

“My Witness” Podcast Transcript
Metro Arts and One Voice Nashville
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MMR: Welcome to the “My Witness” podcast, a collaboration between One Voice Nashville and Metro Arts to support *Witness Walls*, Nashville’s Civil Rights-inspired public artwork, next to the Historic Metro Courthouse. In creating these podcasts, we hope to honor the fight for racial equality during the Nashville Civil Rights movement, educate youth about this history, and continue the conversation about social justice in our community.

GJP: I am Genevieve Jean-Pierre, I am in 8th grade, and I am interviewing Mr. Walter Hood.

Mr. Hood, can you describe when you first became aware of race or racism?

WH: Hahaha, why’d you hit me with that one? Uh, I guess I was probably seven? Six or seven years old. Growing up in North Carolina—Charlotte, North Carolina—and we lived in a trailer park and my father was in the military and...I was out playing with another kid whose father was in the military who just happened to be white. And we were playing and then someone came up and called me the N word. I didn’t know what it was, then me and my friend went back to our parents and asked them. That was kind of the first time.

GJP: Did that influence any feelings, then?

WH: At the time, it made me feel for the first time, different. Again, I grew up on military bases up until that point, which were probably the most integrated and diverse environments that one can grow up on in the early ’60s. So it really made me feel different. And after, you know, we had to settle into a neighborhood it became very clear that neighborhoods were segregated. So everybody in my new community, by the time I started first and second grade, they were all African-Americans. So that became really really clear to me—that there was a difference right in the world.

GJP: Does that memory kind of contribute to how or why you’ve gotten into art?

WH: Yes, and no. I mean, I think I’ve always had an inclination or a creative bent, whether it be music, whether it was making things, whether it was drawing...I’ve always had kind of an inclination towards that. But you know, being the first person to go to college, in my family...you know, it was not one of the chosen fields of study per se. And I kind of always knew in the back of my mind that I wanted to do things a little more different and when it came time, when it became known that I could actually pursue a career in the arts, I jumped at the chance. I’m the youngest of three, I have two older sisters, and you know, it was a very feminine household. I grew up with my grandmother, my mother passed away very young, so there were always women. Very strong women in my life. And I think that probably led to me having a bent more towards the creative side, because, I mean, they were always doing things. From sewing and

cooking and making...as a young boy, I was always out, you know, making. When I came home, there was this relationship. So I can remember very early, you know, making a doghouse for my dog or helping my sisters, you know, make clothing for their Barbie dolls, et cetera et cetera. I can stay that now with a straight face. But those were things that were just part of my environment. My grandmother sewed quilts, she gardened...so all of those things, I think, kind of created this more inquisitive, sort of, nature for me.

GJP: Those family members in your life were some people who you could relate to when the world didn't understand?

WH: Oh, for sure. Particularly with my grandmother. You know, as someone who is kind of rooted in a Southern vernacular, it was very easy for her to explain things through storytelling, which I think was probably my saving grace.

GJP: Can you describe your experience at North Carolina A&T University?

WH: Um, my experience?...it was probably one of the...I think I would say, one of the more central kind of experiences to my development. To go to a university that was predominantly African-American, to have role models in every one of my teachers, to look at thousands of people walking around, you know, trying to navigate higher education that all look like me...it was a very nurturing place. And I think it gave me courage to, you know, spend four years of my formative life with these amazing role models to give me courage to go out into the world and ask the kind of questions I wanted to ask. So it was a very safe place, it was very nurturing.

GJP: Do you think that maybe your career, or where you are now, would be different if you had chosen to go to a different college?

WH: Oh for sure. I mean, I think a lot of the confidence, a lot of the kind of...interest in culture, I think also the belief in oneself, you know, through a kind of environment that nurtures versus and environment that, you know, is more frightful. Meaning, there's no connection. I definitely think I would have ended up completely in a different place.

GJP: What most influenced your decision to pursue architecture and art?

WH: It was probably, like most people, I remember reading *The Fountainhead*, this amazing, book, when I was in high school. And also, I took drafting in high school, which was also taught by an African-American male, who became a role model, and I was the only African-American taking the course. Drafting is a kind of mechanical aspect of drawing, and before computers, you had to be taught how to make a drawing. And so these are like the drawings you see from a computer—people used to do those by hand. That's drafting.

You know, it's like one of those things that is really hard to describe, but when you discover something...I just remember walking by a classroom with people in cloaks, you know, drawing on these high tables, and I just walked in and said "what are you guys doing?" and they said "it's called drafting." And I immediately, you know, became hooked. And again, I was the only brown person in my class for two years, in a school that was highly integrated, so it felt like something completely fresh, something completely now, and I was hooked. And it really had all of those

things—making, thinking, right? I mean you can make a house, you can make a tall building, you can make a world...and I really reveled in that.

There are few artists that I have a reverence for but also know. One of those would be Martin Puryear. Martin is a sculptor—he just had a big retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art a few years ago, but I've had the chance to kind of hang out with Martin and talk with him and discuss the work, and I really...he's one of the first African-American artists that I was able to engage that was making work from a purely more idiosyncratic point of view—meaning his experiences, his studies, his research—and I always look at his work as this kind of touchstone as far as, you know, the broadness but also the narrowness of the focus. And so in trying to bring together all of the things I'm interested in, I think some of Martin's work comes closer in metaphorical content as well as their kind of deliberate nature.

GJP: Do you ever get inspiration from nature and things around you for your artwork?

WH: All the time. I mean, I'm trained in landscape architecture as well as architecture as well as art, and part of your environmental training is...I remember very early, learning like 500 plants, you know, when I was like 21 years old. And so this notion of being conscious of things around you...I think that's now grown into me being very interested in getting other people to see the things that I see. And so a lot of the work—this notion of, you know, amplifying things around you—is a big part of the things that we do. Because there is this really keen adjustment that you need to make, you know, to allow people to sort of see the world through your eyes. And once you kind of become clear what the vehicle might be for that, whether a sculpture, whether they're gardens, whether they're, you know, temporary installations...they all become part of sharing something, right? That you enjoy, with a larger population.

GJP: I am getting that artwork is a kind of medium for you to show how you see things and get other people to know what you think of things. Is there any other way or medium that you have ever used to allow people to see the way you do?

WH: Um, I think in space, I think a lot of the works we do, I think some of the gardens that we do, create a kind of spatial aperture for people to see things differently. Whether it's using 100-year-old trees, set on top of a freeway, or taking...how do I say...taking an abstract set of geometries and placing them under a freeway to get people to see that the freeway doesn't really matter that much. Or to put people at the edge of a glaciated moraine, like in Jackson, Wyoming, and just take the car away. Allow them to see the landscape without a car. These are ways that are simple, that you can kind of do, like sculpture, to get people to see the other side of things. And so, those are always kind of motivations for us in the artwork.

GJP: So many of your projects explore race, identity, and social justice. Can you tell me about some of your favorites?

WH: Hmmm. Um, probably one of my favorites is the first project I ever did. It was called *Courtland Creek Park*. It was this small little creek in east Oakland and we planted 150 trees over three blocks. And we planted them along the edge of the street so that they formed like, a hallway. Right? And they were all the same color, and I was challenged by everyone that 'you can't do that in a city', and we didn't want to put concrete sidewalks, we said, since there's a creek next to it...let's just put dirt. And 20 years later, that project is still there. It was done by,

you know, local people in the community. For one week a year, the entire street is ablaze in pink color. And that taught me one simple thing. It's like...to get people to understand and see their environment, you gotta go big. And I don't mean just big in scale, but whatever you're proposing, particularly that's dealing with a lot of these issues of people being invisible in the landscape, or people in these inequality landscapes, that whatever you do, has to be of a scale. And scale can range, because it's all in relationship to things. And so that's probably one of my favorites. Another one would probably be 7th Street here in Oakland—there's a sculpture that we did over the road, which is at the scale of a freeway...set of signs, and we have Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, over the freeway and it sort of reminds me when I was growing up of having Martin Luther King and John Kennedy hanging in the kitchen, and so now we have these 8 foot tall by 50 foot wide thing of these amazing people...black heroes in the neighborhood. Obama is there, as well, next to Malcolm, next to Martin, and next to a local hero in the neighborhood. And so this idea of being able to say "we're here", again, is another thing that I think art and architecture can begin to help for neighborhoods and people who seem invisible in the landscape.

GJP: Do you have any advice for aspiring artists who want, like you said, to do things on a larger scale and get their ideas and their artwork out there?

WH: Mm hmm. Well the one thing, that you have probably have heard this before, just become good at the thing you want to be, and your identity and what you want to say, your politics, your values and attitudes, will come through that medium. But don't do the opposite, right? Don't take the medium for granted and think it's going to get you somewhere if you don't put the time in to get good at it, right? And so, I would imagine you're playing music and you sort of see when you practice, right? You get better, right? And so this idea of...if you want to go into art, if you want to go into architecture, get good at the thing first so that you get to a point where you can improvise just based on feel, right? Just based on what you're trying to say and it's almost effortless, to a certain degree. So that's what I would give you.

GJP: Could you explain what your artwork *Witness Walls* will look like when it's installed later this year?

WH: I don't know. [laughter] Um, I really don't. And that's the beautiful thing of art—you know, I had an idea about the space on the side of the building. I had an idea about images on a wall that could tell a story. And then, you know, we started doing more research into the archives and I found that some of the images touched me in a completely different way. So, you know, on one side of the wall, there are these images that I remade of women and children, and on the other side are more photo-realistic images. It's in a very small space, there will be some sound, there will be some water, and that's as far as I know. Right? Um, as far as the feeling...this is the beautiful thing of making, you know....you're only gonna know what it is when you're done. And that's the scary part, but it's also the part that makes you keep doing it, right?

GJP: *Witness Walls* includes strong imagery photos, as well as music and fountains. How do you expect people will experience it?

WH: Well a lot of the space is just pure movement that people are walking through. But there's also places for people to sit. And, I guess at the end of the day, it's a space in which people can come and actually look at, how can I say, look at a piece of art that documents the civil rights in

a very different way. And it's through these images. And I want people to have a conversation about the images, right? Because it's not a clear narrative—the narrative is not, you know, *Brown v. Board of Education* at one end, the Voting Rights Act at the other end. It's a piece. And this is part of a conversation we've been having and I would just like to have it with you, as well. If you imagine, you know, all of the artists—particularly brown artists—in North America or America. If all of us could say something, let's just say about civil rights, and you have the freedom to do it, and we have multiple pieces out there in the world for people to look at, they could then formulate a very diverse view of something that was very diverse versus having only a few things. And so, what I'm hoping is this is just a different view that gets people to kind of think about a time that they've heard about/read about in a lot of different ways, but maybe think about it in a different way. And it's my point of view, which is a very kind of personal, you know, sort of take, which I believe art has that ability to be. And then once you put it out in the world, it becomes something completely different.

GJP: With *Witness Walls*, it combines many elements of emotion and history and your perspective...and how do you think that people will react to this?

WH: I'm hoping they feel like there is a place they can go to and reflect. That would be the biggest thing. And, you know, and I hope that it will push people or prompt people to add more to the story. Meaning, to think that maybe we need to do more pieces that deal with this time.

GJP: How would you explain to people of my age the Civil Rights movement?

WH: I would say that, you know, fifty years ago there was a point in time where the black community really forced and engaged with America to honor their rights within the Constitution. I think...one thing that I would like you guys to understand is that it didn't end. That all of the things that we're going through today is part of the Civil Rights movement. And I think we can't become complacent—that what we're seeing is really, you know, part of this long, long road that we have to take as brown people but also a long road that this country has to take in engaging in this experiment, this experiment of diversity and having people who have diverse backgrounds be together. And I think one of the things that, you know, kind of gets in the way of that clarity is the legacy of slavery. And you know, until we have that honest conversation, and some of that conversation can't happen between African-Americans, I think some of it has to happen in other communities, but I want the youth to know that this is still part of that movement. And that we shouldn't forget or think or become complacent that something was resolved fifty years ago and now we don't have to worry about it. Because I think if you look through that lens, people won't be so, how can I say, difficult to have a communication...we'd have more communication if we thought about it as a continuation of a long struggle.

[to Genevieve] I was gonna say, an 8th grader! Man, I feel like I'm talking to the *New York Times*...this is really wonderful! You're very smart, and I hope you can understand some of the things that I was saying as well. And I look forward to meeting you on our trip to Nashville for the opening.

MMR: We hope you enjoyed listening to this "My Witness" podcast. To hear more podcasts or for more information on the *Witness Walls* public artwork, go to witnesswalls.org. Metro Arts'

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Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016