

Dennis Powell

NAACP

April 13, 2017

Audited July 13, 2018 (JM), spellings checked by DP

Pre recording chat

I am Judith Monachina, from the Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College. I am here with Dennis Powell who is president of the NAACP. And also in the room with us are:

Wendy Germain, who is the technical audio expert here, whose helping Maria Flores, a BCC student, and Len Kates who is also NAACP's liaison to this project. This is the NAACP's Oral History Project and you are the third person to be interviewed.

I also just want to say a couple things before we get started. We are in the Berkshire Eagle's Recording Room, where they do podcasts and things. We will hear some sounds. It won't be completely sound free. So just be aware of that. Also, normally when you talk to a person they gesture. Because I don't want to be heard while you are speaking, I won't do as much of that normal stuff. It might feel a little weird but you will get used to it.....

Today is April 13th, and here we go. So, Dennis, I think I mentioned to you on the phone that this is sort of a biographical interview. So even though we are going to get to the NAACP and we are going to get to the present tense, we are going to start at the beginning.

JUDITH MONACHINA: So, can you tell me where you were born and little bit about your childhood?

DENNIS POWELL: Well, I was born right here in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, one of, at the time, back then, I think it was St. Lukes Hospital, which was where all the

births took place. On June 26, 1945, and I found that out only when I went into the service because from the time I was born, my birthday was always celebrated on the 24th, and then when I had to get my birth certificate it said June 26, so to be sure I celebrate from the 23rd to the 27th.

JM: Yeah, because the birth certificate could have just been written late.

DP: Back then records were not as thorough and up to date, you know, because people born in the South are lucky even if they can find the birth certificate. So I consider myself being pretty lucky there.

And first residence was actually on West Street. About now it would be where the Big y is located. That was 180 West Street, which was right above the Busy Bee restaurant, which was one of the probably busiest and really famous restaurants of the Berkshires, at the time. You could actually smell the spaghetti sauce from the corner bank at the top of West Street, and it was just one of those... I think that helped families who -because by the time you finished smelling that, you really didn't feel too much hunger. You got filled up on the fumes and the aromas. But grew up there, beautiful area...

JM: Yeah, could you describe it a little because it is totally gone?

DP: It is of the treasures of Pittsfield that was totally destroyed. When I got out of the service everything was gone. When I say treasures, both sides of West Street were completely full with restaurants, all the way down the hill. At the bottom of West Street was this beautiful train station, which, at the time had beautiful marble, the old fashioned benches with the lanterns at the end of the bench. They really didn't like us kids that lived in the area because we used to open that door and yell in there, and our echo would last for about 15 minutes. It was so beautiful and it really had...why they tore it down, I have absolutely no idea because it was just the treasure that could have made a beautiful restaurant - could have been the beginning of the mall -- could have just gone right up West Street. Also, there was a beautiful park right across the street from -- in the center of it, sort of -- probably

where the paint store and of that is now. And I mean beautiful park-- trees, grass benches, people used to come there and take their lunch. We as kids played in that park. It was just...beautiful.

JM: And then you lived on Mill Street - West Street still? You lived on West Street.

DP: I lived on West Street, it was West Street, like I said, right about the restaurant itself, the Busy Bee restaurant, and they had apartments above that. And we had a beautiful drawbridge which was right down from the train station. And it, not draw bridge, I'm sorry - walk bridge - and you could actually - you could go up the stairs and you could walk across the tracks and end up on Francis Avenue, and that was all good. Destroyed. And I remember all the restaurants were packed. All the time. I also remember a lot of the bookies would do their business there on the street, and the hotel at the time, which was at the top of the hill, that too was a beautiful building and it sort of mirrored the other four - three buildings on the corner. And Friday night, they had a buffet every Friday night and the line would be down the street. I remember my grandfather, who was a porter at that hotel. They used to come down to the train station to pick up the bags and carry them up the hill to the hotel. So, a lot of activity.

So, I think was around 7 maybe 7 - 8. That's when I had my first job. I was playing outside the Busy Bee restaurant, and someone was going in and I was right by the door so I grabbed the door knob and pulled the door open and they gave me a quarter. I stood there all day, refused to leave, all 4 pockets were full of coins - back pockets - front pockets. And my mother even sent a sandwich down, because I realized the kids knew what I was doing, and if I left the spot, they'd do it so I stayed there. I didn't even want to go to bed that night, because knew in the morning some kid would beat me up, I mean get up before me and take that spot.

JM: Did they?

JP: No. I wasn't tall enough to actually see when they came to the window to come out the restaurant, so I used to watch the threshold and when I saw the shadow from their feet, I would grab the door and open it again and get tipped on the way out.

So that's when I started my entrepreneurship (*laugh*). So that was fun.

JM: 7 or 8!

DP: And then we moved to Mill Street, 17 Mill Street. And Mill Street is now where the electric company... We actually lost 4 neighborhoods, because it was West Street and there was houses on both side of West Street; then there was Mill Street and at the, this end of Mill Street as you go under the bridge – the railroad bridge there over by the supermarket: That street was called Satinette Street. And there was houses on both sides of Satinette. And then you could go from Satinette down to the end and you'd be on Mill Street at that end of Mill Street, and Mill Street was off of West Street. Then there was the river, Housatonic River, and then Daring Street where a lot of the Italians lived on Daring Street with wonderful gardens and the gardens were always by the river. And we used to make a little raft and at night we used to go across the river and fill up our raft with beautiful vegetables and then come back across the river. I remember one of the Italian guys used to literally water his garden when the sun went down from a bucket from the river. He had a rope and he'd put the bucket in there and hoist it up, and he'd just go from plant to plant. We used to sit on the steps and watch him. And at the time, we all basically lived, I mean it was clearly a neighborhood. I grew up in a no father figure home, with 4 brothers, a sister, cousins. I mean we all lived in the same house at the time. And my aunt lived there, my grand mother. It was her house. She was a cook for years at Hillcrest Hospital, and I think that was what got me interested in cooking. Plus when you had a family that large I was wise enough to know if I stayed in the kitchen, I could eat more than the rest of them, just by cleaning bowls and that sort of thing, So I was always I thinking sort ahead of my siblings at that front.

I grew up without a father, but never missed a father because in our neighborhood we truly had men that really stepped up to the plate. Even though they had their own children, they really fathered a lot of us. And one had passed away a couple of years ago and when I went to his funeral I really thanked his wife and his children for sharing their father with so many of us, and I was telling the story. I said "now, of course what your husband used to do us today, DSS would really frown on, they might even put him under the jail". I said, "I don't think that putting snowballs in your freezer in the winter So you could throw them at the kid in July is something that DSS would have liked (LAUGH)

JM: Can you tell us his name?

DP: St. Clair Gunn... Actually Ray Gunn's brother

(laugh)

but he was a wonderful man....just

JM:

DP: St Clair Gunn, actually Ray Gunn's brother, St Clair Gunn

He was just he was sort of a black cowboy. He loved cowboy garb and we used to... I don't know if he was ever on a horse, but he was so bow-legged, we used to always kid him about his legs being perfect for riding a horse. But just great guy, powerful laugh. He probably is the only man that I know that kept an afro to the extentunfortunately he got cancer, and he did not lose one strand of hair. And I remember saying to his wife, "You should put that hair in a museum. Don't bury him with it because that's remarkable." But he was just that kind of guy and because of that, I really believe that set the tone for me what I was going to be the way I ...the way ...how kids are important in my life and the activism that I do is really because I had role models that just didn't talk it, but did it. And I mean, it would be impossible in our neighborhood for any kid to get snatched because there was always someone sitting out on the porch. You couldn't walk two houses without someone saying,

"Does your mother know you're down here?" And it was that kind of a neighborhood, and we all had gardens and we shared great conversation because you could actually sit on the porch and we as kids used to sit on the steps and our parents sat on the porches, and they conversed right down the line three or four houses. Whatever the third house said, they would just pass it down till it got down to us.

And it was safe. Never felt unsafe or Clapp Park. We could walk underneath the bridge off of ... underneath the bridge at the end of Mill Street and walk over to Hawthorne and get down to Clapp Park. We used to go there every Friday night, take our blankets because they had movies every Friday night, showed cartoons and two feature films, you know. It was great, I mean, it was just ...and I think when they tore down all that, at least in my mind, that really started, this whole urban renewal project, started this whole institutional racism because it broke up families. It broke up neighborhoods, which were really always the support groups, because my mother worked at the Wendell Sheraton Hotel running the elevator. My grandmother was at the hospital. So there was no-one home, but you really didn't need that baby-sitter, you didn't have to worry because the neighborhood took care. There was always someone in the area.

JM: Do you remember when that all happened?

DP: Well, that actually happened when I got out of the Service in '66. I got out of the service and urban renewal - that's when they were coming through with the promise that they were going to take down all the houses and put up other houses and we would be the first ones allowed back in. Of course, that wasn't their plan, but it was interesting because our landlord would give you anything for the inside of the house. He actually had at the end of... it was a house attached to ours that was 15 Mill Street, and then at the end of that house, he actually had a warehouse with paint and wallpaper and all of that. He would give you whatever you wanted for the inside of the house. But he never painted the outside because he wanted to keep his taxes low. And when urban renewal came through he painted all of them. It reminded me of the western when you painted all the houses red. Well, he painted every house. You could literally hear the paint being sucked up by the wood. That's how dry the

wood was because it never had anything on it. You could sit in the house and actually smell the paint being.... when the houses were being painted so he could get more money for them when urban renewal took them. So that was interesting but...

JM: So that was when you were away. So when you came home?

DP: Yeah that was in '66. When I came home, that's when they decided to tear everything down.

JM: So where did your family go?

DP: Well, we were looking at other apartments because it was supposed to be temporary. At the time was just my younger brother, myself, and my mother. Having gotten out of the service, I says, "Well, I mean every apartment we looked at -- John Street. They were all just terrible." You would go upstairs you would see the living room through the floor boards, and I just said, "Why don't we try to buy a house?" I said, "We'll get one on the GI bill." So we started looking around and at the time I was.. saw this house on Cole Avenue, 159 Cole Avenue. And I remember a loan officer at Berkshire Bank, Mrs. Coy. She says, "You can get the house". Well, my brother was working, but I was getting ready to go to school. I was getting ready to go to the Culinary Institute.

At that point. says, "Geez I don't know if they're going to allow us to buy a house, when I'm in school...but the house at the time was only \$15,000. And when Mrs. Coy called me up and says, "Congratulations, you're a homeowner." My brother and I bought the house together. So I was attending the Culinary Institute at the time in New Haven, Connecticut.

JM: So you did that after the service?

DP: After, yeah. Actually no. After the service, I actually went to work for GE. I went in as a wastepaper basket emptier, and probably the best one they ever had. My grandmother always said, "Whatever job you take, be three times better

than anybody else that might have had the job." So my hardest time at that job was trying to kill three hours because before I would go to dinner I was done with all the offices. I used to keep the penthouse till last, and I would sit up there and watch tv waiting till 11 o'clock, and had the elevator triggered so that when the guard came up I would know it, and then I'd be jumping up and emptying the baskets, shut the tv off. But I knew he knew what was going on because one time he says, to me "Dennis, how come I always find you in here?" I says, "It's my last stop." He said, "yeah okay." Then I just decided there was an opportunity for me to apply for another job within GE and I just said, "it's not going to work for me. I'm going to use the GI bill again and apply to the Culinary." I did and got in. That started my food service career.

JM: How was it there? How was your experience?

DP: My experience was wonderful. I actually did so well that I ended up getting a teaching fellowship for a third year. That was a very proud moment because of sitting at graduation with my mother and my grandfather. They were sitting there, and the President of the college kept talking about this graduate. We're all looking at each other trying to figure out who is he talking about. We don't know anybody in the school like that. Then he called my name. I had a medallion around my neck. My hand actually went through and broke it because I was so shocked when he called my name and he called me up and awarded me. So I stayed at the Culinary actually three years instead of two, and probably learned more in the third year because I never wanted to be ..always a possibility if the chef instructor didn't show you, you'd have to take the class, and I never ever wanted to have a student ask me a question that I couldn't respond to. So I probably studied more the third year than I did the two years I was there. But, and even there I became President of the Alumni Association, then I became Department Chair for all of the subjects unrelated to hands-on cooking. And then came, in 1977, put together a team of all American born chefs and we entered an international cooking competition over in Basel Switzerland. We won first place, we beat 17 countries, and my idea was I wanted to show Europe that America had a cuisine other than hamburgers and hot-dogs.

JM: What was that?

JP: We did regional cuisine. We did food from each from the south, east, the west. and it was basically a cold food competition. Because back then we were not a sanctioned team through the American Culinary Federation. So we couldn't really compete as a sanctioned team. So, we went over and if you're not a sanctioned team then you really can't enter hot food competition. But because we did so well...we weren't even ready to compete in hot food competition. But we did so well in the cold food area, that the organizers came to us and asked if we would want to compete in the hot food competition. We all thought about it. Of course I said right off the bat "Yes". Everybody said "Are you crazy. We don't have anything." I said, "it's November. They don't do Thanksgiving here. If we can't do a Thanksgiving dinner that's going to take first place, then we shouldn't even be here." So that's what we did. We did Thanksgiving and it was actually to your average Thanksgiving of course because we took the items and brought them up to a competition level. And the competition took place in a restaurant, so it was actually the customers who filled out cards and rated. And we took first place in hot food and at the time, Henry Holler was Chef at a Swiss Chef. He was chef at the White House. He came and congratulated all of us and we spent I think 17 days, 10 of which we just toured Germany. We took our wives with us. We made a double thing out of it.

JM: Quite an experience.

DP: Yeah, and, unfortunately, it created the kind of resume that would not associate with a person of color. So, the Berkshires and various places that I would apply for jobs, I would have the job based on the resume and lose the job when I showed up.

JM: Were there certain places that you remember that?

DP: Oh, all of them. (LAUGH)

JM: All of them

DP: All of them. Tanglewood, several different positions at Tanglewood, which I spoke about last year.

JM: Oh i remember about that ... Seranac

DP: Seranac, yeah. and at the time, my son... Oh I should back up

JM: Yeah we still don't have a family.

DP: Yeah, yeah, we need to back up, need to back up.

When I left the Culinary Institute I ended up at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City and started a training program. They had a training program for food and beverage. So I ended up there, was transferred from there to the Hotel New Yorker on 34th and 8th Avenue, and was sitting at the window one day and a beautiful woman came up out of the subway and I eyed her. Two days later, the same woman came into --one of the restaurants was called Maggie's and it was actually the host was one of the women that were on one of the soap operas ---and I was the Food and Beverage Manager at the time. And I would make my rounds through the restaurant. I happened to go into Maggie's and saw this same beautiful person that came up out of the subway ,and walked over and started talking to her. That was on a Monday. This was all Christmas week. By Friday I asked her to marry me. Of course we didn't get married till a year later but

JM: Did she say yes?

DP; Oh yes, I said to her "Well I would be lying if I said I love you because I don't even know you really. But I like you, and I think you first have to like a person before you can love a person and I know li can grow to love you, but I like you now." So, that's what happened, and just a beautiful nineteen years because I grew up in a household really not knowing love. I don't think I ever heard the words come out of my mother's mouth. We were a family, I mean I would say say 4 brothers, 4 sisters, but they are really 3 half-brothers and half-sisters because each one of us had a

different father, which also made it difficult in relationships - same mother different fathers, different personalities.

Although my oldest brother Dallas -- him and I were really probably the closest. All of this is, you know, backing up and going forward.

JM: Yeah, that's okay.

DP: My brother, Dallas being the oldest back then in families, the oldest took care, you know. I have always said, he didn't get a chance to be a child because he had to take care of everybody else. My sister was the oldest but when she graduated she moved to New York. She knew her father and always had a relationship with her father. He actually lived in New York. The rest of us really didn't really know who our father was. So, you know I said, Busy Bee was my first job. My second job was... my brother hired me. He worked for Adams Supermarket, and at the time, Adams Supermarket, at the time you had to have a white shirt, black pants and shined shoes. I was terrific with the iron. I could do a shirt better than the Chinamen (small laugh). So he used to pay me to shine his shoes and keep his shirts ironed. So as I said, he was....

[long pause] excuse me. (long pause)

He was a brother, a father, and really my best friend, who, unfortunately, I lost because he never went to the doctors. And he worked for GE till he retired. All of the medical, all the best insurance, but for some reason black men, and I'm not one of them, just don't go to the doctor. I don't care, people can call me whatever they call me, but I'm 71 and I've probably had six colonoscopies already. My brother never had one, and at the time when he finally had it, too late. He fought cancer for better part of six years. But....

JM: So when did he die?

DP: He died, let's see 20, I think it was twelve - (2012). and it was amazing because we had such a connection that he actually sent me messages to come and visit him. I was going through a junk drawer, and I picked up this envelope and in it was his email address and his address in Philadelphia that he sent me when he moved with his wife from Pittsfield to Philadelphia. And then later on the day, I was in the basement and I was mucking around on the shelf and this book fell off from the shelf and literally opened up to this page. It was a book that the photographer from the *Eagle* had done because he used to go around the neighborhood snapping pictures. It was my brother and I, in Clapp Park, flying a kite. So I says, "Okay, I got the message" and I called my son and I said, "I'm going to see your uncle." He said, "Who are you going with?" " I said, "Nobody, I'm going to drive down. He says, "Dad you can't drive" that distance; and so I was waiting for him to say "I'll go with you." He didn't say it. So, I says, "Well I am going". And I called my bother in Boston and he says, "Well I can't go now." I said, "I didn't ask you to go. I'm just letting you know I'm going." And I never called my brother or his wife.

I just punched their address in the GPS; went to bed, got up at midnight; and by 6 o'clock in the morning I was sitting in their driveway. She came out to water the flowers and I got out of the car, started walking up to the house. She said she thought she was seeing a mirage; and when I got to her, she just couldn't believe it and she says, "I was going to call you today because I just called in Hospice". And I said, "Well he called me". She says, "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" I said, "because I didn't want you guys to worry about me driving." So I went to the hospital and she asked me to just stay outside the room. She went in first, and she says to him, "I got a visitor". And I walked in and stood at the foot of his bed and he just perked right up. "How'd you get here?" I said," I drove". "Who came with you?" I said "GOD." He says, "No I'm serious". i said "I'm serious too". I said "God was my co-pilot". he says, "There's no way you could drive down here by yourself". I had sleep apnea and I would fall asleep when I was working at the Culinary Institute. I would travel and I totaled nine cars in 19 years, never got hurt but just falling asleep at the wheel... anyway...

JM: So that's why everyone was worried about you driving.

DP: Exactly. But I knew I had a message and I had enough adrenalin in me that I drove straight there, had my jazz going, and he just still couldn't believe that I had actually, actually made it there. And then by the time I got home, she had actually had him moved into the house and I helped her set up the hospital bed and all of that because he wanted to be at home because he wanted... *pause*... his spirit to sort of protect her. So he wanted to die in the house...so that was...

JM: That's a beautiful story.

JP: You know, and I think that's the strength of families. Through that, I mean, his wife and I, we talk all the time. It's like we have this ESP going, where I literally went to pick up the phone and it rang and she was on the other end and vice-versa.

JM: What's her name?

DP: Marion

DP: You know, and that was really tough because her daughter's husband -- I had 2 nephews, they were actually twins, and they lost both their grandfathers the same week. They lost their grandfather on their mother's side and the grandfather on their father's side, one from prostate cancer, the other from colon cancer. Neither one of them had to die. We actually had to try to arrange because one had to be buried before the other. One died on Tuesday, and I think Dallas died on Thursday. So it was really, really tough, but...And, to this day I know, he never went to college but there wasn't any subject... He read so much that he was, as I even said at his funeral, he had his doctorate without even going to college - just so brilliant. His daughter used to, whenever she would ask him something, he would always say, "Look it up." He would never give her the answer, and I found out she started, that

she was going, that she was doing the same thing to her children, and they are just bright, excellent golfers, so just...

JM: Are they still in Philadelphia?

JP: Yeah, they are in Philadelphia. She is actually trying to sell the house so she can move closer to her daughter and the family. So hopefully she will sell it this summer. But that's the type of - I think that's what...And my father lived right in Lanesboro the whole time. My friends knew he was my father. I never found out he was my father until my mother died. And shortly after my mother died - she died at 50 - just a massive heart attack on a Sunday. She went to church, came home from church, went to walk with her friend. she as living in the Riverview West and just said, "It's warm, I'm going to just make a lobster salad. I'm not going to cook anything. That Monday, Debbie and I just had Jibari, our second child, and when my mother didn't show up at work, my aunt thought she was done at our house helping us with Jibari. I thought she was with her girlfriend, Frances Duvall because they traveled all the time together; and Frances ended up calling my aunt because she hadn't heard from her. They both had keys. So when they went to the apartment and opened the apartment, she was laying between the kitchen, and Dr. Rubin, at the time, he was the medical examiner, he said she didn't even know what hit her.

JM: You had children already at that time?

J:P: I had 2, yep. We had, Dedan was our first child and he - this again Dallas, we were playing golf one day and I was beating him and he says to me, "You know I've been meaning to say something to you about the Dedan?" I said, "What?" He says, "I don't think Dedan can hear."

I said, "What are you talking about." I thought her was just trying to throw my game off, cause I mean we do crazy stuff like that. He says, "No , I'm really serious. " He says "I think he responds because he sees you, not because he hears." He says, "I want you to go home and tell Debbie to take him in her arms and turn his back, and

you come up behind him with two pieces of silverware and knock them together and see if he turns around." And he didn't.

JM; How old was he, about?

JP: He was about - I want to say two, three maybe. And he had a lot of problems because his temperature used to go up. We'd have to rush him to the hospital -put him on an ice bed and there were times when Debbie had to fill the tub up with ice water and dunk him in it. And we finally - Dr. Porter - God bless him - We took him, and he immediately sent us to Children's Hospital, because he knew something. And this was something like 4 years it took to really diagnose this Hunters-Hurlers syndrome, which is like a Downs syndrome, and what's unique about it is, he was probably only the forth black child that ever got it. And usually you can detect it in white children because they take on Negroid features when they're born, you know, lips, nose, and all of that. And it was actually the Kennedy Center, Shriver Center, where they actually, in conjunction with a Swiss doctor, between the doctors here and the Swiss doctors, they determined what it was because they never...and it was sort of a progressive disease. The kids at the Shriver Center all had to wear helmets because they would bang their heads against the wall. And apparently Debbie and I were carriers which really I say, "Well, why are we being tested at marriage for stupid venereal diseases. Why aren't we tested to make sure that, cause you know, if you've both got 2 recessive genes, when they come together, it's going to become a positive gene, you know. Why aren't you testing for stuff like that." And that's actually what happened. But fortunately for Dedan...he's 45 now and could be the mayor. Everybody knows him in Pittsfield. He walks everywhere, and living a really great life and where he's missing some things, he's a lot stronger in others. I mean he was in special ed and I noticed when he would come home and I would say to Deb, "Why is he acting like this?" And one Christmas I went to his class and brought a lot of gingerbread men and I was showing him how to decorate gingerbread men and kept hearing one of the kids in his class making these sounds and I realized that's what Dedan was doing. He was mimicking. So that's when my wife and I went and said," We want to mainstream in a normal classroom because his learning is going to be by mimicking others. Let him mimic someone who is going to benefit

him," Even if Pittsfield High School, he always knew what to do, not to look out of place. I mean he would go the library and he'd get the books that had the real interesting covers and he'd have a stack of them under his arm so when he walked down the hall he'd look like the rest of the kids. So he had that kind of coping skills, and of course we were, my wife and I, were fighting about whether to have another child. The doctors said, "Well look, the chances are 1 in 4 he could either be like you and your wife, or he could end up like Dedan, or it could be worse." He says, "But we can do an amnio and, if at that time, it shows that he has it, then you and your wife could make the decision to abort." So we said okay - went basically by our faith. We really had that, and when she got pregnant we found out that the amnio won't say whether they actually have the disease. I mean, you could just have the trait, so at that point, especially based on that faith, we didn't want to make a decision to abort, when we didn't even know. So, we just decided to go with the pregnancy. And we knew something was different because my wife worked right up to the week of having Dedan, but Jabari gave her hell. I mean she had morning sickness. She never had morning sickness, never had anything with Dedan, because Dedan was that far behind in development, but Jabari gave her.... and Dr. Porter let me in when he was born. When I saw the look on Dr. Porter's face when the head was born, I knew Jabari was all right and we picked Jabari because in Africa, it's an African name and it means "last born." We decided that we would quit there, and did. And he was fine.

JM: Now where were you living at the time when you got married, you married this beautiful woman?

DP: We were living, we were first living in the Horace Harding Expressway in Brooklyn and I had actually found the apartment. This is funny....had furnished it, everything. We had the wedding at the hotel New Yorker. I did the food. We had 350 people. Because I had a convention at the hotel at the time, we couldn't go on a honeymoon so we left that morning before anybody knew we were gone, went to our apartment, and we opened all the gifts but no nobody gave us a frying pan, and we had nothing to cook with. But somebody gave us a Bakomatic. I don't know if you...it looked like a toaster and you would hang the bacon over it and close up the

flaps, and cook the bacon. So, of course, I went down shopping to the stores, and of course the area was all Jewish. So I got kippered herring and scrambled eggs 'cause I remember my first waiter's job,, when I was at the Culinary Institute that I worked while I was going to school and I was waiting tables. Someone ordered scotch woodcock. So I'm come to pick up my orders and I'm standing in the kitchen and I'm waiting, I'm waiting. The chef was French. "How ...what are you?...get that food out!... ba, ba, ba." I said," I'm missing an order." "You're not missing anything, you idiot. You've got everything. Get that food out while it's hot!" I said, "I'm missing a woodcock" (laughter).

JM: What did he say?

DP: He says, "You call yourself a waiter. You stupid idiot. You got it. It's kippered herring and scrambled eggs, damn it!" (laughter) So it was funny because that's what my wife and I had for our first breakfast. I cooked the herring on one side of the bakomatic, the scrambled eggs on the other side. Then I threw it in the trash because it wasn't any good after that.

(laughing).

JM: That's great.

JM: Are you writing your memoirs?

DP: I'm doing a book.

JM: OK - because you've got some good stories.

DP: But if only if it was fiction, because nobody would believe this. But anyway, she ...her mother wasn't a cook and she wasn't a cook. Her grandmother was an excellent cook. When I say she taught me love - because even though her and her father were - her mother and father were separated. But between the mother and grandmother, my wife grew up in a loving household, a loving family. They hugged.

They did all of that. I remember Christmas Eve, which was in that same week. That's the first time she took me there.

It's interesting because when I met her, I'd invited her girlfriend to dinner. And her girlfriend invited her, because her girlfriend didn't want to come to dinner with me by herself. And it was in the Lampost Corner, which was still within the hotel and we're sitting in a booth, and Debbie and her girlfriend were sitting there and I'm sitting here. And we're talking and everything and everything is nice. The food came and I'm eating and all of a sudden I see a fork come in my plate (laugh) and I looked up. It was the girl that I invited. I call the waiter over and I said, "When these ladies are finished please bring the check to my office." And I got up and excused myself and I left. And Debbie came back the next day to apologize for her girlfriend because she realized what had happened. And, I mean, I'm funny about food, always have been. You want something, you ask. I will make sure I use a clean utensil or whatever to put it on your plate, but you don't, even in marriage, you don't.... (laugh) stick your fork in my plate. (laugh)

JM: To ... it helped you get your wife.

JP: It did, it really did, because she came back to apologize, and that's what really started- started us. And first time, I asked her where she lived. She wrote on a paper, "I forget your address". She wrote it on a piece of paper. I still remember standing at the bar. I opened the paper. I looked at it, folded it, ripped it up, put it in the astray. I said, "I'm not going to Brooklyn to see anybody". (laugh). She came back with her friend.

JM: Same one?

DP: No a different one. And I walked over and I spoke to her. She said "I just wanted to bring my friend in to show her an idiot who ripped up my address." (laugh) I said, "Okay. I think we have something in common" (laugh). And that's how it started. I did go to Brooklyn and it was Christmas Eve, and her mother was a nurse at Riker's Island. She thought enough of me that she went in the back - and her and

Debbie went in the bedroom - and it was a small apartment in Brooklyn, wrapped up a copper cup -- I don't know where they got it from--- but gave it to me so I would have something to open like everyone else. So that's when I knew what kind of family this was. The father had stopped by, and the mother was really just for my benefit being.... and I asked Debbie if I could speak to her and she ... We went into the other room and I says, "Tell your mother she doesn't have to. If she wants to throw him out, she can throw him out. She don't have to be nice because I'm here". Because I sensed all this tension. So that's when her mother and I got along; and the grandmother and I connected because we were having dinner and I had made corn pudding. I made corn pudding the way I was taught at the Culinary, which is more like a cake almost. Her grandmother makes corn pudding where it is like a pudding. You eat it with a spoon. And she's sitting there at the table and she just starts laughing. And says, "Hoo hoo! Whoever heard of a pudding you cut with a knife and eat with a fork?" And that began our relationship (laugh).

So, I actually, which is probably a terrible thing to say, but when her mother died... her mother had a lot of heart problems, it affected me more than when my mother died. That's the kind of bond that had been created in such a short period of time because my mother really... We weren't allowed to call my mother, 'Mommy'. We called her by her first name. She always told her male companions she didn't have any kids. And I remember one night and I always told her, "It's your fault you named me Dennis, because I probably was a menace. And I remember one night a gentleman came to pick her up and you get ready to leave, everybody said good bye. I said "Good night Mommy, have a good time". (pause) Wrong. She told the gentlemen to wait for her in the car. She came back and every time I think of it, I feel the slap on my face. So I never really... like I said, the disciplinarian in our house was my Grandfather. He would come and that's the only real relationship I can ever remember having with him. Saturday night was racketing night and you did something on Sunday, you waited till Saturday to be punished, which in itself was cruel. And we'd all get punished at the same time, go to the attic. You had to take off all your clothes cause he didn't believe in beating clothes, or whatever that nonsense was, but that was it, and I always say today they would probably built the jail on top of them. He would get the old razor straps from the barter shop. and every time he'd

get one, we'd take the cover off the chimney and shove it down the chimney but we survived. We figured what age we were we decided, you aint whipping us anymore, and so that Saturday we went up in the attic and we rigged up old irons over the door - had strings running from them. Of course he's setting us up. He come up. When he go through the door, we cut the string and iron come down. He stepped back. He tried to come in again. we cut another string. Finally he went downstairs. he says," Those kids crazy. I ain't messing with those kids. Those kids crazy". So that ended that.

That was my life, but I think it made me stronger. I'm thankful to God that it didn't make me like them. And, in all my years, I don't think I ever, well I know I never spanked my kids. I didn't have to, my wife did it. But I think I didn't because of what I went through and I never had to. My wife used to get so angry because she said, "You just look in their direction and they stop immediately." I said, "That's because you give them ten to stop. I start at ten. You count to ten, I start at ten. That's the difference .. They know that I look over at you, then it's time to stop."

JM: You mentioned faith, and you were able to develop this love anyway despite the fact that is was hard, you had obviously had loving relationships in your family, your brother, but this faith, where did that come from?

DP: It started at Second Congregational Church, but again we left there and ended up going to St. Stephens, and that's when we really, through Bible study and different classes, we really grew up in St. Stephens. We left Second Con., because a woman stood my brother and I up in front of the congregation and accused us of spending our money we were supposed to put in the offering. I mean, had she said that last week, she'd have been correct. But this week we forgot it and left it on the television and forgot to bring it. But she noticed we didn't put anything in. So we went home and told our mother and that was the end of our going to Second Con. That's when we started at St. Stephens and really developed a... and then when my kids were born they all grew up in St. Stephens.

JM: Are you still involved with that one?

DP: I'm very spiritual, but I'm sort of... I call myself a carpet-bagger now, because it depends on what I need. So I go to first Baptist because I love the word that Sheila Schultz Ross presents. I go to Price because I like the choir. So, it depends on what my needs are at the time. I went to St. Stephens two weeks ago because I needed the Eucharist. And some Sundays I go to church at home. I live stream Reverend -----Church in Albany – Macedonian, because he just gives a beautiful service, and I'm actually thinking about going that church because lately on my spiritual journey, I get a lot out of his ... and he was at Second Con and unfortunately got driven out, and it's sort of sad in a way.

JM: Luckily you can get him without going all the time.

DP: Yeah, yeah, and it's great...I even showed Mabel Hamilton how to livestream when she wasn't feeling up to going to church, and it's a great message. When I was at St. Stephens I became a lay minister so even if it's communion Sunday and I'm home, I give myself communion. I just follow right along with the livestream. But that was always very, very important. We moved from New York here when I took the job teaching at the Culinary Institute.

JM: oh, okay.

DP: Because I hadn't been in New York that long and really figured, they had actually moved from New Haven to Hyde Park and contacted me and asked me if I wanted to come back and teach. And it was interesting. I went back, started out teaching and actually became the Department Chairman. And it was really interesting because I was now supervising some of the teachers I had. Debbie became very ... I was teaching wine appreciation. In seven days, I could have students identify the birthdate of a bottle of wine without even seeing the label. When I put my lectures together, I always presented them to Debbie at night so that she could tell me how I was presenting and all of that when we put the kids to bed. So she knew as much about wines as I did, and for the different countries I had a Frenchman put it on tape. I wrote out my program and I had a Frenchman,

German and Italian. So when I did German wines, between my ride from Pittsfield to Hyde Park and back, I used to listen to the tapes. So I got where I could pronounce. I remember I was covering German wines and the president was coming through with this delegation from Germany, and I was covering one of the wine labels. They stood in the back of the room and when the class left they came up to me and started speaking to me in German (laugh), because I had pronounced it that well you know. And of course I had been in Germany so I told them. I responded to them "Non Sprechen sie Deutsch".

JM: So you were in Germany with the military?

DP: Yeah I was in Germany. When I got out of high school I wasn't sure what I wanted to do so I decided I would volunteer for the draft. This way, here I only had to do 2 years.

JM: And what year was that?

DP; It was in '64.

JM: So it was before the big draft

DP: yea, yeah. And, took my basic training in Fort Dix and then ended up in Germany for two years.

JM: So as long as we are in that period of time, before we jump back to your career. lots was going on in terms of civil rights and that kind of stuff. Do you remember that period?

DP: Oh, I was actually in college when Martin Luther King was assassinated. I was going to school in New Haven at the time, and I remember walking out of class and going and sitting the park across from Yale, totally lost. We showed the film and every time I hear Bobby Kennedy say, "Martin Luther King is dead," chills go through my, even today. I was watching the movie and it's.....(pause)

JM: How did you pick yourself up, and get going again?

DP: I don't know if I ever really did. I don't know if I ever really did.

(pause)

JM: So it sort of killed something.

DP: Yeah, it was, I mean back then, I mean we were, I grew up, and I was right in the middle of Black Panthers. Matter of fact, when I was working in New York, when I would come home on the weekends, I decided to take advantage of the Black Panthers. I bought a newspaper in Port Authority and I used to get on the bus. I used to sit in the seat near the window, put my knee up in the other chair, hold the paper up like this. And then when the bus pulled out, I'd put the paper away, and then I had the two seats, I'd go to sleep. I never read the paper. I had the same paper. If they'd every look at the date, I used that same paper. I kept it in my attache' case and every time I would travel back and forth that same paper I used.

JM: It got you two seats.

DP It just got me two seats.

JM: So you were in New York during all that. And then you could come home on the weekends.

DP: Yeah, I would come and visit, and then when they built that crummy hotel, they were looking for a Food and Beverage Manager, and I thought "Gee it might be nice to come back home," because I still had the house on Cole Avenue. And I applied, sent my resume and everything, and I'd get a phone call and his secretary was a girl who I went to PHS with, and she says, "Dennis Powell, did you go to PHS?" I said, "Yeah". She says, "Wow." she says, "You probably don't remember me." she says, "But I'll tell you one thing I know you'll remember who I am. We went horseback

riding one day and I got knocked off the horse by a branch at Kimball's farm." I said, "Yeah I remember" I said," you were with Frankie and I. She said 'yup'. So she says, "You got the job". He's told me to cancel all other interviews he was so impressed with you, you have the job." Showed up, took a bus up there, sitting outside his office talking to her. He walks out, takes one look at me and I saw it in his eyes. He says, "Now, the Steward's position." I said, "What are you talking about, the steward's position." I said, "You were adverting for a food and beverage manager. I was a Food and Beverage Manager in New York. Why would I come here for a lesser position." And he was German, so I knew what that meant. And I just, I remember thanking him and I went to the Top of the Park to have a drink and he come up and told the bartender, "Give him a drink on me." And I looked at the bartender and I said, "No you will not give me a drink on him."

JM: Not going to pay his way out of this.

DP; No, no, so that was my first denial in the Berkshires and I thought it would be great for him because I knew everybody here. I knew what the help situation was and all of that, but he just... I really got my career jump started by working at Avaloch in Lenox. Avaloch - it's where the Apple Tree Inn is right across from the Tanglewood.

JM: Was Alice running it then?

DP: No, no, this was Baquin. and he was really just. He was sort of the, no pun intended, the black sheep of the family, because he got kicked out of Cornell, just came from this wealthy family. His parents were both in child psychology in New York City, brownstone apartment. You know, one floor was the art gallery, one floor was each one of the kids, and the other floor was theirs; and his brother was president of a big bank in Chicago, and he was a playboy. But he was so good with young people, starting them out and you know, and I was really able to go to the Culinary Institute and then go work there in the summer and try anything. And if worked, it made money he was fine with it. If it didn't make money he was fine with it. So, I really got to experiment. I really learned my craft working for him. I mean he

was just a beautiful man. A lot of people, you know, he hired a lot of blacks there. I mean he was the one person. He didn't have a racist bone in his body. And it's funny because when I moved to New York to work at the Waldorf Astoria, I got caught up in a sting operation. When I got off the bus at Port Authority, I'm going to walk up to the Hotel New Yorker because it was right up the street, and this guy stops me to tell me about some... He just got off the boat and some guy promised him he was going to get him a girl and the girl is up in this hotel, but I don't trust the guy, and will you hold my money for me and I'm trying to get away from him but he's talking to me and everything.

And next thing I know, he takes out a hanky. He puts his money in it. He says, "Give me your money." So my little naive stupid self, big city, country boy. I said, "Why would I give you my money?" "Well, I'm going to put yours with mine and this way here I know if your protecting yours, you'll protect mine." Stupid me. I hand him the money he takes a hanky, ties it up, hands out to me. I undo my tie, my shirt, stick it in under my tee shirt, put it around underneath my arm. I'm sitting in this. He said, "I'm just going to go right across the street there. So you wait here in this luncheonette." I'm sitting there at the counter, and I'd ordered a ice cream soda sitting there. I'm sitting there. He wanted me to check my bag, but thank God I didn't. Something just, I said, "No, I can carry it, I can carry it." I got my bag beside me. I finally said to the waitress, "You know these New Yorkers are really funny, isn't it." She said, "What are you talking about, funny?" I said, "Wome guy, don't know me from Adam, just gave me all his money for me to hold". She looks at me and says, "Where's the money?" I said, "It's right here". She said, "I think you need to look at it." I take that thing out of my..., set it on the counter. I untied it. Well, first of all, I realized the hanky was dirty. The one he wrapped the money in was clean. I never seen him make the switch. Then I unfolded the hanky. When I got halfway through and didn't see my money my heart started (thump-thump-thump) when I got all the way open, it was newspapers, cut the size of dollar bills. I couldn't describe the guy because it wasn't like he was holding a gun on me and I'm studying him or anything. So luckily Mike Baquin was in New York visiting his parents. So I called him because I didn't have a dime on me. They even gave me the ice cream soda because I couldn't even pay for it. He says, "Meet me at the Hilton." So I mean, my

room and all of that was taken care of because they had me staying at the Hotel New Yorker until I found an apartment and all of that. So that wasn't a problem. So he takes me to dinner and then he was leaving that night on the train. So we go back to Port Authority and he says, "Watch my bags. I'll be right back". He comes back with a lollypop sucker that big, and he gives it to me.

Laughter (both)

...along with five hundred dollars, and said, "Here". He said, "Dennis, you're not in the country anymore. People stop you on the street, you have to keep walking. You have to ignore them. You unfortunately have to lose your heart in New York." So it's so funny 'cause I left there and I'm walking back to the hotel and this guy stopped me and I just snapped at him (laugh). I felt so bad after because it was so out of character for me. But so that movie, *The Sting*, I appreciated it, because it clearly is what happened to me.

JM: but this guy at the Avaloch, he gave you your first Berkshire cooking, but meanwhile you still ... so later after New York, you went up to Hyde Park and then how did you get b back over here?

DP: After 19 years at Hyde Park, I decided I was going to open a restaurant. And, so I come back and, I was coming home during the middle of the week to break up the week. But it got to the point where I really wanted to be with the kids, the family and everything. And, we had adopted Patricia at the age of 16. She was in her last year of high school. She used to babysit for us. My wife says to me one night she says, "Trish wants us to adopt her". I said "Why would we do that?" "Well, you know, I always wanted a girl." And I figured well, my wife just wanted a female to talk to (laugh), and so I invited Trish to dinner one Sunday afternoon, and we sat around and I asked her why she wanted to come and live with us and she said, "I just, you know I babysit for Dedan and Jabari, and I just like the atmosphere in your home. I've always been..." She said, "I've been through like 70 , foster homes and I'm getting ready to graduate and I just want to belong to somebody at the time of my

graduation". So, I tell my wife "Okay". So of course, she moved in. Because she was used to so much freedom, she didn't realize, and she thought really with us being young, she would really have it made. But when I put the curfews in place, she found that difficult to deal with. I said "there's nothing for me in Pittsfield for me at 11 o'clock at night, so I know there's nothing for you." And we fought and fought, and then I finally said to my wife, "We're not adopting her. Nope, It's off the table." So I get a call from my wife asking if I could come home on Wednesday night. She says, "I need you to go somewhere with m." I said, "okay." So, I came home and we went to the agency that was actually handling her case. I had never read her case. My wife had. So, we're sitting there and we're talking to the social worker and she says, "Mr. Powell, all of a sudden you decided not to adopt Trish", she says. "What changed your mind?" I said, "Oh, she doesn't love herself. She doesn't love us, She's selfish. She's this, she's that. All she cares about is herself." The woman looks at me. She says, "Oh. I get it. So you're telling me when your boys become teenagers and they start acting like Trish, you're going to disown them." She said, "This is a teenager. This is what they do." So I looked at my wife and said, "You think you're smart". I said, "okay." And that was it. I remember the adoption. The judge actually had questioned Dedan and Jabari and asked them if they knew what they were here for, and what their parents were getting ready to do. And he actually had them sign the adoption papers before we signed them. And, so it as beautiful. Today I can say I'm glad I did it.

JM: Do you remember the judge?

DP: I think it was (pause). I still have the adoption papers.

JM: I'm just curious because I know some of the probate judges.

DP: But what he did was, he cleared the room. He says, "No one has a right to witness this because" he said "all of you are here for separation and divorces. This is a happy time. Get out of the room" It was just just us in here.... And he really drilled Jabari and Devan and said, "You know, you may have less because your parents

are taking on someone now". They loved her, I mean, because like I say, she babysat for them and they had no problem whatsoever.

JM: Big move.

DP: And it was tough because I know why people don't, but I had a close friend of mine at the Culinary and him and his wife had adopted but they had adopted both of their children when they were infants. They were brother and sister, and actually took on their personality. Until he told me that they were actually adopted, you never would have known. So he talked to me about it and he says, like I said, I am glad I did. She lives in New York and my granddaughter Tatiana, she had one child. So that was a right decision. And then we opened the restaurant when I left the school and came back.

JM: What was the name of that?

DP: Wendell House Bistro. It was on Wendell Avenue Extension, and under the hotel. I actually thought Pittsfield was ready for ... my friend Paul Bach had closed the Pillars, I mean the Coachlight which was on West Housatonic Street. So I figured, Pittsfield no longer has a table cloth restaurant.. that maybe mine could make it. And I always believed that dining was to be entertaining. And that when you go out to dine, that's all you should be doing. Not using dinner to go somewhere else, because then you hurry up and eat your meal to make the next , and then you sit there and you complain about your stomach and how bad the food was, when it was really the way you consumed it. So I decided I was going to open sort of a melting pot. So, I decided to do New Orleans, Creole, French, German, Italian. And because I felt that dining was entertaining, ninety percent of my menu was made right at the table. *All my pasta dishes were made right at the table, all my pasta dishes, steak au poivre, steak ...pasta cansardi, fettucine alfredo, everything was made.* Monday night I had class with the waiters and that's when I taught them how to make the items. I had a wine basket with like the old milk basket. I only carried six wines. I let the waiters know what wines went with what items, and instead of a wine list, they

would take the basket to the table so people could actually see the label and see the bottle. And I had live jazz Friday and Saturday night. And, Pittsfield just wasn't ready. All my clientelle came from Albany, south county, and very little Pittsfield. And it was very tough. I had written my business plan and I had taken it to Earl Krieger, who was my accountant at the time, and he asked me who did the plan. And I told them I did. He said, "Well when you go to the bank, make sure you tell them you put this business plan together yourself." He says, "You won't have any problem getting a loan." Well, he forgot there was one drawback because even though I had done the business plan and what not. Because of this, they, I had a SBA 90% guaranteed loan, which did not require me putting up anything, but the bank required me to put up everything but the dog and my children. I had to put the house up, everything. And their only loss on the loan would have been 10%. And they really weren't losing that because that would have been paid off. Like I said, the government guaranteed 90% of the loan. But that again was my first encounter with ... but... we ran that for about, and tough. I mean we struggled. it was closed twice. A friend of my wife actually called and said, Look I'm going to.. your place is too good to close, I'm going to give you guys \$15,000. You just give me 15 back, no interest, no nothing." Everybody was really kind to us except the banks. The banks were horrible. Berkshire County Bank was completely the opposite of when I got my home loan, and it was tough. And then, Deb - we had celebrated our nineteenth wedding anniversary on that Monday, and she was always one of these people that just loved surprises. I come home Monday and my driveway's full of people because, my memory, I got married on my birthday so I would never forget my anniversary. (sigh) (pause), which is tough now because I relive it and plus she was born 4th of July. so that whole period continues to be tough for me. But on Tuesday Paul Bach had come by the restaurant said, "Hey I want to take you down to the Culinary for your birthday for lunch. You probably haven't been down there since you left." I said, "Okay". And Debbie says, "Yeah, go ahead, It's not going to be busy. I can handle it," because she worked for but she used to come. You know this is part of struggle of black people, that white people don't understand at times. They talk about shiftless, lazy, all this. Debbie went to work at Department of Mental Health. She would leave on her lunch hour, come and work at the restaurant, then go back, and then at 5:00 come and work dinner, and that was our

schedule. And my schedule was, I was in the restaurant from 5 in the morning till 2 in the morning. We, like I said, we struggled through it. So that Tuesday I went down to Hyde Park, had lunch, came back and I looked at Deb and I said, "You look tired, why don't you go home. I can handle it - the dinner - by myself." And she did, and then I got home. And, we ate and she was doing the guest checks,, because she did all the bookkeeping and all of that for the restaurant in addition to everything else she was doing. And, I come out of the shower and ready to go to bed and I hear this noise and I she's on the floor, and I call 911, and wait and wait. Finally two cops show up at my house. And Deb's laying on the floor. The cop looks at me and says, "Is she on crack-cocaine?" And that's when crack was in Pittsfield, and they were locking blacks up right and left. It was not a medical problem then. It was a criminal problem. And I think it was her spirit when he said it that just made me run upstairs past Jabari. He was at the top of the stairs, and went right through my screen door. And they finally called the ambulance from my cellar, from my bedroom. And the ambulance came and it stopped three times on the way to the hospital trying to bring her back. Got to the hospital – Doctor Volastro comes out and says, "You need to think about donating her organs." And the way he said it just, I went off. Thank God, Michael Colby, who was the pastor at St. Stevens. He was there. And I understood. Cause I know Volastro, I mean, I love that guy. All he was doing because it was time sensitive, cause they got to give their organ team here and all that and he just, so because the next morning, I'm sitting in her room and he came in to examine her. I'm looking at the sheet. I keep seeing these drops hitting the sheet and I looked up and it was him - crying. And my son sat outside the room on the bench, down in the courtyard at BMC. Finally I had to go down have that conversation with him, and my daughter and son ... that we needed to take her off of the machine - let her have some dignity, So we did that. The next day, the cop that Captain Boyer, I mean that after that evening, Captain Boyer called me up and said, "Dennis, I want to send police officer to the restaurant to apologize." I said "Don't do that". I said "cause I don't think I can contain myself twice. I said, "What I would appreciate is you teach them to evaluate a situation and teach them compassion." I says, "She was dying. Even if she was on crack, what was he going to do, put handcuffs on her." You know, I said, "he said "well he didn't mean

anything by it." I said, "No. if he said is your wife on drugs, I would have thought prescription drug." I says, "But he saw a young beautiful black woman laying on the floor dying. It could only be crack cocaine." They had no... The 911 call had actually been erased. They claim I never called. And I said, "Well if i didn't call, how did the cops end up at my door." They confused me with Walter Powell, who is a cop who they were having a lot of difficulty with. And he had been abusive to his wife, so I think when they got the call, they figured it was his house. That's why they sent the cops. And, the only reason I didn't fight it because I didn't want to put my kids through all that. And the doctor assured me that because it was an aneurism, that her brain was completely flooded. Had she made it she would have just been a vegetable. It was the right thing, and then I had whole new life to contend with. But when she had died, all my colleagues from the Culinary Institute - five of them came up and actually ran the restaurant for me. So I could deal with that. So then I made the decision I had to give up the restaurant because I had two kids - 2 boys that I had to raise - they were just going into high school. And, I knew that it's great to have two parents, but I also knew you could have one good one. So I had a meeting with them I said, "Look, I'm angry, I know you're angry. But we can't be angry to the detriment of ourselves because your mother wouldn't want that." I says, "She started the foundation - i got to build the house. I'm not going to move because I don't want to take you away from your friends. That means I can't be your friend. One day I hope we can be friends, but now I got to be your parent." I promised them I wouldn't take anybody in my life until I got them through high school into college. And, we made it, and I remember the first time I ever hugged my son was his senior year at Northeastern, and it was the last football game, because he was a helluva a football player here in Berkshire County. And that's one of the reasons that I wouldn't fight any of the racism because I didn't want them to retaliate against him and so I just sucked it up. And he used to get so discouraged when I would come home and he asked me if I got the job and I say, "No". He'd say "Keep talking about schooling and all of this. You got all this education, all these credentials and you can't get a job." I said "No, I couldn't get that job, but I've never been unemployed."

JM:1:47:36 I'm dying to know when you ended up. Where did you get a job?

JP: I went into catering - Created my own - and I needed to do that because I couldn't take really a full-time job because I had to be that Dad. So, I did catering and again, thank God, I had Dallas, because he helped me. I had so much support with my kids - the church, members of the church, that they really helped me. My brother guided me with discipline, because I remember punishing Jibari for something, and my brother said, "Dennis, he's a good kid. ,Punishment doesn't fit the crime. Lighten up." So I remember that night at the dinner table I said, "Jibari, your uncle said I was too harsh. " I says, "So I apologize and you're off the punishment. But I'd like for you to do is, you tell me in a week what you think your punishment should be." A week went by, nothing. Next week, he says to me "Dad I'm going this Saturday night." He said, "Dad, I'm going over to the...." I said, "You're not going anywhere". "What do you mean?" I said, "You're grounded". "I didn't do anything". I said, "Yeah, that's the point." I says, "It isn't easy to inflict punishment, is it?" I said, "Did you actually think you were going to get away?" I said, "I always told you: for every action, there's a reaction, there's a consequence". I said, "When I was in the service and stationed in Germany, I went AWOL every year to go to the Munich Jazz Festival, but I accepted the punishment for going AWOL. I said "matter of fact, my last year there, I went to the company commander and I said, can I start my punishment now because the jazz festival's coming up?" And he said to me, "Damn it Dennis, just go!" He says, "You never complained, you did the punishment." He says, "Just go. I'm going to give you the time off to go. You're last year here, just go." I always told my kids, "You can do anything as long as you accept the consequences for your action. And if your action is positive, my reaction is positive and if your action is negative, my reaction is negative." I says, "So I gave you a week to tell me" ... I said" you could have told me, "Wash the dishes for one night. I would have accepted. But you came back with nothing... thinking that you got over, and that's not acceptable, so you're in for tonight." I mean, that's what,that's how... And I look at him today, and I sent him a Father's day card actually telling him he should write a book on fatherhood. And he called me up and he said, "I had a good teacher". And that just (pause). And I

says, "No, you have a better bond with your children than I ever had with you." I said, "because in my era, males didn't hug male children. They just didn't. I says, "but you have.." I mean, his wife worked from home so she always needed her sleep. When the babies cried, he would get them up and take them into the living room and lay them on his chest to put them back to sleep and everything and you know. He's just a terrific father. So, the first time we hugged was on a ...

JM: His graduation?

DP: His last football game at Northeastern, and his aunt took the place of his mother and so he presented roses to her, and him and I hugged. And, it wasn't until he actually got married and I was his best man. After I spoke about him and we hugged. And that's when I felt the energy from his body come into my body. And that's when I realized... that's when we bonded as father and son. That was the true bond. And now we're best friends.

JM: Wow.

DP: And, I work for him (laugh)

JM: You do?

DP: He has Mad Jack's Barbeque

JM: Oh, Yeah.

DP: And I take orders from him now.

JM: Wow

DP: (laugh)

JM: Of course, he went into food too then, that's right

DP: He went in, not because I ever... I never believed parents should force their kids into their occupation, but he wanted to work in the restaurant. I told him, Debbie, give him an application, washing dishes. I would pay him the same thing, not an allowance, whatever I was paying the other dishwashers. But he liked to play at night and all the dishes would back up. Silver back up. And then he would try to get the staff to help him. And I said, "No, you're going to do it yourself. You're getting paid". So Debbie says, "Come on, he's just... He's 8 years old." I said, "Debbie, he can come to me at any time he wants, and say Dad, I made a mistake, I'm really not ready to work." I says, "If we're paying him allowance," I said, "But he's an employee and he's going to...When would like me to teach him work ethics? When he's too old?" I said, "Now is the time." I will tell you, his work ethics are just unbelievable. I mean, he juggles Williams College, his business, and his family."

JM: Wow.

DP: And he just .. so, that's I mean... He is .(pause) .. and I see him using some of the same tactics.

JM: With his kids.

DP: Jibari could have been a pro hockey player. He was that good the first time he put on skates. And my wife and I had sent him up to Lake Placid to hockey camp. Spent all that money. Report card came home. D's, C's. He come home one day and I'm putting the hockey gear in the car, and he says, "Dad I don't have a game tonight or practice". I said, "No your career is over. I'm taking this to the Boys Club and donating it so they can give it to some kid who can't afford it - the gear." And that was the smartest thing we ever did. Because for him to play football after his mother died, I told him, "I accept nothing less than 85 in every subject in order for you to play football. And Dallas always said, "You should have made it 90 cause he's capable" And my wife always worried that if something happened to her, whether Jibari and I could make it because we both had the same personality. I told her that the difference is that I'm the father. But I think there was times when he probably got

an 88 and he told the teacher, just give me the 85 - that's all my dad wants."
(laugh). That's the kind of kid he was. I always let them - like I said - whatever they did, they were always responsible. We lived Cole Avenue. The bus came up the street, came around and stopped right in front of the door. I came home one day. Debbie says, "We have to take Jibari to school. He got kicked off the bus." I said, "No, Jibari has to walk to school". Now, we live on Cole Avenue. He was going to Sterns.

JM: A little walk...

DP: Fifth grade. Got him up early. I followed him all the way to school. I drive up 2 streets, wait, when he passed, I drove 2 more streets, all the way to school. When he got out, I'd be right there, follow him all the way home. He'd get to the bottom of Cole Avenue, thought I was going to give him a ride up the hill. I went right past him. He never got kicked off the bus again. And Dr. Grace Jones was the Superintendent of Schools, and she was a member of St. Stephens. The Superintendent called her into the office and said "You got a car? talk to the Powell's. They cannot have their child walking to school." She says, "They don't. You do, you put him off the bus." She says, "I have all the confidence in what the Powells are doing and I support them." And it's all about consequences. Yes,! Did I have to take time out of work? I did. But I was not going to drive him to school. And he even told his cousins down the road,? one of them got kicked off. "You got to be glad you weren't living with my dad. You'd be walking to school". (laugh) I mean it's ... we laugh about it now, but those were important lessons. Clearly today, I really feel that we are in the situation we're in the situation we are in with a lot of our children because DSS went too far and they took the right of the parent to discipline and got it mixed up with child abuse, cause there's clearly a difference. You know, I see it all the time. I mean I used to tell my son, "Don't ever think you will speak to me the way your friends speak to their parents. Cause I will knock you out. It's that simple." We had one time when he was standing in the kitchen with both fists clenched down at his side having these dry heaves. And I said, "Wait a minute. Before you do what I think you're going to do, I want to identify tomorrow's scene for you." I said, "Tomorrow you'll be standing in front of the judge and I'm

going to be doing all of the talking because you're going to have so many tubes running in and out of you just to give you life, because if you think every morning I got up and fixed you a hot breakfast and built those muscles so you could use them on me ... em-em ..aint happening." So opened his hands, "I'm leaving". I open the front door and I open the back door. I said, "Which one do you want to use?" So, of course, he want right over to his aunt's, and she called me up and she told me. "Okay, he can come back once he decides he's not going to be disrespectful to me in my house."

JM: Tough - being a parent.

DP: And there's no formula.

JM: Yeah

DP: And I was fortunate

JM: yep

DP: Because at the time when his mother passed, that's when drugs and everything was in the community, and he could of went either way. And the last day I was taking him up to Herberg, he says to me, "Dad, I'd like for you to go back St. Joe's and see what I have to do to get in there." And I was so happy. I drove right to St. Joe. I said to Sister Julie, "Jibari wants to come here. I don't have money, but I have skills and I will barter my skills for his tuition." And that's how he ended up going to St. Joe's. I created that pasta pizazz, that fundraiser.

JM: wow, cool,

DP: And the first year we did it, that Saturday we took in like eight grand. I had this idea for all the restaurants give 10 gallons of pasta sauce, and I told them "It's your reputation so whatever you give" and we created all the restaurants in the gym. It was a kind of function that brought the parents, the community, the businesses,

everybody together. I had a contest with the florist shops asking them to make centerpieces out of pasta.

JM: Wow

DP: Only. And we used them and auctioned them off. I did cooking demos during it. I cooked all the pasta for everybody, and I used to cook the pasta at BMC 'cause they had the big vats - 900 pounds of pasta. (laugh) And, it was like I said it was probably one of the most successful fundraisers because it brought, like I said, the entire community together who were involved in it. And Jibari had graduated from Northeastern, and I finally said to them at St. Joe's, "Can I have my name back now." Cause it was always Jibari's dad. I said, "Do you think I can get my name back now." I said, "Do you think his tuition is actually paid up by now." You know, but...All good. All good. All positive. Back then parents and kids were just great.

JM: It's interesting that when you came here today, I thought we would talk about the NAACP and all those things, but it's so wonderful you shared with us, really your heart and your stories and we'll have to do another interview for the NAACP.

DP: laugh

JM: No Seriously, And we have an idea. Wendy and I have talked about this. Maybe we talk too - getting like three or four people whatever in the room and talking about the NAACP. You know, getting more of a group conversation about it - people who are the leaders - past - present leaders - talk about it. I know I do just want to mention these things though because you've been.... we talked on the phone a little bit ago, and you told me all the other things you're involved with, including the "Life Every Voice," the Licensing Board, first African-American on the Licensing Board and for some reason I don't have my notes with me, but I know there was more... NAACP, Licensing Board,

DP: I'm the Vice-chair of the Clinton Restoration Project in Great Barrington. I'm on the DuBois Lecture Series. We're actually planning his 150 anniversary next February, and I will soon be putting in my papers for the School Board.

JM: That's great.

DP: I guess... my son says, "Really dad!" says Jibari. I said, "Something has to change." And what I'm hoping for is that we've just started this wonderful youth group in the NAACP and I'm hoping to ...what's the word...mentor them for the future. And, I'm hoping that this will be my last year as president, and that we really have our young ready to step up to the plate and take the leadership roles. So, by working with the youth group, and then having them on all the standing committees, like the Education Committee, I've asked that each one of them, on a rotating basis, to attend the School Board meetings. And then, this way here, they will understand the working and all of that, and then hopefully I can get one of them to run in two years for the School Board. Because I'm trying to convince them that politics starts at home.

JM: That reminds me that you're also on the Four Freedoms Coalition, which started after the recent election.

DP: Yep, Yep...So I keep myself busy.

JM: Well, I look forward to that group. I hope you will be willing to do that.

DP: Sure

JM: Three or four or five or whatever. We might bring a camera, and have a conversation about what you are doing, what you hope to do, what's...it's not an accident that it's the NAACP that's really our first big project. It's the home of W.E.B. DuBois and Len Kates came to us and said, "Can we do it". So, we're very eager to do that.

DP: This is the first 100 years of the Berkshires, and in here is the... this is my grandparents here...

JM: So, we're looking at a book and, what's it called.

DP: *The First Hundred Years of Berkshire County*, and I wanted to show you this train station that they tore down.

JM: Yes, we'll get images, because the train station image. Mariah, this is something that we can do at the public library. The public library will have pictures of what he is talking about .. Mill Street, Union Station, all of that.

DP: No, look at that.

JM; Gorgeous.. And that's the walk over -overpass - to connect the downtown to the neighborhood.

JM: That's the other thing that I really appreciate about the interview... because you painted a picture.

DP: That's my Grandparents.

JM: Oh Wow, we probably want to scan that one. That's beautiful. We'll probably ask you to have another appointment, when we talk to you... we're going to ask you sign a release, probably take a picture of you, and we're going to scan some images.

DP: That was me (laugh), with my socks with no elastic in them (laugh).

JM: I'm going to take this picture, but ask you to bring them another time to scan. That's beautiful...we'll have an appointment where we can scan it...

Thank you for bringing them.