show to their parents today. That bothers me. Another thing that bothers me is that you take a youngster today and tell them they don't have to salute the flag if they don't want to. They don't have to say prayers if they don't want to. And then we stand up in court, and the first thing they tell you do is to raise your hand, put it on the Bible, and say, "So help you God." And they swear you in. To me, that's a double standard. They take all the stuff out of school, but when you get out of school it's different. Any time you want to make a law or something like that, you have to swear yourself in with "So help me, God." I am very disturbed over that. I'm still working on that, and I have a long way to go to understand that. But I hope I will some day.

Ms. West: Having said that, what are your deepest values?

Mr. Booth: Well, I love to love people. I think that's probably my deepest value. I try to respect people, and that is respect for all people. When I was in college, there was a group of us fellows that got together, and we had an organization that dealt with all people. I don't like these organizations that deal with just some people. I think everybody should be included in whatever you do. Race has nothing to do with

it, and color has nothing to do with it. Religion has nothing to do with it. It's all people. I think if you would look at a person just as a person, we'd be better off than looking at different races. We are all human. I got in trouble over that once. I wrote that on my paper in college. When it asked what race I belonged to, I wrote the human race. And man, I really got laid out for that! They thought I was being smart. But I wasn't really being smart, that is the way I felt about that situation. We are all human beings, and that is the only race that I know. But we have a long way to go with that race thing.

Ms. West: Oh, yes.

Mr. Booth: I think one day it will come about that we are just one human race. And it would be a fantastic thing.

Ms. West: What are your personal strengths?

Mr. Booth: The ability to know that I have my wife on my side. She is one of my strengths and plays an important part in my life. Another one of my strengths is the ability to look at things and try to see a positive point in whatever the situation might be. If there is something to do, then go do it. Don't wait around for someone else to do it.

Ms. West: About eight months ago everyone was talking about the new millennium and expecting great changes and hoping for wonderful things to happen. What are your expectations and hopes for this millennium?

Mr. Booth: As I said before, for people to get along together. That's my main expectation. I would like to see all people get along, everybody. That is one thing I would love to see.

Ms. West: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Mr. Booth: No, just thank you for this opportunity.