Arkansas Supreme Court Project
Arkansas Supreme Court Historical Society
Interview with
Ronald Sheffield
Little Rock, Arkansas
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Interviewer: Ernest Dumas

Ernest Dumas: I am Ernie Dumas and I am interviewing Ron Sheffield, former justice of the Arkansas Supreme Court. This interview is being held at his home in Little Rock, Pulaski County, on August 17, 2017. The audio recording and transcript of this interview will be donated to the Arkansas Supreme Court Historical Society and to the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual Arkansas History at the University of Arkansas. The recording transcript and any other related materials will be deposited and preserved forever in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. And the copyright will belong to the University of Arkansas and the Arkansas Supreme Court Historical Society. Judge, will you please state your name, spell your name, and do you give your consent to the Supreme Court Historical Society and the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History to make the transcript available for whatever use they make of it.

Ronald Sheffield: Certainly. Ronald Lee Sheffield. And I am more than willing, yes.

ED: Let's start at the beginning. You were born in Ohio, right?

RS: Coshocton, Ohio.

ED: And the day?

RS: June 30, 1946.

ED: And your mother and father?

RS: My mother was Mildred Hattie Sheffield. And I don't know who my father is.

ED: You don't know who your father is?

RS: No.

ED: All right, let's talk a little about Coshocton. Tell me a little about how you came to be born in Ohio.

RS: Well, my grandfather worked in a coal mine in West Virginia, and he wanted to get away from the coal mines. In the small town of Coshocton, Ohio there were manufacturing jobs which were safer and better paying than working in the coal mines. You had J. B. Clow's, which was a manufacturer of cast-iron pipe. There was Pretty Products, which was a business that manufactured glassware. For a long time … You probably heard of Anchor Hocking glassware. That was made in Lancaster, Ohio, which was not far from Coshocton. Then there was an RCA plant that was close by in Cambridge, so my grandfather brought my grandmother and they moved to Coshocton so they would no longer have to work in the coal mines.

ED: There was some coal mining around there as well, wasn't there?

RS: Right. But not as much.

ED: Have you traced your family back to the South sometime in the past?

RS: It's funny you should ask that. A friend of mine does the Ancestry.com stuff. I can only tell you about one side of my family, my mother's side—my maternal grandfather's name, Sheffield. She did some research. She found that the Sheffield side of the family actually had an ancestor who was an officer in the Confederate Army.
ED: An officer in the Confederate Army?
RS: Yes, and I said, "You've told me as much as I need to know." But I have asked my aunt, Lula Williams, who is now ninety-six. I said, "Tell me what you can about my family." She's putting together a tree for me. I asked her, "Were any of my family ever slaves?" She said, "No, I don't believe so." I said, "I know you don't believe so, but can you give me some names so we can go back." So she's working on that right now. But, other than that, the only history of my family I can tell you about is from 1946 on.
ED: It's amazing that one was an officer in the Confederate Army. But we don't know from what state?
RS: No. My mother was born in Mayberry, Virginia. So I would assume that they were from Virginia or the West Virginia area—that area where Virginia, West Virginia, and Ohio come together.
ED: Did you have any brothers and sisters?
RS: My brothers and sisters are halves, but they are my brothers and sisters, OK?
ED: Yes. You were the oldest?
RS: No. Actually, my mother was married for a time before I was born and she divorced. She and her husband had a son. His name was Billy Richards, but he subsequently became Muslim and changed his name to Hakim Bey. They divorced and between the time they divorced and my mother married my stepfather, I was born. One of the things that has always weighed very heavily on me is the fact that I believe that every child has a right to know who his father is, but I've never known, not to this day.
ED: Did you ever talk to your mother about it?
RS: Not really.
ED: She wouldn't want to talk about it.
RS: Exactly. I do remember one time when I was about eight or nine years old and I was standing in our front yard with one of my friends and we were playing catch. This man came up and he said, "You're Ronnie Sheffield." I remember that to this day. I said, "yeah." And he said, "I just always wanted to meet you." I remember telling my friend, "He's a baseball scout. He's looking for me because I'm a good baseball player." I never knew his name.
ED: You suspect that he was your father?
RS: After time went by, yeah. I thought, "Awwww, that's who that was." But my mother never mentioned it to me. So, here I am, seventy-one, not knowing. So I'm a Sheffield. She married my stepdad when I was maybe six, seven, nine months old. He was the only father figure I had.
ED: He was your stepfather, and his name was . . .
RS: Lee Evans Taylor Jr. He fulfilled that role until he died.
ED: Which was when, when you were grown?
RS: Oh, yes. He died February 23, 1994. He died a little bit more than a month after my mother died. They were together about fifty years and I would never have thought that that would have ever happened. I knew one of them was going to kill the other one.
ED: There was a lot of friction.

RS: Oh, *whewww*.
ED: Was he brutal?
RS: Oh, yeah. There were times when I would . . . I remember one time as clear as a bell. Christmas Eve. There was a particularly violent altercation.
ED: How many kids were in the household at that time?
RS: At the time, I think there was just me. I went over to my grandmother's house. She lived next door—my stepdad's mother. I said, "You've got to make them stop." And she said, "Well, she deserves it." To this day, I can hear that.
ED: Parents are going to take the side of their offspring in a marriage, usually.
RS: When my mother married my stepdad, two other children were born. Cecilia and Lee Evans Taylor III—"Tinker." One night when I was six, the house caught fire. Cecilia and Tink died in the house fire. Mr. Dansby, a neighbor, pulled me out the window. My dad was at work at General Electric. It was a night shift. My mother had left the house and apparently had left a skillet or something on the stove and had gone next door. While she was gone, the house caught fire. I remember lying on my Aunt Izell's sofa looking out the window and watching the house burn down.
ED: You had two siblings in there.
RS: Yeah. I know that was why my mother began drinking.. I just know that. Well, that and something else that happened later on down the road. But she blamed herself from that day on. Unfortunately, people around her would not let her forget it. My grandmother on my stepdad's side for one. And my dad. He took it out on her; he took it out on me. I was a constant reminder that Cecilia and Tink were gone. And I'm here. And why am I here?
ED: That's tough. You were the only one who escaped the fire?
RS: Yeah. For a long time, I felt as guilty as a person could be. It's only been in recent years. You know, they say survivors always feel guilty. Why me? And stuff like that. I have a cousin who is very close to me, almost like an older sister, who has convinced me that it was not my fault. For the longest I said, "Did I start that fire? Did I cause that fire?"
ED: You were six.
RS: Yeah. It's probably been only in the last ten years that Carol has been able to convince me that no, it wasn't your fault. For a long time, you carry that around. You know, you are glad you survive. You don't grow up. You just survive. That's what it was. One time, my mother approached me about changing my name to Taylor, because I think he wanted to adopt me so all the kids had the same last name, Taylor. This was when I was, like, twelve. Everybody knew me as Ronnie Sheffield. I just didn't want to disconnect from myself, not from any family but just from me. I had a special connection with Ronnie Sheffield that I didn't have with anybody else on my mother side or my stepdad's side. So I said, No. It's just stuff that happens. I think he felt like he was rejected. But it was not because of him. It was more about me at that time.
ED: Did he ever physically abuse you?
RS: Well, you've got to look at it this way . . .
ED: There had to be a lot of mental or emotional abuse.
RS: When you're growing up—back when I was growing up—when you stepped out of line you got punished. It wasn't, "Go sit in the corner."
ED: A strap.

RS: Oh, a strap, a coat hanger, a stick, a switch, whatever is handy. Sometimes I think he was trying to say, "Why are you here?" Because Cecilia and Tink weren't. I remember him saying, "Am I going to have to kill you?"
ED: Really?
RS: Yeah.
ED: This was after you had done something to displease him?
RS: Yeah. Sometimes, you . . . There was a lot of alcohol in our house. My dad—and whenever I say my dad I'm talking about Lee Taylor Jr.—my grandfather on my dad's side, my dad's brother and sister all drank. That's what they did. They just drank. It wasn't that that they drank to be sociable. You drank to excess, and beyond excess. Sometimes, I guess when people get to a certain point of inebriation, some people are happy drunks, some people or mad drunks, some people are mean drunks. I survived. [Laughs] What can I say? It made me who I am today. I don't think I ever hit my daughter. Ever. Even though sometimes there is anger, I find a way to step back, because it doesn't solve anything. So growing up was not Wally Cleaver [the fictional character in the TV sitcom "Leave it to Beaver"]. But I survived. A cousin of mine, Mike, who was my hero, because he is older than me and is Carol's brother . . .
ED: Mike? Back in Coshocton?
RS: His name is Mike Williams. Yes, Coshocton. He said, "You know, I always thought you were a little weird. I always envied you, but I thought you were a little weird." I said, why? He said, "Because you were always by yourself and you always seemed to know where you were going and what you were doing." I said, "I don't understand." He said, "When you were seven, you got a Social Security card and you started shining shoes."
ED: You got a Social Security card when you were seven years old?
RS: Seven years old. I was shining shoes for Mr. Sam Spediopoulos.
ED: Spell that.
RS: I can't spell that. He was a Greek gentleman who had a little shoeshine parlor. I went up there and Mr. Spediopoulos said, "You can work for me, but you've got to get a Social Security card." I said OK and I worked for him and made a nickel a shine. He used to punch that card. When you shined a pair of shoes he would come over and punch your card.
ED: Were you the only one who worked for him?
RS: There were other kids that came and would worked for him . I couldn't tell you who they were.
ED: Kids like you?
RS: Yeah, but they would come in and stay for a while and leave. They would come in and work for a few days and then they were gone. I worked, probably, for almost a year. That nickel was my money. I made money. Mr. Spediopoulos sold his shoe parlor, which was right next to the pool hall, and went back to Greece. I said, OK I can't just do nothing. So I went up to the Coshocton Country Club and I caddied. When you are caddying, the first person there got to caddy first. You didn't want to be the tenth kid coming, because you might not get to caddy that day. So I would be there at 4:30, before the sun came up, because I wanted to make sure I got a chance to caddy. It was two bucks for eighteen holes. Awww, *man*!
ED: You were getting rich.

RS: That's how I bought my first baseball glove. I kept that money . . .
ED: Did you open a bank account?
RS: I got savings stamps. You could buy a stamp for a dime. And after you got enough you could get a twenty-five-dollar book. But you only paid seventeen dollars and fifty cents for it. If you held that book long enough—I forget how many years it was—it was twenty-five dollars as opposed to seventeen fifty. I used one of my first books to buy my first baseball glove. Awww, man! So I worked for Mr. Spediopoulos, then started caddying and I got a little bigger and started cutting grass for people. That was only a summertime job. But there was a junkyard on the north end of Coshocton. A man who worked there—and I cannot tell you his name—said, "Ron, you can work here and you can make a dollar fifty per engine that you take the pistons out of." The pistons were made out of aluminum. He said you have to take the pistons out of the engine, throw them over there, and you get a buck and a half an engine. I had a little sledgehammer about that big [gestures with his hands] and a pair of gloves. My mama would make me a little sack lunch and I would go up there first thing in the morning and stay there until they made us leave at night. I would get a buck and a half for every engine that I broke down and took the pistons out of. I had to knock the head off, knock off the lifter valve, lift the pistons out and throw them over there. I don't know what they were worth then, but they were worth something. That was when I was maybe fourteen. Then I went to high school and they closed that down. So I started playing a little football and a little baseball.
ED: Let's go back to the beginning of school. This is not a Southern town where you might have more than just five or six African American kids in your school. Coshocton was integrated, wasn't it?
RS: Yeah.
ED: I think the whole population of Coshocton now is probably less than 2 percent African American.
RS: Oh, yes. It's always been less than 2 percent brown.
ED: Maybe we should say where Coshocton is. It's east of Columbus and south of Cleveland.
RS: Right. Closer to the eastern border of Ohio. It may be about equidistant from Columbus, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh [Pennsylvania]. Very rural. Again, the only thing that Coshocton ever had in the way of jobs was General Electric, Clow's, Pretty Products . . .
ED: A little manufacturing town.
RS: A little manufacturing town, still is. Now, Clow's is operating a little bit. GE is gone. Pretty Products is gone. There is a steel mill, AK Steel, in Conesville. Conesville is two miles outside of Coshocton, which is owned now by the Japanese, but they are downsizing it. You know, there used to be a song, "There Is Nothing But the Dead and Dying in My Little Town." Well, that's Coshocton. It may have had at the most fifteen thousand people, but I think they're down to about eleven thousand now.
ED: I looked at the figures. That's about right.
RS: What you do when you're born in Coshocton is, that when you're grown you can leave. Both my brothers and sisters are there. They have tried many times to get their children to reach out and leave, but I guess it's a state of mind in Coshocton.

ED: When you were born you had a brother. Your mother had that boy by a previous marriage.
RS: She was convinced that he would be better off living with his grandmother than living with her. My grandmother Sheffield and Billy's grandmother Richards convinced my mother to give him up. That was the other thing that caused her to drink.
ED: She regretted giving him up.
RS: Awwww, until the day she died.
ED: But she felt she had to, for his sake.
RS: For his sake, exactly. You asked about Coshocton. It was integrated to an extent. Some of the minority kids went to Southlawn Elementary. There were probably five—like you said maybe five—brown kids in the school, and through all my years from first grade to graduation there were five, six, maybe seven brown kids in the school. Those minority kids that lived up by the cemetery went to Chestnut Elementary. Again there was a very small number. I was the only brown kid in the choir, the only brown kid on the football team, the only brown kid on the baseball team. There were so few, but when you say integrated, brown kids knew where they could go and where they couldn't go. We knew there were certain restaurants we could not go to eat. There weren't any signs. There wasn't anything saying "Whites Only" or "Colored Only." It was just known systemically that you didn't go here.
ED: You would not be welcome.
RS: You would not be welcome. Exactly. Exactly. And my grandmother on my stepdad's side was a maid. My mother for a while worked as a maid in a house owned by Coshocton's rich families. I think maybe most brown women worked in somebody's house. My aunt Lula had a "good" job. She worked in a department store.
ED: A clerk?
RS: She was a clerk. I am the brownest person in my family. Everybody else was much lighter skinned. I don't care what anybody says, within the brown community, or the white community—the European community—the lighter the skin the more acceptable you were. It's just a reality. It's just a reality. You could rebel against it, but to what end? You could accept it and not accept it as demeaning, not lowering your self-esteem. Just accept it as reality, like the sun coming up in the east and going down in the west.
ED: In school, were there ever taunts, people calling you names? Did you encounter any of that, like you would have in the South?
RS: I'll tell you something in a second about my first experience in the South. In my home town you could be walking down the street . . . I walked to school. I walked the distance everybody said they used to have to walk to go to school—uphill both ways. But, literally, I walked about four and a half miles to and from school every day, because we didn't have buses. You could be walking a path and someone would holler out the N word. But in school I can't tell you a time when anybody ever treated me as anything but as Ronnie. In the choir, we would travel, but nobody ever said, "You sit in the back." There wasn't any of that. I don't want to think it was because they thought I knew what my position was. They accepted me. We sang together, we laughed together, we talked together, we went to the community center together, we went to the YMCA and played pingpong together, we danced together.
ED: You wouldn't have had that experience in Arkansas in the 'fifties and 'sixties.

RS: I know.
ED: So your school experience was pretty good. You were a normal kid.
RS: Yeah, a normal kid.
ED: And you were athletic.
RS: Yeah. I knew that my family wasn't going to be able to send me to college. But, college wasn't even discussed. What you did in Coshocton when you graduated from high school and got out was that you went to work for GE or Clow's and you said, "I've made it." But something just didn't sit right with me about that. There wasn't any counseling, like here are the scholarships you can get, or anything like that. So, I said OK. The Vietnam War was beginning to stir up. I was going to go to work, but my draft number was like three or four. So I said, "OK, I'm going to join the Air Force, because in the Air Force nobody carries guns, the only people getting shot at are pilots and I wear glasses so I can't be a pilot, plus they teach you a skill that you can take forward. I said that's my best alternative."
ED: That's after high school. What year did you graduate?'
RS: 1964.
ED: Before we get to the Air Force, you played football. What year did you start playing football?
RS: I started in the ninth grade. I weighed about one hundred forty pounds. I was the smallest thing out there. But I played all four years. I played defensive safety and quarterback . You asked about segregation, earlier. There are always going to be kids whose parents who have the money to make sure their kid plays. This is so funny. I never got to play in home games. When we played in Coshocton, I never played.
ED: Really?
RS: …. But when we went out of town, I always played. Somebody's dad, dad of somebody who played my position, wasn't there. [Laughs] But that was OK, because it was what I wanted to do.
ED: That was OK. You understood what was happening?
RS: Yeah. Also, I played because wanted to and I didn't have to go home. See, right after school I would go to football practice … I would practice until maybe six or seven o'clock. Then I would go home. My mom would always see that I had something to eat. And then I would go to bed.
ED: So you avoided two or three hours of strife at home.
RS: A whole bunch. That's why when Mike told me "you were always by yourself," I said yeah, because it always made it easier for me. So I always played in the away games but I never played in any home games. I said, OK, I got to play. Some of my friends . . . Jimmy Martin, who I walked to school with every day from kindergarten to high school . . .
ED: White kid.
RS: No, brown kid. His brother played football for Coshocton and he was a beast. He went to Ohio State. Jimmy was built just like him. Jimmy didn't want to play football. Jimmy just wanted to go through the motions of going to school. No books. If he could just get a D he was cool. He was going through the motions. So even though none of the kids that I hung out with played, I played because I wanted to do that. It allowed me that alone time, if you will. I played all four years and I think it made me stronger. I can remember times when we would play out of town and coach would say, "Ron, good run,

good run." I said, wow, somebody said something nice, somebody said something good. It was never in front of the home crowd.

ED: That was bizarre.

RS: [Laughs] Life in the 'fifties—and the 'sixties.

ED: In Arkansas, the first town that integrated was Charleston, where Dale Bumpers was from. It integrated immediately after the *Brown* decision in 1954. Dale was the attorney for the school board and when the Supreme Court said schools had to be integrated he told them that the law was that you had to integrate and he said you've got to do it right now. And they did. So they had a black or two on the football team and when they would go out of town the black kids often couldn't play. I think that was true at other schools, like Fayetteville. And in Missouri, too. Tom Glaze [former Supreme Court justice from Joplin, Missouri] said their star players were often black but they couldn't play when they played in Arkansas because the other team wouldn't allow it and you might have to forfeit if you tried to play a black player.

RS: But Bear Bryant [late football coach at the University of Alabama] helped them see the light.

ED: Did you make good grades in school?

RS: I made OK, I was a low B high C, student. That reminds me of what my mama said to me. She said, "Don't bring home no F." After a while, after a while, I began to understand that she thought I was a D person. I wasn't an A person, I wasn't a B person. I wasn't even a C person. I was a D person.

ED: That was the standard you had to meet.

RS: Yeah. So I began to say, "Wait a minute. I'm not a D person." She never said to bring books home or study. She just said, " Don't bring home no F".

ED: You said your mother was a maid sometimes. Did she do anything else, another job?

RS: RCA Victor had a plant in Cambridge and she worked there for a while. At the time they were making telephones and TVs for cars. The reason I know that is my mother came home one time and said, "If any of your friends ask, are there television sets for cars, you tell 'em yes because I'm making 'em." I can't tell you how long, maybe a year or something like that, she was trying to help make ends meet. We lived on what is South Sixth Street (referred to everyone in Coshocton as "Clowville" because a lot of the brown families lived near the Clow Plant. Some of the lower-income European-Americans lived on South Sixth Street. That was not incorporated into Coshocton. It was not in the city limits. That's why when our house caught fire in '51 they didn't fight the fire. They just let the house burn.

ED: The fire department didn't come?

RS: Didn't come. I don't drink Carnation milk today because there was a Carnation Milk plant right across the street from our house and the plant had a water hose that was a fire-fighting hose but they wouldn't fight the fire.

ED: And your stepfather. What did he do?

RS: He was a laborer at GE.

ED: Was that a unionized plant?

RS: Yes.

ED: So he was a union member.

RS: Yes, in order for him to get a job at GE he had to belong to the union. Most definitely. He worked there. He had an eighth-grade education. He came back from the Second World War, went right back to Coshocton, worked at GE, married my mother. I was telling you that alcohol was everywhere. Sharon was just under me, then Stevie, and then Tommy. Their remembrance of my dad is almost exactly the opposite of mine. They'd say, "Oh, yeah, he would straighten you out, but he didn't drink. Somewhere along the line he quit cold turkey. Just cold turkey.

ED: But your mother did not.

RS: No. No. She died of esophageal cancer, brought on by alcohol and smoking. I can remember going home and taking her down to Zanesville for her radiation therapy. I said, "Mama, you've got to quit this." She said, "Why? I got it [cancer] now." With the esophageal as advanced as it was, there was nothing they could do to abate it.

ED: So, after high school, you joined the Air Force.

RS: Right. 1964.

ED: Let's talk about what you did in the Air Force.

RS: OK. Let me tell you this. When I turned eighteen on June 30, 1964, my dad came in and said, "This house is not big enough for two grown men." Only because my mother talked to him, he let me stay in the house until the first of August, when I was due to go into the Air Force. Other than that, on June 30, 1964, he expected me to leave, because the house wasn't big enough for two grown men. And it really wasn't. It was a two-bedroom house with six people living in it. So I went into the Air Force. I remember going down to Columbus [Ohio] to the Wright Patterson Air Force Base. The night before we left to go to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio Texas, I got into a poker game, won a bunch of money and woke up the next morning and someone had stolen all my money. [Laughs] We got on a plane and flew down to San Antonio, Texas, and Coshocton and everything that it stood for was behind me. I told myself that I would never go back to Coshocton the rest of my life. Literally, I had left it, because I didn't have the kind of memories that a lot of people would have said about, "Oh, man, I remember my childhood and my hometown." Yeah, I do, too. I remember being sexually molested by a gentleman that everybody thought was the greatest guy in the world, of a home life where I was more reminded of bad things and a hometown that did not value me as a person. So I didn't want to go back.

ED: Was he at the church?

RS: Oh, yeah, he was church person but not a preacher, Mr. Dozier was . . . See, I still call him Mr. Dozier. . . was the umpire at every baseball game where all the kids played in the neighborhood. He would come out and umpire. He always had candy for kids. When you are eight or nine years old, you don't understand stuff like that. Boy! So when I went to the Air Force, Coshocton was in my rearview mirror. I went down to San Antonio. They trained me and I became a news/still photographer. They trained me in Denver, Colorado. My first duty station was Little Rock Air Force Base. I get off the plane. I'm still a country kid from Ohio. I only know about Little rock because how they treated people like me. You have to take a bus from Adams Field out to Little Rock Air Force Base. I didn't know that I could call the base and let them know I was there. They may not come for eight, ten or twelve hours, but they would send a bus down to pick up people to go out to the base. So I caught a taxi. It took every penny I had. I was stationed out there with the 825th SAC [Strategic Air Command] Squadron. They had the 43rd

Bomb Wing out there, the 43rd Missile Wing. You remember when they had the missiles all around Arkansas and they had the B-58 Hustler.

ED: They had eighteen of the Titan II missiles in silos ringed around Searcy. I went up there when one of them . . .

RS: Blew up . . .

ED: Well, not blew up . . .

RS: Caught fire.

ED: I was up there that night.

RS: I was up there with you.

ED: Oh, were you? [The Titan II disaster occurred August 9, 1965, at a missile site near Searcy, where workers were retrofitting missiles with new fuel technology. Fifty-three men, all but two workers at the site, died when they were trapped in the silo. It was the largest loss of life in any nuclear facility. An investigation concluded that a welder accidentally hit a hydraulic line with his welding rod, igniting the spray from the ruptured hydraulic line.]

RS: I was taking photographs for the Air Force.

ED: I did all the reporting. It was on a Monday morning, as I recall. My duty [at the *Arkansas Gazette*] was to go to the Supreme Court on Monday mornings and get all the opinions that came down for the week, come back to the *Gazette* and write all of them up for the paper. The city editor [Bill Shelton] came over and said, "There's something going on at one of the missile silos." He had a police scanner near his desk. He said go out to the airport and get a plane to fly you up there and take a photographer with you. See what's going on." We found the site and circled over it and saw people crowded around the fence that surrounded the silo, went back and landed at the Searcy airport. I got a guy at the airport to drive me out to the site in his truck. I spent the next twenty-four hours out there. I was out there all night, outside the fence, when they began to bring out all those bodies around midnight.

RS: I was down in there taking photographs of all of the carnage and destruction. I probably spent every day for the next month going up there with some officers from DC [District of Columbia] taking photographs of every aspect of that missile silo—inside the control panel . . .

ED: Had they lifted the lid by that time?

RS: Oh, yeah. They lifted it long enough to extract whatever they needed and then they put it back over.

ED: But you had to go down in there.

RS: I had to go down in the silo.

ED: So you photographed them taking the bodies out.

RS: I was taking photographs of where the bodies were located. I'm eighteen years old. It was hard. The first time I was confronted with racism in Arkansas was when we were going from Little Rock up to Searcy, myself and two or three officers from Washington, D.C.—a silo commander and a couple of tech sergeants. We stopped at . . . Who was the guy who owned Cajun's Wharf in Little Rock? What was his name?

ED: Yes, I forget his name. He was from around Beebe. He had a restaurant there. [He was Bruce Anderson].

RS: Yeah, he had the restaurant at Beebe. We were going to stop there and get lunch. We were walking in and the guy said, "All of you can eat in here, but you've got to eat in

the back [gesturing at Sheffield]. The officer from DC said, "He's in the Air Force." But the guy said, "He's got to eat in the back." The officer said, "Can I borrow your phone?" He called the Air Base and said, "No Air Force personnel are to eat here again."

ED: Great. You had never encountered that before.

RS: Not the "in your face" discrimination. Not right in your face. I said, wow, but I'm wearing the uniform. Years have gone by and I'm reading history. Everybody, African American who's ever donned the uniform said, "This will prove to them that I deserve to be equal."

ED: Not here. Not in Beebe.

RS: No. Even now, guys who wear the uniform don't always get the respect they've earned. I'm not going to say the respect you deserve. You earned it. That was the first time. And I was there when the B-58 crashed. It seemed like a B-58 was crashing about every other day, because of the way they put that nose down. I shot autopsies. The plane that crashed into the field—where was it? There was a bomber that planted itself. Was it out around Scott? Anyhow, it doesn't matter. I was basically a news/still photographer. I was here until '66. Initially, I was assigned to Vietnam, but in the middle of the orders they sent me to a place called Udorn, Thailand. Oh, you almost wish you had been sent to Vietnam. Udorn is right on the Cambodian border, and Air America was operating at Udorn [Royal Air Force Base]. I didn't know what Air America was for a while, and then they put me into reconnaissance photography, where I was developing film that the jets and aircraft had shot, from their bombing runs, and this would allow us to pinpoint where the North Vietnamese were. I'm saying to myself, why Air America? We've got a PI [Photo Interpretation] office department right here. But you're eighteen or nineteen years old and you're just doing what you're told. [Air America was an airline that was secretly controlled by the Central Intelligence Agency.] I was over there for a year. Then they sent me to Brooks Aerospace Medical Center at San Antonio Texas. Down there I did photomatography, because they were studying cancer cells and they also were studying the effects of weightlessness on what were soon going to be astronauts. They had a whole lot of medical staff down there. You were saluting every fifteen seconds, because there were ten enlisted people to every two hundred medical personnel, who were all officers. It was supposedly a choice assignment and I thought it was. It really was. When I left there I was on my way back to Ohio. I was going to go to Ohio State [University]. Some of my friends that I had met when I was stationed here [at Little Rock Air Force Base] said we're going to go out and integrate Little Rock University [now the University of Arkansas at Little Rock], because it's a private school.

ED: This was when you were at the Little Rock Air Force Base?

RS: This was when I got out of the service, 1968. This is after my four years of service. I said, "Awww, I really want to go back and try to play baseball for Ohio State." They said, "Come on, man, we need you. We need someone who can get in school and stay in school out at LRU.

ED: This would have been 1968?

RS: '68, yeah. I said, "Yeah, I guess I can." And I never left. I've been here ever since.

ED: But you were going to go back and play for Ohio State.

RS: I really was, but I stayed here. I went to school and played baseball for UALR.

ED: Before we get to UALR, let's go back a little bit to the Air Force.

RS: OK.
ED: When you were in Thailand doing photography, did you encounter any combat, any hostile fire?
RS: Not, really, There was only one time. The photo lab was stationed out on the flight line. The flight line is on the very edge of the jungle. You have the flight line and then you have the jungle. Beyond the jungle is whatever is out there. When we had to burn classified material, it was just at the end of the flight line, right at the edge of the jungle. So whenever you went you always carried weapons. We never had a problem there, but there were one or two times when "somebody threw" some . . . I'm trying to think . . . not missiles, but . . .
ED: Grenades?
RS: Not grenades but. . . One time they threw some mortars on the base. But that was it. That occurrence was downplayed and the higher-ups attributed it to a rocket that had misfired. Other than that, we were pretty safe. We were as safe as we could be having Air America on the northern part of the base flying RF-4Cs, bombers, off the base and flying Hueys, helicopters, off the base. So we knew that, at any time, we were subject to getting hit, because they were packing a lot of arsenal from Udorn.
ED: OK. So, a year at Vietnam, or near it.
RS: My first assignment was Little Rock Air Force Base. My second assignment was Udorn, Thailand. My third and last assignment was Brooks Aerospace Medical Center in San Antonio. Then I left.
ED: And you decided to come back to Little Rock.
RS: I had a girlfriend. I was going from San Antonio and I was going to pick her up, get married and go to Ohio and go to Ohio State.
ED: Your girlfriend was here.
RS: She was here. I had met her when I was at Little Rock Air Force Base. And I never got out of Little Rock.
ED: You played baseball for UALR. Who was the coach then, when they started baseball? He had been a TV sports personality, an announcer.
RS: I can see his face. His name was Marshall Davis. He's still around. Woodrow Harrelson helped coach. He was sort of a local celebrity. He coached Little League teams and some of the older teams. He came and helped out. We had thirteen players. Some of us were veterans. Some of us were just old and long in the tooth. But, boy, we had fun. We bought our own bats. The uniforms we wore were the uniforms the [Arkansas] Travelers had worn. They were old uniforms made out of wool. We drove our own cars to games. We usually had more fights than anybody else. But we loved playing baseball. Yeah.
ED: Baseball is a great game.
RS: It is.
ED: What about your girlfriend?
RS: Married her. Gwen Alston.
ED: Gwen or Gwendolyn?
RS: Gwendolyn. I was married to her long enough to have a daughter. We were married maybe eighteen months. I didn't understand until just a few years ago. I was angry.
ED: Angry from way back, childhood?

RS: No. More from Vietnam. My stepdad. He said, "You guys, you can't win, you aren't winning the war." We were getting our butts handed to us.
ED: So he was blaming you, too.
RS: Oh, yeah. People didn't respect you when you came back. But now, gee whiz . . . I didn't understand why I was so mad. The anger just boiled out, all over the place. I had absolutely no problem with Gwen saying, "Look . . ." I said, "Hey, I can't explain it to you, but you need to go ahead and get a divorce." So we got a divorce after about eighteen months. I have a daughter, Nicole. Nicole Anjeannette Sheffield. Nic is the most important person in my life. She is part of me. The only person on this planet that is part of me. She has always been my heart. Got divorced, so . . .
ED: This is while you were still a student?
RS: Yeah. I graduated.
ED: What did you study?
RS: Political science, economics, sociology. I don't know what I was going to do with it. I was just going to get a degree. Because, where I started from no one would have given me any possibility of graduating from college. That was the key thing. I went to work in 1972 for the Arkansas Insurance Department. Father Ernie Fennell hired me.
ED: E.J.W. Fennell.
RS: Yes, indeed. He and Granny, two of my favorite people.
ED: I play golf with his son, Tom Fennell, who's an architect.
RS: Tom, oh my! His pop and his mom, boy!
ED: Ernie Fennell was appointed by [Governor Winthrop] Rockefeller. But by 1972, he was not the insurance commissioner. Ark . . .
RS: Yeah, Ark Monroe was the insurance commissioner. But Ernie still had sway.
ED: Was he still working there?
RS: Yeah, he hired me. I was doing some volunteer work at St. Francis House, and he said, "You want a job?" I said, "I need a job. I don't want one. I *need* a job." And he hired me.
ED: He had been the assistant insurance commissioner under Winthrop Rockefeller.
RS: I think John Norman Harkey . . .
ED: Well, John Norman Harkey was Rockefeller's first insurance commissioner. He shut down, well, hundreds of insurance companies and then he got bored after about a year and then I think Dick Horne—Allen Horne—who is still around—became the commissioner.
RS: Oh, yeah, I talk to Dick often.
ED: I think Ernie Fennell had been the assistant commissioner under Harkey, and then Horne and then continued under Ark Monroe.
RS: I think for a while Ernie stayed there under Bill Woodyard. So I went to work there in '72.
ED: What did you do there?
RS: I was an investigator, an insurance investigator. We took complaints from consumers. We looked at them, worked on them, tried to help them if we could. I did that for six or seven years. After a while, I talked to Ark and I said there's a better way for us to handle complaints so that we can help people more. We ought to keep track of how we're doing, how we're helping. He said, "Well, think of something." I thought of something and he left and Bill Woodyard came in. Bill said, "Ron, tell me what you want

to do, because we have to find a spot for you." I said we needed a consumer services division, where we not only help people with complaints but we go out to schools and consumer groups, because in the 'eighties we had a big push for consumerism. So he let me start the Consumer Division of the Insurance Department. All the investigators fell under my supervision in the Consumer Services. He said, who's going to run this? I said, who thought of it? He said, all right we'll try it. We started keeping track of all the complaints, we started helping people. We put some companies out of business, schemes out there that were defrauding college students. It became a national thing that Arkansas stopped these people from doing premium financing on college students' lives. I did not know that it was going to get this big. There was part of the industry that was selling insurance door to door, nickel or dime and stuff like that, the industry referred to it as Industrial Life Insurance. A lady in Wynne, Arkansas, filed a complaint. She couldn't figure out which policy she was paying on. Her grandson brought her policies to me. She had forty policies—forty life-insurance policies! I looked at them, made a chart. Some of them were good. Most of them were still current, but some of them had lapsed for nonpayment of premium or whatever. They were all pretty much from the same company. I wrote the company and they tried to give me some mishmash explanation. So I went to her house in Wynne and sat down with her for maybe five or six hours. I told her what she had and what she didn't. The agent got real upset with me, because I told her people had been hoodwinking her. "You don't need all these policies," I said. She had maybe eight or ten policies on her grandson, who was about twelve years old. Life insurance policies! She had almost none on herself or her husband. She had policies on nieces and nephews. The policies were a nickel or a quarter a week, but she was paying like a hundred and eighty dollars a month for all these policies. And she had limited income. I don't know how Mike Wallace [of CBS] became aware of it. He got in touch with me and asked if I would meet him in Wynne and talk to him about this, so I did and the issue was highlighted on *60 Minutes*. We did a program on *60 Minutes* about a type of insurance that was sold door to door, nickels and dimes, where people are getting no bang for their buck. I testified before the U.S. Senate. And nothing happened. Nothing happened! Twenty years later, I was finally able to get that kind of insurance outlawed, at least in Arkansas and most of the United States. It just took twenty years of sticking to it to get it done. Under Governor Clinton, I was made deputy insurance commissioner. I was deputy insurance commissioner until [Mike] Huckabee was elected and then I was made special assistant commissioner to the new commissioner, Mike Pickens. My office was moved into a closet. [Laughs] And I said, "No, I've done too much good work. I can't stay here and do this." So I left. In the meantime, after 1972, I went to UALR and got a masters degree in public administration. I first went to law school in 1976 and had to drop out. I got my masters and then I went back to law school.

ED: This is at UALR.

RS: UALR in 1984. I went to law school at night for five years. I asked myself if I was nuts or something, there are so many people smarter than you and even if you graduate you can't pass that bar. That's two and a half days of tests and you think you can do this? I took off work for two weeks and from 8 to 5 every day I went to the Supreme Court library and studied. That was my job. I took a half-hour for lunch and I went back and I studied. When the results of the bar exam were released I was attending a National Association of Insurance Commissioners meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah. As

you know, they always post the results at the Supreme Court. I told everybody, "Don't call me. Don't tell me. I don't want to know!" I would call home. At the time, you know, we had the answering machines. The answering machine had about nine messages. I said I didn't want to hear them, because they would be people saying "It's OK. Next time you've got it. Don't worry." So I was in a meeting on Sunday and Ark Monroe III came in and he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I just want to introduce you to Arkansas's newest attorney." I said, "*Yes! Yes!* [Laughs] Then I went back to my room and called my phone and listened to all the messages. That was brutal. That was the hardest thing I've ever done. No, second hardest thing I've ever done in the practice of law. So now I'm a lawyer and I'm working at the Insurance Department. I'm OK. I'm having no problems. I'm doing what I think God put me there to do, to help people. But then we had a new governor and a new commissioner and they didn't see it that way. My self-esteem did not allow me to sit there and just pick up a check. So I retired.

ED: That would have been in 19 . . .

RS: 1997. But then I went to work for the secretary of state, Sharon [Priest]. I was her coordinator for the census—redistricting. I stayed there with her until she left. Then I really retired. I went to work for my wife and my mother-in-law. Boy, there's a hard job. So I was retired and minding my own business . . .

ED: Before we get there, let's go back. You said your wife . . . So you remarried.

RS: After twenty-nine years of being single. It was providence. Some people wanted to buy an empty charter of an insurance company. It was a minority-owned insurance company that had been run very poorly. There was nothing in it. It had no policies. It was just a shell. Lee Douglass was the [state insurance] commissioner at the time. When Lee doesn't act as a hearing officer, I do, as the deputy commissioner. He said, "Listen, I've got people coming in from someplace. The Mitchell [law] firm needs me to sit down with the company and I need you to handle it." I said, OK, no sweat. I go into the hearing room and [Allan] Dick Horne is representing the company. He said we have this company and some people who want to buy this charter. It's empty, there's nothing in it, it's a straightforward deal, cash. But you always have to ask questions about the people who are buying it, what their credentials are. So we have one of the attorneys whom we question, and they tell us whether they have met all the requirements, financially, if their background is clean, if they are the kind of people whom we would want. All of that stuff. I wasn't paying any attention, but I looked up and I see this elderly brown woman, brown man and brown woman beside him. They present themselves and they want to buy it. I thought it was Eunice Reed—that's my mother-in-law now—and her son Howard and this lady sitting beside him, who is Deborah Reed. I said, OK, you guys can buy it. I'm thinking mother, son and son's wife. I sign the order. I'm shaking hands and saying, like I would say to anybody who acquires a company: Look, I know you're new in the insurance business, so if you have questions you can call us, at the department, and we'll be glad to help you. We'll guide you through stuff. I took my business card and started to hand it to the gentleman. The young lady beside him took it. She said, "I'm going to be doing most of it." I said OK.

About a week or a week and a half later, my secretary said, "You've got a call from Deborah Reed." I thought, "Deborah Reed—who is that?" My secretary said, "You know who it is." I said no. She said, "Yes, you do." I said, "Oh, oh, yes." So we talked

and she invited me to lunch. We visited about the company and stuff like that. And it went from there. That will be twenty years ago May of this year.

ED: So this would have been 1998.

RS: May 23, 1998. That's when I married her. It was about a year and a half before then that we met. I said providence because my mother and father had just died, about a year or a year and a half before that. I told you earlier that I never thought they would be together, that one of them would kill the other. But my mother had esophageal cancer and my dad had congestive heart failure. They were taking care of each other. Never more than an arm's length away from each other from the time that he got congestive heart failure. He got that in 1990 or maybe 1991 or 1992. She got diagnosed with esophageal cancer in late '92. But from then on they were never apart. Never. And I would say, fifty years? Surely they had something that I hope that I have something of in me.

ED: But you missed all that part of their lives when they apparently kind of resolved things.

RS: Right, I couldn't go back, because my memories were negative. When I was in Colorado [in the Air Force] I got a call from the base commander, who told me to come down to his office. I went down to his office and he said, "Call your mother *right now*." He made me call my mother right then. She said, "You haven't called me. You haven't talked to me. It's been over a year. Why have you . . .?" When I told you Coshocton was in my rearview that was literally true. It was back there. I remember my mother drinking, fighting, getting beat up. There wasn't anything to draw me to that. In those years from '68 to '94, I probably did not go to Coshocton more than five times, maybe six. I never stayed longer than three days. I'd go in on Friday and come back on Sunday.

ED: When you did go back, was your relationship with your stepfather any better?

RS: Yes, it was better.

ED: You were not dependent on him?

RS: No. For most of my life, I was not dependent on him. That's why I worked. I bought what I wanted, what I needed. I did not ever want anybody to say, "I helped you do this. I did this for you." That's why Mike, my cousin, always reminded me, "You were always by yourself." I was very independent. I didn't know what I was doing, because I didn't have a mentor. That is the one thing that I regret about my entire life. I did not have a mentor, someone to say, "Hey, hey, hey, hey. Come here, let's talk." I have not ever had that. That's why I tried to do that so much. I did it with my daughter. I did it with my goddaughter, my great-goddaughter, and anybody who comes to me and says, "Hey, I've got a question." I try to do that, because I know how vitally important it is to have somebody who will sit down and tell you when you're wrong, or tell you you're right, to tell you it's going to be better, and to tell you "don't give up." In the later years, again, I only went home a few times and stayed a short period of time. But, yeah, I guess it was better, because it was more man to man. But the day my mother died, Sharon, Stevie, Tommy and I went to the hospital. He was in the hospital when she died. They said, no, no, don't tell him. I said, "Look, we have to tell him. If we don't tell him we're not doing the right thing." So we went in and I said, "Daddy, Mama had to go." He said, "I thought she would not be home when I came home." Then he said, "We've got to be like a family. We had never done that. But from now on we're going to be like a family." Twenty-three days later, he died. So, now I go home, see my brothers, see my sister and I'm constantly trying to get them to be like a family. I will go home, but they

rarely come here. Maybe once or twice in all the years I've been here since '68. But I will go home because I'm trying to get them to understand that we still are a family. Sheffield or Taylor, we're still a family. I'm still your brother. That was the thing that made me realize when I asked Deedee to marry me that you're not supposed to be by yourself. You're not supposed to go through all your life alone. You need to have someone who is a helpmate, a soulmate, someone who will tell you when you're wrong, sometimes not too nicely, but also someone who will take you with the warts, the bad breath in the morning. So I asked her in San Diego, California . . . I bought the ring in November. I carried it around in my pocket until February. I literally had it in my pocket every time I saw her. I asked her mother and she said yes. I asked her brother and he said yeah. I asked her favorite nephews and they said OK. We were in San Diego for Valentine's Day with my cousin Mike and his friend and there were torrential rains the whole weekend. They said "We've never seen rain like this in San Diego." We were in an arboreum. We were sitting on a bench and I was soaking wet. I said, "You are soaking wet. You need something to dry you off." That's when I took it out and gave her the ring. That was it. I never said, "Will you marry me?" I just gave her the ring. Since that time she's kept me on the straight and narrow. I tell her many times, "You know, I don't want to even think about what I would be doing if I hadn't married you." You have saved me from myself." It will be twenty years next May.

ED: So you went to work with her?

RS: No, I'm just the companies' lawyer. Ruffin & Jarrett Funeral Home and New Foundation Life Insurance Company. My mother in law will call me and she'll say, "Ronald, somebody up here needs to probate an estate, so they can get the money to pay the funeral home and I told them you'd do it for them." She's always giving me *pro-bono* work. [Laughs] She has absolutely no problem with it. I help when there are issues, when they have a complaint filed against either of the companies. But that's all I was doing, trying to take it easy, trying to retire, because I had worked from the time I was seven. I had taken up cycling and had formed a bicycle club in honor of Marshall "Major" Taylor and was doing so gardening for my church. So I said, "Come on, come on, let's go. Take it easy for a while." So I'm their lawyer for their insurance company, and I'm a lawyer for their funeral home. Also, I'm Mrs. Reed's personal attorney, Mrs. Sheffield's personal attorney, all the people in my church—I'm their lawyer for all my family members. You never retire. God has blessed me so that I don't have to work. I was frugal enough when I was working to save some money. Unfortunately, that 2007 [financial crash] . . . Boy, oh man! . . .

ED: It was a lick.

RS: Oh, man. But God is good, all the time.

ED: So you leave the Insurance Department, meet them and retire. You got a degree in political science. Were you always interested in politics?

RS: No.

ED: Well, when did you decide to run for lieutenant governor?

RS: [Laughs] It was sort of like when I became a Supreme Court justice. I was sitting in my office and Bill Trice, who used to live right down there on the corner, and Ron Holt and Ron . . . What is Ron's last name—he was head of the Democratic Party? Deedee talks to him all the time. Now, he's with Oaklawn [Jockey Club]. He was chair of the Democratic Party at the time. I'll think of his name in a minute. [Ron Oliver] They

asked me if I wanted to go to lunch. I said yeah, because I had gone to lunch with Ron and Trice. They said, what are you doing?

ED: What year was that?

RS: 2002 or 2003. Because the race was in 2004, wasn't it? [No, 2002]

ED: We'll look it up.

RS: OK, so we went to lunch. It was funny, because someone asked, how would you like to be federal judge? I said, "Hey, I'm barely a decent lawyer. Why are you talking about being a judge?" He said, "No, let me tell you what we're thinking. We want you to run for lieutenant governor." I said, "I'm not going to run for lieutenant governor. I don't have the kind of chops for that." I said that, if anything, I would have thought about secretary of state, because I worked over there and I knew what was going on. But not lieutenant governor. I said, "Is [Winthrop Paul] Rockefeller not running?" They said, nah, he's running. I said, "Well, I don't know . . ." So they sat there for about an hour or so. So they said Bill Bowen [William H. Bowen] could get me some [financial] support. I said, "Look, here's the first thing. You've got to ask my wife. Because I don't have any kind of mechanism, any kind of machine behind me." They said Democratic Party, Democratic Party. Yeah! So I said, "Let me pray over this." I got home and talked to Deb about it and visited about it. I said, "You know, if I were to run there would be two reasons. One would be to win. The other would be, if I lost, to get other brown people to see that they can run a statewide race if you run it right, even if you lose." She said, first of all, if you run you run because you believe that if you won you could do some good. I said, that's true, too. So I told them OK. So for a year I hardly saw my wife. You're talking to a man who goes to bed at seven o'clock at night, maybe eight, at the latest. But I'm up at 3:30 or 4 o'clock every day. That's just my routine. So they started telling me you've got to go here, you've got to go there, you've got to do this, you've got to do that, but don't worry because we've got the money and everything is going to be all right. After a while, every place I went was with Pryor [U.S. Senator Mark Pryor]. If Pryor is going someplace, we want you go with Pryor. Even some places where Senator Pryor [David Pryor] went and not his son, and I was there with him.

ED: So you were there with either Mark or David.

RS: Yeah. I thought, if they can excite enough people to vote then maybe this is going to work out. After a while, I wasn't so much with Mark as I was with Mike [U.S. Representative Mike] Ross in Southern Arkansas. I would stand up for him anywhere, anytime. Everything he said he would do he did, and more. He spent time with me. He coached me. Unlike other people, who said, yeah, we're going to get you some money, we're going to do this, we're going to do that. I'm naive in politics. It doesn't materialize. So we're starting to spend some of our money. I'm driving from Little Rock to Blytheville, from Blytheville to Texarkana, and from Texarkana to Fayetteville, all the same day. LeShannon Spencer and I are driving that 1997 Toyota to death. I came in second.

ED: In the Democratic primary?

RS: No, came in first in the Democratic primary. In fact, they say that in that primary race I received a record number of votes of any candidate, ever, in the primary races, in the Republican or Democratic primaries.

ED: Who ran in the primary?

RS: I can't remember. The dentist who had run before for lieutenant governor. I can't think of his name. But we won the primary going away.
ED: Did you win without a runoff?
RS: Oh, yeah. We had maybe 80 percent of the vote. Then we're into the general election. I'm driving all over the state. I'm meeting with everybody I can find, talking to everybody I can talk to. I did not really have a platform. There's no coaching going on. I'm pretty much doing this like I've pretty much done everything all my life, by the seat of my pants. No one stepped up and said, let me give you some insights. Let's do this and let's do that. I had one coaching session before the debate with Rockefeller on PBS, AETN. That was it, but I had adopted and accepted the fact that I was going to make this race as well as I can make it, realizing that I am running against deeeeep pockets. I'm not getting the financial support that would allow me to make commercials. I'm pretty much piggybacking—with Jimmie Lou [Fisher, the Democratic nominee for governor]. I'm on a bus with her. I'm sometimes flying with her and with Mark. But nothing independent of them. I had no campaign outside of their campaigns. Again, I told myself you're going to represent the best you can, to run the best race you can. If you win, then you can put meat on the bone. You can get very substantive. But if you don't win, at least no one can say, he really embarrassed us. That was the nature of the race I had.
ED: But you recognized the fact that you were brown was going to be a huge negative for you.
RS: Oh, yeah.
ED: There was a substantial part of the population that were not going to let a brown man be elected.
RS: But when I went into those parts of the state, I would tell them, "What I am is on my face and I can't deny that, but who I am is in my heart. I am here to try to help make Arkansas a better place. I can't do anything about my color, but I can do things that will help make Arkansas a better place." Yes, I knew that sometimes I was talking to the wall. But they would have to look at me and say, well, he's well spoken.
ED: Did you encounter people out there when you were campaigning who . . .
RS: who would say, "I've never voted for an 'n_____' before but I'm going to vote for you."
ED: They said that?
RS: Oh yeah. Right to my face.
ED: That was the lexicon.
RS: Exactly.
ED: They don't think it's a bad word.
RS: That's what they had always heard and said. You're right.
ED: But they probably didn't really vote for you.
RS: Oh, I know that. But they said it. They recognized that I was running. Up in the northeastern part of the state, in a parade, I had a little issue, but then I just had to keep on going. People were standing by the side of the road and we were standing in the back of trucks. We're waving and throwing candy. Some people would hoot out. But that's what you've got. But I did hear some people say, "Come on, now . . ."
ED: Responding to them?
RS: Yeah. This life ain't perfect. This world ain't perfect.
ED: What about Rockefeller? Did you have many occasions to talk to Win Paul?

RS: Once or twice. We were campaigning in the southern part of the state. He had a RV with "Win with Win" on the side. He was following us. Wherever we went, he brought his RV and parked it across the street from the park, or parked it across the street from a school, or something like that. Somebody said, "You've got Win worried." I said, "Well, good." I said he's a sweet man and you can't say anything negative about him.
ED: He was a sweet guy. But he was not anything like his daddy. He didn't have any of the leanings of his daddy.
RS: Exactly.
ED: His daddy was probably the most liberal governor this state has ever had, or any state.
RS: He could afford to be.
ED: Yes, he could afford to be. But he got elected anyway. Win Paul had some of the same instincts, but he really became sort of a right-winger in some respects.
RS: Oh, tell me about it. We had a couple of conversations. I respected him. He respected me. What was so funny was that Sharon Priest, Win Rockefeller and my brother in law, Howard Reed, lived nearby each other. Howard lived across the street from Win Paul up in the River Ridge area.
ED: Hillcrest. Win Paul had a house there a block off Kavanaugh.
RS: They would have a Christmas dinner every year. Now I'm running against Howard's buddy. I didn't mean to hurt anybody. The most disappointing aspect of the race was that I learned that people will tell you anything. People who promised me money didn't give me money. I don't want to call his name, because he's held in such high esteem in the banking community and at my alma-mater law school, but he promised me money when I asked for it, he said he couldn't do it because he said he had something working with Win Paul. I could have said, but you were the one who said you would help me and I could rely on you. But I said, "I understand." I learned quickly. I said, "Good luck and take care."
ED: About ten percent of all the promises actually materialize.
RS: That's why I say we were spending money out of our pockets.
ED: Everybody has to learn that lesson.
RS: Exactly. Somebody came to me not long ago and said, "Ron, why don't you run for secretary of state?" I said, "Let me tell you something. Two things have to happen. You've got to call my wife and get her to say yes. Then you've got to put three million dollars in a bank that I control. Other than that, no. Plus, my doctors told me I don't need that kind of stress right now." The political process requires you to say and do some things that when you fall on your knees at night and pray you don't know want to say God forgive me for doing that. Even at the local level it eats you up. If you allow it, it will eat you up. I can't do that anymore. It still hurts me today that no brown people will run for attorney general, secretary of state, lieutenant governor, governor, for any statewide seat . . .
ED: A couple have run for seats in Congress from central and east Arkansas, but that stopped. Some great candidates. Joyce Elliott was probably the best candidate who ever ran for Congress from any part of the state.
RS: Yeah, she just made one mistake, but we all make mistakes and we learn from them. Or we run again. [Laughs]

ED: So you were doing legal work for the family and friends, the church and everybody else. Is there anything else we need to talk about before we get around to the Supreme Court?

RS: Ernie, I'm probably the most private person you know. I revel in it. It's got to be from being by myself, being alone, not saying much to anybody about anything. I know that I need to be out doing more, helping in some areas, but I'm not sure enough about myself to jump out there and do something. I donate. I do a garden at the church where the weeds are winning every year. From 2004, I just practiced a little law, stayed to myself, learned that I had a son, and that's it.

ED: We've covered all your children, right?

RS: Well, except for this son I just found out I had.

ED: Oh, OK. Do we need to talk about that?

RS: Ohhhh. Deedee gets livid about it. I try not to get livid about it, but . . . Apparently during the time I was single I had an encounter that produced a child. Maybe fifteen years ago I get this phone call. "Dad!"

I'm saying, "Hello."

"Yeah, Dad, it's me."

I said, "Do you know who you're calling?"

"Yeah, it's me, Dad. It's Shane."

I said, "This is Ron Sheffield."

He said, "Yeah, yeah. This is Shane. Hey, Dad, how're you doing?"

I said, "Hey, wait a minute. Slow down. Slow down. Is there an adult around?"

"Yeah, hold on."

A lady gets on the phone. She said, "Hey, Ron, it's Nancy."

I said, "Yeah. Nancy? Oh, Nancy!

She says, "Well, that's your son Shane."

I said, "Wait a minute." And she goes on to relate to me that she was a nurse at Children's Hospital, neonatal. We had a relationship. She decided that, one, I don't want to get married, and, two, I don't want a kid. She decided to marry a male nurse that is working at the hospital with her and they move to California. She's married to him. They decide to get a divorce. The man, who has acknowledged this boy as his, says, "You know that is not my child and I'm not paying child support." So she says, "I guess I need to let him know who his father is."

My response was less than friendly, "Now wait a minute. I was born at night, but it was not last night. You know what, we need some testing done. Do you ever get to Arkansas." She said, "Yes, sometimes when I'm going through to visit my mother in Texas." I said, "The next time you come, bring the boy and we're going to get some tests. We're going to find out." My temper is starting to come back. I did not hear from them for about eight or nine years. Then one day I get another phone call with a message left on my recorder: "You sorry mother . . .," just cussing me. I got the number and I called back. I said, "I don't know who this is, but I'm going to tell you something. You talk to me like that and you and I are going to have a long discussion and you're going to lose. Now, who is this?" He explains who it is. I said you don't talk to me like than and hung up. I called his mother and said, "Look, you said that was my son. I told you some years ago that you guys need to come here and we need to be tested, but I understand that with the DNA you don't even need to come here. We're going to do DNA testing. If he's my

son, I want to know, because you're talking to a man who doesn't know who his father is. To this day, that bothers me." We did the testing. He's my son.

ED: And he's in California.

RS: I sat down and talked to Deedee about it. She sees the hurt that is in me. I never got to teach him how to play baseball, to ride a bike, didn't teach him how to be a man, didn't get to teach him any of that stuff. He's now twenty-six or so. And now I'm saying, "She cheated me." I got so mad. I thought, this is so wrong. And the young man hates me, because I wasn't there for him.

ED: He doesn't understand . . .

RS: He doesn't understand. Deedee said "I need to talk to him." I said, no, no. At some point in time I want him to figure it out for himself, because I don't want him to think anybody is making an excuse. So I've got a son. Now, my daughter isn't buying it. I told her, I was single at the time. I was sowing wild oats. I'm sorry for that, but I can't deny him if he is, in fact, my son. I've got a son and I didn't get to teach him how to play baseball or football or none of that stuff.

ED: Well, I suspect you'll get a chance at some point to have a relationship.

RS: I hope so. I hope so. And he has gotten married. I learned about that on Facebook. I know he's harboring some animosity and anger that I'm not going to try to assuage. I'm going to let him come to his own realization on that. But Deedee says, "I'm going to tell him."

ED: Maybe you can send him the transcript of this. Then maybe he could understand all of it.

RS: Maybe he can. That's a good idea.

ED: I think it would be illuminating for him, to read the whole history of his dad.

RS: That's a great idea. I hadn't thought of that.

ED: It explains it better than you ever could face to face. . .

RS: There's no way I could . . .

ED: That's a possibility. So we come up to 2010. You've developed a relationship with Mike Beebe. Did you know him well before you started campaigning [for lieutenant governor].

RS: Oh, yeah. When he was in the Senate I worked at the Insurance Department. I dealt with him on insurance legislation. Sometimes, all legislators, if one of their constituents is having a problem with an insurance company will call the department. Everybody knew that I was the consumer representative at the department and I would call the company and talk to the right person, to help a legislator over a rough spot with one of his constituents. Mike and I became colleagues and friends from that. He was not shy about calling [laughs]. It was not that he would call and say can you help somebody. He'd say, "help 'em out." When he said "help 'em out," he expected a positive result. He was always nice in the way he did it, but you understood that he wielded a pretty good hammer over the department. I liked working with him, because he was straightforward, you knew where he stood, he didn't try to hoodwink you. He would come straight at you. How can you not respect a man like that.

ED: He was a good politician, in the best sense of the word.

RS: Very much so.

ED: He was a politician.

RS: Absolutely. He had to be.

ED: It just occurs to me when you were talking about consumerism that an old friend of mine worked there with you. Remember Mamie Ruth Williams?
RS: Mamie Ruth! Oh, my!
ED: She was a character.
RS: She was. She came in and told me right off the bat when she worked for me. She said: "I go to lunch. That's what I do. And I go with Ernie Dumas." I said all right. And she said, "I don't want to take any vacation, I don't want to take any leave time, but I can't just take an hour for lunch."
ED: I got to know her in 1960 when I first came to the *Gazette*. She was part of the Women's Emergency Committee during the Central High School crisis. I did the eulogy at her funeral, in which I just told some funny stories.
RS: And there were plenty to tell. Oh, my. We used to go down to David's [Dave's Place, a restaurant in downtown Little Rock run by her son, David Williams] and have lunch, or David would bring lunch out to the department when she couldn't go out.
ED: A George Fisher caricature of her is on the wall down there.
RS: We are both blessed.
ED: 2010. Annabelle Clinton Imber Tuck. Maybe she was still just Imber at the time.
RS: Yes. She added Tuck a little bit later.
ED: She had some health problems and decided to retire from the Supreme Court. So Governor Beebe checks with you. Tell me about that conversation. Did he call you?
RS: I was in the kitchen. I think I was getting ready to cook my wife dinner. That's one of my chores. Lamar Davis called me. He was the governor's executive secretary. He said, "Governor Beebe wants to talk to you." I said, "About what?" He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Nothing." And he said, "Why don't you come see the governor in the morning?" I said, "OK, no sweat." I went down to the governor's office and he said, "I need a Supreme Court judge and I need one right now." I said, "You've got Bill Bowen." He said "No, Bill Bowen's had a mild stroke and he had to step down." He said, I've got to have someone who can hit the ground running." He said, "I wasn't going to consider an African American because [Judge] Wendell Griffen is on my ass, and I don't succumb to that kind of . . ." I said, "OK, it's all right that you didn't succumb to him, because I don't know the first thing about Supreme Courting." "Yes," he said, "but you can hit the ground running." He said, "Now, I thought of some other people. Let me tell you." I said, "And well you should, because there are a lot of people out there who are smarter than me and can hit the ground running." He said, "Yeah, but the people I talk to don't want to lose the money and they don't want to work that hard." I said, "Governor, you know I'm not a jurist. I'm a lawyer and I'm probably down there with guys who . . ." And he said, "But you're a lawyer." I said yeah. He said, "OK, will you do it?" So I said, "One other time a governor told me to do something and I told him no and I'm regretting it to this day. If you say I can do the work, then I'll do it."
ED: What was the other thing?
RS: Bill Clinton. He asked me to come to work in the governor's office as his affirmative action officer. So I said, OK, then no, because working in the Insurance Department was where I was supposed to be, because I was doing the most good. So I said, "Governor, I've got to do this. I know it's bad, but I've got to do this." He said OK. It was shortly after that that he sent me a letter thanking me for all the good that you do

for the people of Arkansas. People were telling him the Insurance Department was doing a good job, and so is Sheffield. So I said, OK, I'll take that.

So I said to Governor Beebe OK. That was on a Monday. Tuesday, I'm sworn in at the Arkansas Supreme Court.

ED: Who swore you in?

RS: [Chief Justice] Jim Hannah. Wednesday, I'm briefing cases. Thursday I'm sitting in oral arguments and I am presenting cases. I didn't know where the bathroom was. I didn't know what I was saying. I didn't know if I was right or wrong. But they said they need someone to hit the ground running. At the time, I was asked to keep the two clerks.

ED: Annabelle's clerks.

RS: One had just failed the bar. One had accepted a job with a New York law firm. [Laughs]

ED: So you didn't have a law clerk?

RS: I had two clerks, but their minds were "I'm studying for the bar" and the other one was "I'm getting ready to leave here. I'm getting ready to go to New York." So I'm literally bumping into walls. I'm trying to figure out what is the process, how does it work, what am I supposed to do, what am I supposed to say, how am I supposed to do this. I'm coming home and I'm someone who goes to bed at seven or eight o'clock. Now I'm going to bed at eleven, I'm still getting up at three, I'm trying to read and understand the cases. The case load at the Supreme Court at the time was that every week you had a lead case and you had backup on another.

ED: Right.

RS: So that's two for you.

ED: That you've really got to steep yourself in.

RS: But still . . .

ED: There are six or seven others that week that you have to read.

RS: Well, there are twelve other cases that you've got to know about before you can say yes or no, or whatever.

ED: And two that you have to argue.

RS: Yes. And know it inside and out. I'm getting up and I'm not sleeping. I'm saying, "I can't do this. I don't know how you guys do it." Donnie Corbin [Justice Donald L. Corbin] says, in Donnie Corbin language, "Hey, you don't know what you're doing, do you?" [Laughs] No. No. He says, "Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it."

ED: That's Donnie.

RS: That's Donnie. He and I hit it off almost immediately, almost immediately . . . He was rough. He said, "You were thrown into a real bad situation." He said: "Hell, I don't know why you did it. You were thrown into a bad situation. You've got no clerks. You've got no judicial experience. I'm going to go ahead and say it, you don't know what you're doing." I said, "You can go ahead and say that because I don't."

ED: He had been there.

RS: Yeah. But I said I'm here to help, to make the court run better. That's what I want to do. I told Donnie: "Don't let me embarrass the court, please. My skin is not so thin that someone can't come in and say, 'Ron, you're wrong on this and let me tell you why you're not thinking right.' Do this. Tell me. Because I'm here to help all of y'all. It's most important to me that I do nothing to embarrass the Arkansas Supreme Court and the people who make it up." To a fault, I know they carried me, and I know I made some

stupid statements. But it was important to me that we got the law right, that we did the right thing, and that we had respect all around that table.

ED: Let's see if we can identify who was there then. Jim Hannah was the chief. Donald Corbin. Robert L. Brown was there then.

RS: Paul Danielson.

ED: Was Tom Glaze still there? No, he left in 2009, that's right.

RS: Jim Gunter.

ED: Who else?

RS: Oh, what was her name? I am so sorry I can't remember her name. I can see her face. Boy, she wordsmithed us to death. [Elana Cunningham Wills]

ED: So Donnie was sort of your mentor?

RS: Yeah, if you want to use the word mentor. Pain in the backside. Oh, I loved that man.

ED: Well, it was a pretty congenial court, wasn't it?

RS: Yes.

ED: Everybody got along.

RS: Even when we disagreed. The disagreements were about your perception of the case, the law. It wasn't about your personality, anybody else's personality. It was about legitimate concerns or aspects of the law. If you disagreed, it was about that case and that case was gone and you moved on to something else. And then we went to lunch.

ED: I should have done a little more research on the cases that year. You were on the court from, I guess, January through the end of December.

RS: Pretty much.

ED: Until January and I've forgotten who was elected to fill your position.

RS: Karen Baker.

ED: Was one of the tort-reform cases in the court that year?

RS: No. The cases that stood out in my mind were the Murphy case—*Arkansas Baptist Hospital v. Murphy*. That was about doctors being able to practice at other facilities and still be credentialed at Arkansas Baptist. They were trying to restrict a doctor's ability to operate at another hospital. That was a case that comes to mind. But the most important case to me was the West Memphis Three.

ED: That's right.

RS: That's the last case I wrote. I don't know how I got that case, but I don't think that was fair. [Laughs]

ED: Was this the final case? The West Memphis Three went up and down over the years.

RS: Right. This was the last one.

ED: What was the rule that decided the case? I had never heard of it.

RS: Well, we didn't do that. Our ruling was that the statute required the lower court to grant a defendant a hearing if the DNA evidence presented doesn't exonerate him but does show that it is not his DNA. The lower court did not grant him a hearing. Basically, what we said was that he's entitled to a hearing, because the DNA excluded him as a potential donor. That's what it was. So the DNA that was found was not the DNA of any of the three. So the lower court had to grant them a hearing on that.

ED: That's when it came apart. That's when they said you've got to . . .

RS: That's when they said "we'll say we are guilty but we are really not." The Alford Plea.
ED: That's right. The Alford Plea. I had never heard of that before. But I've seen it since then a couple of times. About two weeks ago. So it was that decision that essentially liberated those kids—although they were not kids anymore. Was that a unanimous decision?
RS: Unanimous, even Donnie.
ED: You flipped Donnie. And he became a fierce champion. When I interviewed him for these oral histories shortly before he died, he came back to that and said he felt terrible that he had been personally responsible for those kids spending all that time in prison when they may not have committed the murders, and probably didn't commit them. He said he blindly went along with that all along and felt terrible, terrible about it.
RS: I led him to the light. [Laughs] You hear that, Donnie? I led you to the light.
ED: Well, he probably became more passionate about their innocence than anyone else. So you got a unanimous vote.
RS: I got seven votes.
ED: You wrote the opinion.
RS: Yes. If someone said, what was the best you did while you were on the court, that would be it, the West Memphis Three.
ED: It was the biggest murder case in Arkansas history and it was famous internationally. Do you remember much about the discussion in chambers about the case?
RS: The thing I remember is that when I presented the case I got six knocks. [Taps his knuckles on the table.] When it was his turn, Donnie said, "I may have been wrong all these years. I believed they were guilty, but I may have been wrong all these years." He gave me his knock.
ED: You said knocks, is that what they do?
RS: When you go around the table after presenting your case, they go around the table and if they have nothing to say and they are on board with how you've written it, they just knock on the table.
ED: And if they disagreed with you?
RS: They would say something, remember these are very opinionated people and not reluctant to speak their mind. Everything after that was a blur. I said, we did it. Not to say too much about it, but if you saw the evidence . . . I went through boxes and boxes and boxes of evidence, photographs, testimony for me to get an understanding outside of what was on TV and the news, but to get an understanding from a legal aspect of what had happened and all the circumstantial stuff. If you ever get access to that file, it is enlightening reading.
ED: When you get through it all, you realize there is nothing there except that third kid's confession, when the police get him to sign a statement making his admission. That's all they had.
RS: That's all they had. There was lying, there were innuendoes, there was subterfuge.
ED: Anything else about the court?
RS: I don't know about now, but those are some of the hardest working people I've ever worked with. And I've done some hard work in my life. I said earlier that the hardest thing I've ever done was to take the bar. No. The hardest thing was, every day, preparing yourself to read a case, to think about a case, to decide a case that could cost somebody

his life, that could keep somebody in prison until they die. I didn't worry so much about the civil cases. But in the criminal cases, the effect of what I said and what I did really affected a life. To live or die. Those guys and that lady—I don't know how they did it, year in and year out. The enormity of what you were doing. It was with me every day when I walked in and when I walked out. I lost more sleep and worried more about whether I did that right, did I say things right, did I help or did I hurt? That's why I told Governor Beebe, I'm not the smartest, but I am here. Because I'm here I've got to do the best I can.

ED: January 1, 2011, you're a civilian again.

RS: I'm back with my wife again, practicing law, but a little less so because I got involved in helping out at Jericho Way [a homeless shelter]. I take stuff out there from time the time. And being to myself. I've got to go back to what gives me the most comfort, and that is being alone. That's just the way my life has been. My wife, God bless her, doesn't know how she has saved me from myself. She has saved me literally, because she makes me do things that I would not otherwise do. But she also accepts me for what I am. You can't ask for more than that.

Since 2011, I've practiced a little law. I've done more *pro bono* work. My wife and my paralegal say, "You've got to send out some bills." I say, I've sent 'em out. She says, but they're not paying you. And I say, all right, we'll send some more out. I'd say eighty or ninety percent of what I do now is *pro bono*. There are people out there who need help and don't know how to do it, where to go. If it's a case that generates a fee, generally I call another lawyer and say, hey, do you want a client? That's what we're supposed to do when we've been given so much. What do I need? I've got everything I could possibly ever want.

ED: [Pointing to a piano in the corner] Do you play the piano?

RS: My god-granddaughter plays the piano. It's there. We get it tuned from time to time. You can see [gesturing at walls] that my wife loves art. If she gets a piece of artwork and she's happy, I'm happy. God has blessed me beyond measure. So I just sit and try to help out where I can and do what I can. You don't remember this, but I do. When we had the Million Man March [October 16, 1995], and you interviewed me. Thank you for your kind words. I know you don't remember it, but I do.