

Mr. JORDAN: Well, to begin with I guess, I was a senior in high school at High School in Atlanta, an over-crowded, segregated high school, and there was one who was considered a pretty smart boy, voted the most intellectual in his class, active in everything - the student newspaper, athletics, and all of the scholastic activities around the school - and also was one who through the years had no idea or no thoughts, I guess due to conditions and circumstances, of ever attending an integrated school, north or south. It was in the - oh, about the first of November or December -

RPW: What year was this, now?

VJ: This was in 1952 - the school year 1952-53, when a man who was on leave from ^{Howard}Harvard/University came to the high school, representing the National Services Scholarship Fund for Negro students. His mission was to interest allegedly promising or scholarly Negro students, ~~and~~ⁱⁿ attending integrated schools in the North. My teachers, my principal, my counselors in high school felt that I ought to talk to this man, Mr. Paul Lawrence.

RPW: Just hold it now - I have to make a check on voice, just to be sure we're doing all right. Yes, just go ahead - that's fine. Mr. Lawrence, was it?

VJ: Mr. Lawrence - on leave from Howard University, as I understand

it, came and spent a good bit of time explaining to us what was involved in an integrated school, what we might expect, and generally trying to generate enthusiasm on the part of myself and other - my classmates. I became intensely interested - I guess it was to some extent - it gratified my ego - it substantuated some feelings of superiority, I guess, over my fellow students. This in a sense to me is a young high school senior, made me - convinced me that - helped me to believe that I was as smart as my grades or my teachers might have thought I was. Mr. Lawrence recommended to me a list of schools, specifically, Yale or Dartmouth College and duPaul University. I was primarily interested in Dartmouth, I had seen stories and pictures of its winter carnival, I had talked to its - members of its alumni in Atlanta, president of the local alumni association, and he said, we have ten boys in Atlanta who have applied for admission to Dartmouth, and we have a little scholarship money, and we'd be happy to give you this scholarship money, be it ever so limited, because we feel that if you, as a Negro, could get exposed to a Dartmouth education, that you might be able to return South and be of some benefit to your people. Now, as I reflect on what Mr. Fortuna, who was an officer of the Citizens Southern National Bank of Atlanta - I'm not really sure what he meant by "come back and help your people" - I'm not so sure that today, having finished school, law school and college, that I might not resent his statement to come back and help your people.

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RPW: Do you think he knew what he meant?

VJ: I'm not certain. I'm not sure if he meant to come back and help your people to clean my house better or to take care of my children better or in a better fashion, or whether he meant to come back and make democracy really live in the South.

RPW: He probably couldn't know, could he? He could know on reflection - he was not thinking about making you a better yard man. He could not mean that.

VJ: No, but he - he kind of acted as if he felt that if I had gone to Dartmouth I would come back and I could be an exceptional school principal or a good school teachers. I was never sure that he envisioned my leaving Dartmouth College, going to the Harvard Law School, coming back, becoming -

RPW: But you are a lawyer.

VJ: Well, yes. Well, not so much that, but I'm never sure that even with a Dartmouth degree and a Harvard diploma that he would have appreciated my being a junior ~~in~~ law partner or a law clerk to the general counsel of the Bank. I feel certain that what he meant by my helping my people would be to come back and assume some position or some role of leadership in the Negro community, wherein I would have assumed a kind of Booker Washington role in the Atlanta community. Do you want to stop this for a while - a moment? (interruption) Surely - I get the ice and stuff and the waters can help themselves. I'm just not really certain what the man meant, but he did say to me that of the ten

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boys, you're the only Negro, and we have some notion that if you get up there because of your essential mission, that you might do better scholastically than your white counterparts or classmates would do. He pointed out also that the scholastic record of white graduates of the high schools in Atlanta at Dartmouth was not very good, and of course, now in retrospect, I would attribute this to a quality of Southern education as compared with the general qualifications and college preparedness of the average Dartmouth student. I think that he was addressing himself more to that than some sloth for this on the part of the high school students - white high school students in Atlanta. At any rate, I never went to Dartmouth although this was my great dream. I even now have to hope that should my wife and I be blessed with a son, that somehow or other I can instill in him some notion about Dartmouth. I have never quite gotten over the notion of not having gone to Dartmouth, but during the time of my application, my counselors in high school - it seems I was the first Negro in my school to apply to take the college board entrance exam, and there was some misunderstanding of the procedures. I remember quite vividly, my parents, in conjunction with other parents whose children had applied to schools like Sarah Lawrence and other schools in the East, requiring the college board entrance exam, trying to find out why their children could not be admitted to the exam to be given at Emory University on the next day, March 14th - I remember that quite well. I remember my displeasure, my hurt, my sorrow at not being able to take the exam,

at that time being filled with some notion - having no notion that the college board entrance exam would be extremely difficult for me, and that I would not make a score to qualify me for entrance at Dartmouth. At any rate, I did not get to go to Dartmouth, Dartmouth being a school which had chosen all the members of its freshman class April first. I did, however, get accepted at DePauw University, a small midwestern school in Green Castle, Indiana.

RPW: Let me interrupt - you did not take the examination at all?

VJ: I did not take the college board entrance exam at all. That's right.

RPW: It was not a refusal on the grounds of your examination - it was just that you had not -

VJ: I had not complied with the conditions precedent, and the condition precedent was to take the college entrance exam, and I had not done that.

RPW: Yes, that's what killed it.

VJ: That's right. I did, however, fly to DePauw and was accepted, and felt that - well, I always had the impression that if I didn't go to DePauw that the school would go to pot, - and by "go to pot" I mean that had not I gone to that campus that the school just couldn't have done without me. This impression you get from the tremendous response that you get from organizations campus-wise and even city-wise in Green Castle, Indiana. The two banks - the First Citizens Bank, as I remember - I'm not certain about the title - I'm certain about Central National Bank, because that's where I

ultimately opened up my checking account - but even the banks in town wrote you to say that we understand that you are a prospective DePauw student - we welcome you to Green Castle, and we welcome you to come in and be a part of not only the school but our bank and the town.

RPW: Let's check this now, just a moment, may we? (pause)

VJ: I received a - letters of invitation from every Greek letter fraternity on the DePauw campus - fraternities were given the list of prospective students, without regard to race. They wrote me inviting me up for dances, assured me that if I would come up for the weekend that I could have a date. Ironically, there were no Negro co-eds on the DePauw campus, and I know that had I shown up on the DePauw campus that there would have been great consternation. railroad station or at the bus station that this fellow Vernon Jordan turned out to be a Negro, and it would have created some problems for the fraternity inviting me. However, I did not go, but I did go - I did not go for the fraternity weekend, but I did go to DePauw to attend the educational guidance clinic which was sponsored by the admissions department in cooperation with the psychology department and other departments in the school. Well, I, along with - oh, maybe 60 other prospective college students, spent a week finding out what college was all about, taking the examinations that one usually takes as a part of the college orientation program. It was there that I became quite disconcerted that here Vernon Jordan, third in his class,

a young man who felt that he had been everywhere, seen everything and knew everybody, all of a sudden I found out that on the basis of my tests that I couldn't read, and I was reading less than 200 words a minute and my counselor at the guidance clinic suggested that I would probably do very well at a state-supported school, but he wasn't sure as to how well I would do in a private school, and suggested that, though while I was accepted, that I might even consider going to a state school or that I probably would do all right at DePauw if I took a reading course. So I returned home and took a reading course at Atlanta University. It was at that time that I experienced some little problem with my parents, and having indicated to them that I wanted to go to DePauw, and I indicated this to them, in spite of the fact that I had been told that - at DePauw, that my social life would be somewhat limited, that there were no Negro girls, the dating of white girls was taboo; I had also been told that I would have to go forty miles to Indianapolis to get my hair cut because Negroes weren't permitted to get their hair cuts in downtown Green Castle. I did not know at the time that the most popular barber in Green Castle was a Negro, who ultimately would not cut my hair because I was Negro. And he told me this in the presence of - well, while he was cutting a white student's hair.

RPW: He told you this - the barber told you this?

VJ: The barber told me this after I went to DePauw and my hair got long and I sought out a barber. And an upper classmate of

mine, a Negro, and I went into Barney's barber shop - or Bernie's barber shop, as I remember, and there sat a white boy in a chair, a Negro barber, had come from a segregated society where Negroes had always cut my hair, so this was commonplace with me. I said to him, I came in to see if I can get a haircut, and Bernie said to me, well, I'm sorry, but - in effect he said I don't cut colored folks' hair. This to me was a kind of -

RPW: Did he own the shop, or was he an employee?

VJ: He owned the shop - it was a shop that he had inherited from his father. He had been cutting hair in Green Castle twenty years before I got there, and Bernie said to me, no, I can't cut your hair, and - I can't cut your hair. He said this in effect, because you're colored. And my first reaction was to push Bernie through the window. I didn't push Bernie through the window, I just said thank you and left with a great sense of embarrassment and hurt. It was just something I never experienced before, a Negro telling me, while he's cutting a white man's hair, that he can't cut my hair because I'm Negro. This was a pretty bad experience. At any rate, I suffered through that and -

RPW: Do you think he suffered through it?

VJ: I don't - no, I don't think that Bernie, God rest his soul, suffered through that at all. I think that Bernie felt that he had to do this to placate his white clientele. Bernie was the best - at that time, the white boys at DePauw were ~~were~~ wearing crewcuts - crewcuts were very popular - Bernie was the best barber in town. A vast majority of the students went to Bernie for their

haircuts, but also, the better - more businessmen in Green Castle went to Bernie. The students told Bernie ~~km~~ it didn't make any difference whose hair he cut - just give him a good crewcut. Bernie felt some fidelity or loyalty to these students, and he just refused to cut Negroes' hair. The bulk of his business was student business because Bernie closed his shop in the summer, when students were away from town and away from the campus, and would only go to his shop upon request of the local businessmen in town who depended upon Bernie as they had depended upon his father to cut their hair. All this I told to my parents, and then one day I went home from a part time job during the summer and found a note on my bed where my mother says to me, very sweetly, Vernon, we love you and we want you to go to college where you want to go to college, but we kind of feel like if you went to Howard University, a predominantly Negro school in Washington, D.C., that academically, economically and socially you might be happier. But you go where you want to go. And I took them at their word and chose to go to DePauw.

RPW: What were their reasons for trying to steer you from DePauw?

VJ: Well, I think that here were Negro parents, both from rural communities in Georgia, both of whom had grandparents who were slaves, who to some extent conditioned to the Southern way of life. And were never quite accustomed, or could never quite adjust to the thought of their boy being even in Green Castle, Indiana, the only Negro in a class of 400 students, and they felt that their

boy, their baby, their prize, would be happier and would have less frustrations if he went to a predominantly Negro institution. They just felt that he would get along better, and that they would have less problems and fewer problems with him and he'd have less problems and fewer problems with his peers, or if he went to an all Negro school. I shall never forget my father, who on an occasion when I had brought a white boy from North Carolina home with me - and I forget Bob's first name, but Bob drove home with me and another white boy from Dublin, Georgia, and he couldn't get a bus out that night so he spent the night with me, and he slept in one twin bed, and my brother was away at school, and I slept in another. And in the middle of the night, my father got up out of bed and came in the room and turned on the light, and stood there with tears in his eyes, put the light out and went back to bed and said to my mother that, you know, this democracy thing is really here, and it's right here in my house. There in one bed is my own son, and in the other bed is a white boy from South Carolina, with a sharp Southern accent, who says yes, sir, and no, sir, and who eats grits with the same enjoyment as my boy, who likes biscuits and who likes sausage, and says to me, a colored man, yes, sir, and no, sir, and says to my wife, yes, ma'am, and no, ma'am. This for my father was a traumatic experience - something that -

RPW: Could you analyze the experience? looking back on it?

VJ: Well, I think that here again you have to look at this man's background. He was one of seventeen children -

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RPW: Your father?

VJ: My father, yes. From one of the worst counties in this state, Jasper County, Georgia - that's at Monticello. He had heard stories of people being lynched - I'm not so sure that he had not seen the results of brutalities there in Jasper County, who left home with a circus because he worked from sun-up to sun-down, his daddy got all of the money, who was a boy - a family of seventeen children - saw the entire family divide a watermelon which the mama and the papa took one half and the seventeen children divided the other half - a boy who never knew that the chicken had anything but feet or necks until such time that he got enough money to buy his own chicken, and he left home with a great sense of disillusionment and disappointment and really in a sense out of rebelliousness to the system under which his father found accommodating and a way of life in Jasper County, Georgia. I think that somewhere during that night, after having had dinner and conversations with this white boy from South Carolina, who seems to have been a good friend of his son -

RPW: I gather he was a decent, well mannered white boy -

VJ: Very well mannered, a boy who was not completely void of prejudices - I'm not so sure that I could have gone to his house and spent the night, and I'm sure that this to some extent bothered him, that here is this Negro boy from Georgia, who can extend to me these courtesies but I'm not so sure that I would receive the warmth and kindredness of - I'm not so sure that this warmth would be extended to him in my household. I think that Bob felt that - I'm not very

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certain that I could even approach my parents with the idea of bringing a Negro home - I'm not even sure that he told his folks that he had spent the night with Vernon Jordan, a colored boy who was in school with him up there. I can't say this with any certainty - this is just a kind of feeling that I have. At any rate, against the mild objections of my parents I went on to Green Castle. My parents took me to school, along with my younger brother - we all drove to Green Castle, and we did everything that the brochure says, from go to the tent on the other side of church on the DePauw campus - we were assigned housing - my parents stayed with the local Methodist minister, Elmer Harvey, who was very charming and very gracious. And I think that this in and of itself was a real experience for my parents - my father who was a government employee in mail service, my mother, who paid my tuition by making food tasty and pretty as a cateress. And had always been in a domestic role. This I think for them was a real experience - certainly it was unique and different. But they took me and they left me, and I shall never forget my dad just standing out in front of old college, saying goodbye, saying to me, son, you know everybody is looking for you to do well, and he said I expect more of you than they do, and I feel like you're going to do all right, and I'm glad you're here. And I think that after they got to the DePauw campus, after they experienced the friendliness, the warmth of the campus, and the open kindredness of the people, that they were satisfied that their boy had made a good choice, and that

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they had reared him right, they had reared him to do the right thing, to think pretty much the right thing, to conduct himself like a gentleman, and they were reasonably certain that he would do all right in this atmosphere. And I think they left - they came to Green Castle that weekend curious and concerned and to some extent worried, but I think they left satisfied that their boy, though in a situation totally foreign to him, a situation where he was the only Negro in his class, one of five Negroes in a student body of 5,000, one who would have to live with two white boys whom he had never seen before - I think they left, going back down Highway 41, confident that all would be well, and that their boy would do all right. They also left confident that, though there might be some small financial strain or something, that their boy - that they could pay his bills, and they did - they did it - they paid them in advance - the ~~mm~~ tuition was never late - and he never had to be concerned as to whether or not his funds were forthcoming. His only job was to get his lessons. I started off sort of a little behind - I took reading for four semesters - I shall never forget in a speech course - and I took speech - speech was recommended to me through my faculty adviser because I had won several oratorical contests in high school, so I took sort of an advanced speech course - and I was really at a loss because in this speech course my classmates talked about plays that they had done, books that they had read, and I was somewhat at a loss because during the whole time I was in high school I never really read a full novel, and my

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first novel was *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, by Thomas Hardy - I'm not sure that's a good book for anybody to get started on - it's full of pessimism and - but that was my first novel. And I think that early in that speech class I realized that my segregated education had been inadequate, and not only my segregated education but my Southern education was somewhat inadequate for me to cope with the academic problems that I faced at a school that's as good as DePauw.

RPW: Have you thought about what the graduate of Peoria high school would feel in certain colleges?

VJ: No, I haven't really -

RPW: The same thing, isn't it?

VJ: I suspect that at a school like DePauw that he would feel as - almost as insecure as I was - especially if he was the average student. I'm not so sure what a student who was in the upper ten percent of his class would have felt.

RPW: I don't know if Peoria has any point - I don't know what it's like, but I pulled it out of a million places.

VJ: Sure. I think there were some students - DePauw is very selective - highly selective, as a matter of fact -

RPW: End of the first tape of Mr. Jordan - resume on Tape #2.

(end of tape)