UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT
RYAN MIDDLE SCHOOL PROJECT

Interview with: Donald Roy Dickson
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DH: O.K. Please start by telling me your full name.

DRD: All right. My full name is Donald Roy Dickson.

DH: And tell me whether or not you are a native Houstonian. Also, something about your early life here.

DRD: Well, I am a native Houstonian. I was born and reared in Houston and specifically in Third Ward, which is an area of the city that is one of which is known by numbers rather than by area itself. And, of course, my early days in Third Ward were very rewarding days, very informative days -- the days, I guess, when the foundation of Donald Dickson was etched in stone because not only did our parents discipline us but all the way from home to school and from school to church and those paths that we traveled going to and fro, or to and from home and church and those kind of places. Everybody knew us and everybody would look out for us. And by the same token, if those same persons saw us doing things that were not right, they would chastise us. And not only, Debbie, would they chastise us but they would tell our parents. And when our parents got the news that they had to tell us or they saw us doing this or doing that, our parents would also chastise us. Those were the days when there was not a question as to whether or not those folk were right or whether they were wrong - it was the fact that they

believed what those folks said and they would rather chastise you, believing what they said, than for them not to chastise you and you to really have a feeling that you've gotten away with something because the little things that you get away with, then they grow into larger things. And so, home and family and school and church was the order of our agenda in those days and they were not just in the days that we grew up as little kids but that same format was prevalent in our teenage days and even in the days when we became big enough and old enough to finish high school. The same thing existed. But they were just the days that a solid foundation was built in our lives so that when the winds of life would come and the storms would blow in our lives as our parents knew they would, then they knew that we were on a solid foundation and we would not wilt under the strain of the storm, if you will.

DH: Tell me a little bit about where you were born.

DRD: O.K., where I was born. I was born in a low economic project setting and it was called the Cuny Home. It was an area where families lived who did not have a vast amount of income, and they were able to move into those low economic projects which were up and downstairs apartments like. And we grew up in those projects, I guess, as families. We grew up where if we didn't have sugar and we needed sugar in our home, we were able to go next door and borrow sugar. If we needed lemons for lemonade, we would go next door or, in some cases, we would go down the street, because our parents knew each other. But there were still some areas of division even in the projects because there were some folks who lived in the projects who didn't believe in the same things and possessed the same character, the same discipline and chastising of their children as my parents did and other parents. And so, we did not associate so much, even living in the

same projects, we did not associate so much with those kind because they would allow their children to run wild, do anything, and, of course, that brought folk into a fellowship. You tend to fellowship with persons who were like you, not so much in color and not so much in job title but in household beliefs and the upbringing of your children and that sort of thing. So, we grew up in those projects and we became products of those projects. And I think we came up pretty good.

DH: Can you talk a little bit about the community in the Third Ward and I want to ask you about one person in particular and your experience with him and that is Quentin Mease. Tell me a little bit about how you knew Mr. Mease.

DRD: O.K., well, we did not have, on that side on the south side of Third Ward, we did not have a YMCA. We had a YWCA on the other side of town in Third Ward. And I guess the push came through whatever means to build a YMCA on the south side of Third Ward. Mr. Quentin Mease was, I guess, the probing protégé person who really fought for that YMCA to be built in that area or to be built period, because normally wherever you found a YWCA which was for the young women, the young girls, then you would also have just the opposite somewhere else for the boys. Well, Mr. Quentin Mease became the director of the YMCA and I think it was in 1955 when it opened - he was looking to hire two lifeguards for the summer program. One of my football coaches whose name was Raymond Daniels and who was one of the premier swimming teachers at Yates and in Third Ward schools really, he was contacted about the two lifeguards that Mr. Mease needed at the Y. And so, Coach Raymond Daniels secured the services of myself and another boy named Earl Durham to be the first lifeguards. And so, we worked for Mr. Quentin Mease. He was a quiet man but he was a very stern man and he

kept you on your toes all the time. Let me tell you what he used to do. He used to come to the pool and he would have his water safety book in his hand, and he would just start asking us questions about water safety to see how much we knew about what we were really doing, you know. And when we would answer his questions and we even put on some little water safety acts for him . . . for example, we would go into the water in blue jeans and we would go under the water, take them off, tie them at the legs and then we would blow them up. And then, we would come out of the water and we would float on them. And he thought that was so nice. But he was a very formidable person and was a very, very, I guess you would call him, dot all of your I's and cross all of your T's. He did not allow too many stones to go unturned. That is the kind of man that he was. And, of course, again, his demeanor stuck with us because we were affiliated with those kinds of persons in every facet of our lives - folks who didn't play about life and they didn't play with us. They wanted us to become really men and men who knew they were men and that sort of thing. And so, that is one of the things that Mr. Mease really did for us when we were in our formative years.

DH: Tell me about some of the other people at Yates that were influential in that way.

DRD: Well, I would certainly have to put number one on the list was our principal, Mr. William S. Holland, who was a very personable administrator. He was a very stern man. He was a principal who did not play with children, but he would do anything that he could to help children. And we knew so much about him because he was our principal from the time we were in the seventh grade until the time that we graduated. And so, we knew what he expected of us and many times, we didn't act and we didn't behave in the manner in which we should but we felt the hurt and the quirks of our principal, Mr.

Holland, because he would not allow us to get away with foolishness and that sort of thing. I guess one of the greatest things that we learned from Mr. Holland was that we didn't have to take a back seat to anybody and that is because we were not inferior to anybody. We had a brain, we could think, we had eyes, we could see, we had a tongue, we could talk, we had legs, we could run, and we had a mind, we could think. And he wanted us to use all of those contributing factors to become good and viable and productive men and women. And he allowed us to understand that we didn't have to take a back seat to any . . . and he proved those facts. He didn't just talk about it. There was a time at the Armistice Day Parade that the black schools would have to march behind the white schools, and he came to a point in his administration where he said, "We won't do that anymore. We will not march behind the horses and the cowboys anymore," because they would march because we were getting ready for the football game on Thanksgiving. But they would march and they would step in the droppings from the horses who were also in the parade. And so, he told the persons who were administrators of the parade that we wouldn't march anymore if we couldn't march where the white schools marched. And he meant that. And he worked so hard in his tenure at Yates as principal, he worked so hard to get us the same quality of books that white schools had. When we would normally get our books, we would have no place to write our names because they had gone through the white system and then passed on down to us. So, there was no place for us to write our name. He worked very, very feverishly and very had to get us the same quality of material that other schools had. And, for some reason, they didn't like him for that and we can understand why because he was a - what should I say – a W. E. B.

DuBois? He was a pioneer of equality for us. And he did that not for himself but he did that for us, and it meant so much to us.

One of the other persons who meant so much to us and, you know, I am talking about other folk, but my dad meant so much to me. My dad was the pioneer that did so much for me.

DH: Tell me a little bit about some of the activities that you took part in, in school.

DRD: Well, I took part in football and I took part in track. I was also in the band in my seventh and eighth grade year. I played a trombone and I played a tuba and I played bass drums in the seventh and eighth grade. And that was because I couldn't get a football uniform. I was running track in the seventh and eighth grade. I wanted to play football but I couldn't get a uniform because of my size. Well finally, this same guy that I was telling you about - Raymond Daniels - who Quentin Mease consulted about the lifeguards, well, Raymond Daniels was instrumental in getting me a football suit my ninth grade year. And so, my ninth grade year, I didn't play in the band anymore, I was playing football in the ninth grade. And, of course, I was still running track. I was in the Glee Club, I was in the Press Club, I was in the French Club because all of us who took French, they had a club for us. And that was nice. But basically, most of my before school and after school activity time was in football and track. Those were the areas, extracurricular areas that I participated in.

DH: Tell me about your championship ring there. I see you are wearing that ring. What does that represent?

DRD: This ring represents - it is a Hall of Fame football ring that is symbolic of the Turkey Day Classics that we played in. Well, it was called the Turkey Day Game and

that sort of thing but it was such a grand affair and a grand game that some years after the game, which had been suspended by the district because of redistricting and that sort of thing, and so they didn't have the game anymore. And they wanted to keep the memories of the Thanksgiving Day football game of Yates and Wheatley, they wanted to keep that in the memory of people. And so, what they did, they came up with this Hall of Fame . . .

DH: Could you tell me the significance of the ring?

DRD: Well, as I said before, the significance of it is, is this was probably the greatest high school game in the state of Texas, and when I say great, I mean the number of people who attended the game. And it was a rivalry game that was played between Yates and Wheatley. And that game used to draw 37,000 and 40,000 and 42,000 people in Jepersen Stadium which is now Robertson Stadium. And really, it didn't make any difference what the records were of either team, all records and all wins and losses are out of the window in that game because it came down to really good blood, guts and tears in that game. And it was a game that was shared by the entire state of Texas. So, they devised a Hall of Fame ring from players who played in those games and I just happened to be one of the better players in the game, I guess, so I was inducted I think it was in 1996 or 1997, something like that. I was inducted into the Turkey Day Classic Hall of Fame as being one of the standouts. I had an opportunity to play two years in that game. And so, I was inducted into the Hall of Fame. And so, that is the reason I wear that ring.

DH: What position did you play?

DRD: I was a running back. This ring was styled after. The first Superbowl ring, the very first Superbowl ring looks almost exactly like this one.

DH: You started to talk a few minutes ago about when they redistricted and that game didn't take place anymore. Tell me a little bit about how that affected the community and Third Ward.

DRD: Well, there was, I guess you would say, a modest negative effect from this game not being played anymore because the community had become accustomed and had become so accustomed, I guess, to where they would go on Thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving Day, they knew that they would be at Jepersen Stadium to witness the Yates-Wheatley game. Well, after that game was no more, it did not have the same effect on those who were attendees of the game or those who participated in the game. It had more effect on them than those who did not really know that much about the game because, at this particular time now, the schools had become different, we didn't have the same . . .

DH: Tell me a little bit about how Jack Yates was impacted by the change from the old building to the new building and Mr. Holland being the principal to the new principal.

DRD: O.K., that was a great homage, negative effect on Yates during that transitional period and the reason it was is because Yates had had Mr. Holland as principal since 1940. The year I was born, Mr. Holland became principal at Jack Yates Senior High School. And now here we are, eighteen years later, and finally the things that he had fought so hard to get for us -- new chemistry labs and new auto mechanic buildings and just an upgrade in the school itself. Those things became prevalent when they became, I guess you would say, a part of Yates. We felt that the man who worked so hard to get us to that point should be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor but that was not the case. The slap in the face was that they brought a principal from our rivalry school, Phyllis

Wheatley Senior High School, they brought him from Wheatley and you've got to understand this: Wheatley was a much newer school than was Yates because Yates was built in 1926, and Wheatley was built somewhere around the early 1950s. And they brought a principal from a rivalry area and made him principal at Jack Yates Senior High School which was a slap in the face to our school, to our community, and especially to the things that he had worked so hard to get, and he was not allowed to enjoy those fruits of his labor. And, of course, it killed the school spirit because when the new principal came, he brought many of his teachers from Phyllis Wheatley to Yates over with him. So, Yates now did not have that decorum that they always had. They didn't have the faces of teachers and the cadre of teachers with that Yates spirit that we always had. And so, Yates was basically what you would call split in so many ways, divided, and in that division, the school spirit went down in the depths of that division because of the deterioration that came at that particular time. And they knew what they were doing from downtown. They knew exactly what they were doing, and that premise was to really show him that next time, maybe you will keep your mouth shut and, in so many words, that was what they said. Yes, we know you deserve it but you ain't gonna get it. And so, they didn't give it to him. And, of course, the impact, the negative impact that it had on the neighborhood and on the community was, well, who really cares about it now? And, of course, the morale and the character of the school began to degrade, began to go down because we were hurt. Even those of us who graduated the same year that they made that move -- many of us were at Texas Southern and even though we were not students there, we were hurt by the move that was made from the administrative staff. And Yates has never been the same since then, you see. And, of course, it had its symbolism from top to

bottom. The athletic program remained kind of at the top of the list because Yates would always get good athletes, but the school spirit just wasn't there as it had been in the past.

DH: This wasn't in the original list of questions but how did that affect the Turkey game to have the former principal of Wheatley now at Yates?

DRD: Well, you know, I really don't know from being inside looking out but I know from outside looking in, it was never the same. It was never the same because it was like Wheatley playing Wheatley. The only thing different were the uniform colors. And, you know, I don't think that I went to another Yates-Wheatley game after I left Yates. I don't think I did because we were devastated because of the transition that took place and how it took place.

DH: You mentioned about how before that time when you were still in high school, how you had a great set of teachers there that were very supportive. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

DRD: Well, we had teachers . . . first of all, many of my teachers in the twleve years, well, not twelve, in the six years that I was at Yates, many of my teachers had taught my mother. And so, it was a snowball effect, if you will. Since they knew my mother, they would not allow me to say I can't do it. They would make you come to class after school and learn what you should have learned that day. I think I told you - they would not allow you to fail. They made you get your work. And they would tell you that failure is not an option in this class. You are going to pass this class and you are going to do whatever it takes to pass this class. And they meant that. If it came to chastising you to get your attention as to what they really meant when they said what they said or come to your house and tell your parents that you ain't getting it done, or take you to the coach

and tell the coach that you are not passing that class and if they did that, you knew what was going to happen. If you were not passing your class, you would not play in that football game that week, or you were not running that track meet that week. And so, they had leverage to use on your because athletics meant so much. And then, even those kids who were not in athletics, they were in something. They were Ryan Cadets. They were in Auto Mechanics Club. They were in some club that carried weight, that forced you to have to be productive positively so in your class, and if you didn't produce in your class, there were no extracurricular activities for you after school. And everybody wanted to be a part of something, you see. And so, our teachers were the kind of folk that they would see to it that . . . and, you know, we worked for many of our teachers. My homeroom teacher - I remember I used to have to go on Saturdays and clean up her house, and she had two girls. But I would have to go and clean up that house, you know, clean windows and beat rugs and that sort of thing because she lived in my neighborhood. Our teachers lived in the same places where we lived after we moved out of the Cuny Home. And so, they were a part of us and so, they saw to us. They were just like our parents, our uncles and our aunties and that kind of thing, so they saw to it that we did what was necessary to not just pass the class but to learn the contents of the class work. And we had to do that. There was no getting around it. And, of course, we were upset many times when it was happening but who cared? Nobody. Most of our teachers had the same first and middle name. Do you know what it was? Old Mean Ms. So and So, or Old Mean Mr. So and So. And we said that because they made us do it. They didn't care. They saw to it that we learned content so that when we left that class, we not only passed the class with flying colors but we knew content work. Yes.

DH: Tell me where you went to college and a little something about your experience there.

DRD: Well, I attended Texas Southern University. I attended Texas Southern on a football and track scholarship, half football and half track, or half track and half football. Experiences were great. I had basically the same experiences with my teachers at Texas Southern as I had at Yates. And I was so familiar with Texas Southern because I lived right across the street. For ten years, I lived right across the street from Texas Southern. I would go over there every day. And the other thing is at Yates, we did not have a track to practice on so the track coach at Texas Southern allowed the track team to practice with them at Texas Southern. So, the track coach at Texas Southern knew me from the time I was twelve years old in the seventh grade until I graduated. So, he noticed maybe about my ninth grade year that I had talent and he started recruiting me from the ninth grade that when I graduated, he wanted me to come to Texas Southern on a track scholarship. And basically, that is what happened. But Texas Southern, as I fore stated, was a neighborhood school and I knew as much about Texas Southern as I did Yates. I think I would have rather gone off to school but because of the fellowship and the relationship that I had with the coaches at Texas Southern, it was across the street transfer that I made to go to college. Well, I graduated three times from Texas Southern. I graduated with a B.S. degree in physical education and health education, and I received a master's degree in physical education. And then, I received another master's degree in administration. So, I stayed until I could get everything basically that they had to offer. They did not have a doctoral program in my area and that was basically the only reason that I did not pursue a doctoral degree at Texas Southern. I had a fellowship to go to

Cincinnati University to do doctoral work but there is many a slip between the cup and the lip and I didn't do that. So anyway, I stayed there until I got what I was after.

DH: So, where did your career path take you?

DRD: Well, when I graduated, I've got to tell you this and I don't know whether I will tell you on camera or not but anyway, I was kicked out of school. In my junior year, I was kicked out of school for bad behavior and during those days when you are kicked out of school, well, as long as you are in school, you are 4F according to the draft. You don't have to go to the service. And once you are not in school at the age of twenty-one, then you become 1A. And because of my behavior, something that I was not proud of at that time and I am still not proud of it now, but I take it as an avenue that served to land me where I did land. But, again, it was by the grace of God that it happened that way. But anyway, I was suspended from school and I was turned in to the draft board. And so, I was drafted the next year which was 1962. And I went into the service. I had an opportunity . . . after I underwent my training, I was sent to Germany and I had an opportunity to play football, two years of football, in Germany. And, of course, then I was drafted by the Canadian Football League from the league in Germany. And so, I ended up playing with the Montreal Alouettes in Montreal, Canada. I stayed there for three years. And then, I came back . . . I got hurt and I came back after the season and, of course, my injury was so severe until I didn't go back my third year. Because I went back to school, went back to Texas Southern and was doing so well, I didn't want to interrupt that process so I stayed there until I graduated. And that ended my football career.

So, after graduation, then my first teaching job was in Freeport and I taught at Freeport Intermediate School. I was the only black teacher on staff at Freeport

Intermediate. I taught there for two years and then I came to Houston the following year and became coach at Fonville Junior High School. And, again, I became the first black head coach in HISD to become head coach at a white school in HISD. And then, I coached from 1969 here in Houston until 1979. And then, I went into security work with a former coach and worked with him in HISD security for four years. And then, I went back to Albert Thomas where I previously coached and then became assistant principal there. And I stayed there for four years. Then, I went to Pershing Middle School as assistant principal and I stayed there four years. And then, I was summoned back to the athletics department as one of the directors of athletics and became director of Barnett Stadium and I was there for ten years before I retired. It is a long trail.

DH: It is a great path. What comparisons would you make between education when you were a student and maybe education when you were administrator and then education today?

DRD: No comparison. The teachers in the school I attended, they had, as I fore stated, they had leverage. They had things that they could use to make you get it and they had the support of parents that would help the teacher. In other words, if the teacher would tell parents then that their son or their daughter or whatever the case may be, they were not really putting forth all the efforts needed in order to do thus and so, then the parent would work with the teachers so that they could move that child from point A to point B. There was not the kind of relationship between parent and teacher that there is today. There seemed to be an attitude that parents don't want to work with teachers nowadays because they tend to think that teachers are after that child or they are trying to make false accusations against that child. When I was coming along and in my first days of

teaching in Freeport and then in Houston, parents worked with the teachers and they gave them their support. But it is different now in that teachers don't get that parental support that they need in order to get the job done. And then, the demeanor, the behavior and the attitude toward academics is so much different now than it was before because there are so many avenues now that children can take, kids can take, as they leave the school arena. They can become business folk who really don't . . . and, grant you, they need schooling but they have so many other avenues that they don't see the academics as being important in their lives now, and much of that has to do with their attitude towards the teacher. My first coaching job in Freeport, I could walk down the street and folk would come out of their houses and they just would holler, "Hey Coach Dickson," and holler this. "We are going to fix dinner for you," and all that kind of thing. That is the respect that they had for coaches and teachers of that time. And now you walk down the street and they are subject to come out of their house with an uzi to shoot you down because they don't have any respect for teachers and administrators and that kind of thing now. I am not saying all of them but by and large, most of them.

DH: How can we fix that?

DRD: Well, we've got to go back. We've got to go back to getting the child and the student to recognize the dire importance of an education; that they would understand that you need an education. You may not see the value of it now but somewhere in life's run, you will need an education, you will need to know your multiplication tables, you will need to know how to diagram sentences. You will need to know all of those things that deal with your learning in school. You will need that somewhere down the line. And to

get them to see the value in it and the importance, even when it comes to teaching their children when they get out of school; that it is important and you will need it. Yes.

DH: Is there anything else you want us to know about you or anything else you want your children to know?

DRD: Well, you know, I have nine grandchildren and I say to them quite often that you don't get paid for doing what you ought to do. I had to settle that issue real early. "Coach, I made five A's. I made six A's. Give me a dollar. Give me five dollars." You don't get paid for doing what you are supposed to do. You do what you are supposed to do because you have the ability to do it. Now, if Coach decides that he wants to give you, then that's all right but I don't owe you anything. And so, I teach them from the perspective that nobody owes you anything. You get out of life what you put in it. If you put effort in it, you will get some good results from your effort but if you don't put anything, you won't get anything. So, there is nothing free in life. Everything that you get, you earn it, you see. And so, that is one of the things that I think we need to get back to in dealing with our children and getting them to recognize really what is important in life because they get paid for everything, you know. I don't have anything really against giving them little monies because I used to ask my uncle . . . I had an uncle and I used to ask my uncle, "Uncle Freddie, give me a quarter." He said, "What you said?" I said, "Give me a quarter." He said, "Well, you'd better come around to this nickel here, Son." So, there is nothing wrong with asking but there is always a lesson that ought to be taught in everything that you do for your children and grandchildren. You teach them that Coach don't owe you anything. Everything that you get, listen, you get it because you have a coach like me, you have a grandfather like me because, in many cases, if it had not

been for your grandfather, you know, you wouldn't have a father. So, going back to teach the values of life and living and how life operates. Yes.

DH: All right.

DRD: This is a picture of one of my football players at Fonville Junior High School. A young man by the name of Tim Levere who had only one leg and had a prosthesis on his left leg that did not allow him to play football in high school but because the junior high school program was not under the UIL, he could play in junior high school. This young man now is a doctor. He is an orthopedic surgeon. But this picture was taken because of his ability to operate on the football field.

This is an old picture, I guess you can see, of yours truly his junior year in high school running the 100 yard dash, and I tell everybody all the time that this is the race that they took from me because I won that race and they gave me second. But I was a junior in high school and ran 9.7 that year in junior high. This was what they used to call the city track meet. That was a meet between Yates, Wheatley and Washington. And, of course, if you see it good enough, you can see that I won that race. They took that race from me. That was the 100 yard dash.

And, of course, this is a picture of the backfield at Jack Yates High School which was also my junior year, a young man by the name of Kyle Dockery, the big boy in the middle and the other kid was Eugene Gaylord. We were the running backs at Jack Yates in 1957.

DH: Did you have a nickname? What was it?

DRD: Man tan.

DH: Man tan?

DRD: Yes.

This is a write-up that was in the *Post*, I believe, some years ago that talked about memories of the past fading fast or something but really had to do with the fact that the things, the accomplishments that were made by athletes back in the days of segregation and how fast people tend to forget the blood, sweat and the tears that came forth out of athletes back in those days which really got to a point where they really meant nothing to the athletes of today. But this is really to show individuals that there were a lot of rough roads that had to be crossed by the athletes in those days to line them where they are today. And so, this is a write-up about those days.