

**University of Mississippi
Mississippi Hill Country Oral History Collective**

**Black Families of Yalobusha County
Interview with Thomas Brown**

March 23, 2021

Interviewer: Jasmine Stansberry

Length: 52:10

- Jasmine Stansberry: [00:00](#) Today is Tuesday, March 23rd, 2021. And I'm Jasmine Stansberry, a graduate student at the University of Mississippi, and I'm here collecting an oral history on Zoom with Bishop Thomas Brown. This oral history interview is being conducted on behalf of the Mississippi Hill Country Oral History Collective and the Black Power at Ole Miss task force. Bishop, I want to thank you for allowing me to interview you. And now if you would please introduce yourself giving your full name, birthday, and where you were born.
- Thomas Brown: [01:36](#) I'm Thomas Lewis Brown, Sr. Born June 21st, 1951 in Oakland, Mississippi. That's My native home. And my parents were Steven and Lillie [Sp] Brown, who also were from that area.
- Jasmine Stansberry: [01:53](#) Okay. Bishop Brown, can you tell me about your upbringing?
- Thomas Brown: [01:59](#) Well, I was born on my father's farm. He had eighty acres of land there in Oakland until the state (Interstate) 55 came through and divided, took 39 of the 80 acres leaving him 41 acres. And that was a very disturbing experience because the interstate came through and took the most fertile property in the home that we lived in. All the, he had set up in terms of orchards and what have you. The interstate took all of that and left him with pennies to build a new home. It had not been for the principal of Walker High School named Jimmy Walker who was a graduate of Alcorn State, and had done his work, his training in agriculture there at Alcorn, and had learned some carpentry skills. So he and my—I have a brother that's eight years older than I am. He and my brother—Mr. Walker and my brother—and a few others, built our home. It still sits there in Oakland on the farm. And that was my first introduction to I guess, systemic racism in the sense that we literally had no power in deciding what acreage the interstate would take, uh the government would take from us, and it was a very difficult adjustment for us having to move to a new, to build a house. First, we moved to a new location until the house was built. And but at least we were able to get some to create from that in terms of starting over new. I have eight

siblings. My father and mother were both married twice. My father had five children to his first marriage. Most of them are much older than I am. And my mother had one daughter (to her first marriage; and they married and there are three of us products of that marriage. My father and mother were educators during the time when Blacks in the South could teach without college education. They would go to Rust and MI college [Mississippi Industrial College] in Holly Springs in, through the summer and get courses. And they taught there in Oakland. My mother taught in other places. In fact, she taught in Lake Cormorant, Mississippi out from Hernando is where I remember her teaching. My dad taught at Oakland until he came to a juncture when they could not teach without college education. And so he was ordered to becoming a farmer; and work the other jobs he worked on, the government [inaudible] and we grew up on the farm mostly with what we call truck crops that is products that we could go to the market and sale, so we would take them to Batesville and market and sell them. We had our own garden home farm and later, I guess when I was a teenager, my daddy bought a tractor he was able to farm, the land more productively then. But basically that was my experience, growing up on the farm never went anywhere major. Memphis was the farthest I'd gone. I guess I was a junior in high school, 1968, Dr. King was killed. And I do not know to this day who sponsored the trips, but, but students from high schools were selected. I was not the one initially selected. Another one of my classmates was, and he chose to not go. And so I got my first privilege to come to Atlanta in 1968. First time I'd ever lived in a hotel, first time I'd ever really experienced a big city. And so it was a...eye opening experience for me to see something like Atlanta after growing up on a farm. Most of my years as a kid up until I was 14 and a half, we had no vehicle. So we walked everywhere. We would have to get the others to take us to get groceries for us but we walked to church. Occasionally I had to walk to school, which was six miles away especially when I missed the bus. Our bus stop was about a half mile from home, so we had to walk to the main highway—highway 51 at that time—was the main thoroughfare from Mississippi until the interstate 55 was created. But that was my experience by and large high school, elementary school, was a very excellent experience. I guess when I was seventh grade, thereabouts, eight [grade] integration was beginning to take place, and so the whites in Yalobusha County decided that they were going to resist integration and, as a result of that, began to shift resources away from high school to other places, private schools and my last, I guess my last three years of high school, we saw a major shift in terms of our teachers. Our principal left and went to Tunica. Most of our best teachers taken by him to Tunica. We were left, basically, with teachers who were really rejects other places. I, in fact, I had one, one teacher who had not finished college at Alcorn, but they allowed him to teach because they needed teachers and also ended up having to take typing

and mechanics to get enough units to finish high school. So it was a very impoverished area, but also education, a very impoverished. I did somehow finish valedictorian in my class. It was a very small class of 18 of us. And somebody, I wasn't the smartest kid in class by any means. In fact, the mayor of Oakland at this present time, Riley Swearingen was in my class. He dropped out, I guess, maybe eighth grade or ninth grade, but he was the smartest kid I'd ever come in contact with, but he dropped out because of his leaving school and, uh, some other things. I became the valedictorian but that's something of my upbringing in school worked on the farm. I guess must've been my 11th grade year. I worked for the city of Oakland cutting grass and summer programs that they had. So that was my first time making any money outside of my father's farm. I did pick cotton as far away as Marks, Mississippi. I used to pick cotton down at Marks, which was an experience all, cause my father really was not much of a farmer. He did it survive, but he was not a lover of farming. Teaching was his, his, his real passion, for education and church. and so he did not put a whole lot of effort into production on the farm. So in order to get monies to go to school, I would hire myself out to work in the summer [inaudible] cotton from white farmers. And in the fall, would pick cotton on the plantation, particularly in Marks. Marks had, uh, just was a cotton production at that time. And we would be picked up and carried down to Marks to pick cotton each day. So that was the way in which I got money to buy clothing for school and elsewhere, but it was very challenging time. But we grew all, most of our products that we needed for living. I can only remember going to the store to buy sugar and flour and meal. Everything else was raised on the farm. And in that sense we were insulated a great deal from, from racism because school was all black, other than seeing white people from time to time in town or having the white kids go by on the buses and heckle us and call us names. That was pretty much my exposure to racism, other than reading in the Commercial Appeal—the Memphis paper we always got—and watching news. We, I didn't have any encounters with any whites beyond working on their farm until I was in college.

Jasmine Stansberry: [11:29](#)

You mentioned that your parents were educators and that they took classes at Rust and Mississippi Industrial College. As educators, what do you know their experiences there, if you know anything, and then also what role do you think that their education that those institutions played in how they educated others, including you and your siblings?

Thomas Brown: [12:03](#)

Well my dad was, the people who knew him in the prime of his life, uh they called him professor, Professor Steve, and from hearing students who were in his classes, they extol him as a great teacher, very disciplined, a disciplinary. And in fact, my

brother, Morris, who is eight years older than I am, was a student of is. And I did not, did not know this until three or four years ago. And my daddy flunked him the first grade. Even though he was supposedly the best student in the class, he didn't come up to my daddy's standard; and my daddy kept him back a year. But very demanding believed that education was significant and important, although there was not a whole lot of that in terms of demanding of us as kids growing up it was clear to us that our parents expected us to get a good education. My mother, I was able to sit with her. She's taught in a one school, one room school, I believe it was Bethlehem Church in Lake Cormorant, Mississippi. So I vaguely remember her teaching and but she was the one who taught me how to read and write, and that kind of thing. I remember those days of her helping me to do that. But we grew up in a house we knew that education was significant. My dad not only taught in school, but he was a strong churchman. So I saw him lead in our ... Church in ... Mississippi where he basically was the superintendent of Sunday school all my life there, that situation usually it was the most up-to-date person in terms of knowing what was to be known in terms of the Bible and what have you. And so he was a pillar of the community. In fact, my dad is the one who filed for our suit for the segregation for Yalobusha County. And my baby sister, Beth Brown Whiting was one of the first black students to enroll in the integrated school in Coffeeville. So I consider my dad to have been a leader in the community. My mother, likewise there was a group called the Social Elite, or Socialites they called themselves, women in Yalobusha County. And my mother was one of the leaders in that group, and they mentored young black girls and their focus was on getting scholarships for kids to go to college. So they did a lot of that kind of thing, trying to raise monies to help assist the special girls in going off to college. But both, both parents, very instrumental not only in our home, but in the community as well.

Jasmine Stansberry: [15:00](#)

So who would you say were the leaders, and this could be local, this could be your family, this could be national leaders. Who were the leaders that you saw growing up that you admired?

Thomas Brown: [15:13](#)

Well, other than my father, in terms of the civil rights piece he was there I never met there was Aaron Henry who over NAACP in Mississippi and Medgar Evers course. I never knew them, but we read about them, heard about them on the radio. Locally, there were no quote unquote political leaders who were outspoken. Oakland was known to be Ku Klux Klan territory. In fact, the Ku Klux Klan, I guess, around '65, thereabouts pinned in the middle of, in the middle of Highway 51, which is where my hometown—51 goes through my hometown—put "KKK" in the middle of the highway. And that was part of the things that we dealt with. Yeah. We went downtown. You saw the sign of

the writing on the highway, "KKK." So a lot of Blacks in my community were very [frightened?], and many of them did not own land so they lived on whites plantations or lived in their homes or houses. So they were very, very little outspoken Blacks then. It really wasn't until I came to college, that I began to run into people who were actively engaged in protest. Wayne Johnson, who I mentioned to you earlier, was one of those persons. He, he was very involved with Medgar Evers and with Aaron Henry and others, Fannie Lou Hamer. I learned a lot from Wayne in terms of just the whole protest movement. Other than Martin King hearing about him on radio and TV reading about him in the newspaper. In fact, when Martin King took over the march that James Meredith was marching from Memphis to Jackson and was shot the authorities would not allow Martin King to march through my hometown. That was going to be my, I was hoping my first time seeing my Martin King; and they airlifted him from Batesville to Grenada because they knew of the potential violence that could take place between those two towns. and but I, most of my admiration, a person in terms of protest movement was at a distance until I came to college.

Jasmine Stansberry: [17:50](#)

What was it like for you to, you know, see, you know, you named people that you admired, like Medgar Evers and Dr. King who were assassinated, did, how did that impact you, their deaths?

Thomas Brown: [18:02](#)

Greatly. Going back to the Emmett Till. I was what three, four years old when Emmett Till was killed and the Emmett Till death was a cloud over many of us in Mississippi, especially boys. My mother often raised his name as a reminder of what could happen to me if I got outta line. And so the Emmett Till story was just embedded over and over again. So in some ways there was a, the style of men, my father in part, was a passive aggressive kind of stance. Unless you bothered them, they didn't bother you. They didn't initiate any of that. My father, eventually did in the late sixties, or maybe 10th grade or so when I was 10th grade he began voter registration in Yalobusha County, and I would take drive him around because at that time he didn't have license to drive, so I would drive him in the evening and nights to help register Blacks in Yalobusha County. But it was very disconcerting because John Kennedy was killed, which was a major shock to us. I remember vividly hearing that news because for us John Kennedy represented great hope for us; and then the Evers death, Kings death all just compounded the kind of sense of hopelessness and helplessness that that was pervasive among many of us. And there were not many Blacks in my neck of the woods who had great aspirations because it was thought that we just could not go anywhere. Many young blacks migrated soon as they finished high school or before they finished high school and went North. So it was, especially when the train, the train

would run through Oakland. When School was out of June, it was, it looked like hundreds of people would be boarding the train going North. So by the time I finished high school in '69, the Black population of Oakland had dwindled greatly because people felt like it was a hopeless situation. And so they would get out and go elsewhere, including the education interests there. So it was a very demeaning, despairing time. Yet, we rallied around sports boxing, Muhammad Ali was one of the persons that we all galvanized (gathered) around the TV to watch him fight. He became a symbol of our hope that we could possibly make it watching baseball and watching great baseball players basketball players. Those was for me as a young boy was signs of perhaps I could get out of this predicament and go elsewhere.

Jasmine Stansberry: [21:15](#)

So you graduated in 1969. Can you tell me about the last your senior year or your junior year, or whenever you were in high school and decided that you were gonna attend college; can you also tell me about what made you want to attend the University of Mississippi?

Thomas Brown: [21:39](#)

Well I really had not given much thought to college until my senior year, and at the end of my senior year in fact, although I had a sister who had gone to Alcorn, a brother who had gone to Alcorn in terms of my household and in terms of high school, there was not much discussion about college. Actually it's embarrassing to say, but I had not heard of the ACT test until about two months or three months before I graduated high school. And one of our teachers told three of us, four of us, actually, four boys, told us we need to go and take the ACT test, so we got up one Saturday morning, early and drove all the way to Mississippi Valley State with no idea of what we were to expect. There was no orientation, and so I thought it was a matter of sitting there guessing; and so I guessed and when I got my score back, it was, I mean, devastating. Uh so that, that was one reason I went to Northwest because I had not made a 15 on ACT test and Northwest, I was admitted as a technical student, person in technology. So my first year was in technology. I went back and took the ACT test spring of my freshman year and made a significant score and then went in liberal arts. Psychology was my major. I transferred Ole Miss. And I went to Northwest in part because by the time I got out of high school, my parents had said to me, we have no money to help you. I was, I did apply to Jackson State, was accepted. Applied to Alcorn, was accepted. But I was frightened about going away from home and no money. So Northwest, I was able to get a job at a place called Crump Chrome Craft, that made furniture. And so one of my members of my church who lived in Pope, Mississippi told me about Northwest, about Chrome Craft. I applied job at Chrome Craft, got a job there before school opened. That's really why I ended up at Northwest. Was two years I was there. And then the

question came where to go from Northwest. Many of my peers went to Delta State. A few of them went to Ole Miss. And I guess by that time I was ready for the challenge. And, cause Ole Miss was, was the university and having gone two years at Northwest, I figured I'm, I'm gonna try this. And I did transferred there, was accepted; and transferred there and finished up my degree there at Ole Miss. But it, it was not something that I spent a lot of time thinking about. I'll be honest with you. College, just I was so devastated by the fact that our school had been demoralized from time. I was eight or ninth grade to the time I finished high school. And so academics was not a high priority on my agenda at the time.

Jasmine Stansberry: [25:19](#)

So when you say the school was demoralized, can you be more specific?

Thomas Brown: [25:26](#)

Well I mentioned earlier that I guess around the eighth or ninth grade the powers that be Yalobusha County decided they were not gonna give the school any more money. So we went from having science lab to no science lab, of having something of a library to no library to having teachers who were prepared and who were involved, again, making sure that our lives would advance to teachers who were simply—many of whom—were there for a job. And it was very obvious to, as kids, we understood that. So many times we would go in, we would go in for class at roll call and then leave and go to the gym and play ball. It just was undisciplined. Our principal who was a very strong disciplinarian, who knew all of our parents, knew us, lived in the community to a principal who came from Brandon, Mississippi I believe, who knew nobody and was not involved in the community. So there was this disconnect between who were teaching us and our community, whereas before, the vast majority of our teachers went to church with us, knew our parents, and our parents knew them. So it was more of a connection, a sense of, this is a village here being used for educating kids to a place where there was no village anymore. So that's part of the demoralizing that I experience.

Jasmine Stansberry: [27:02](#)

Can you say a little bit about what Northwest Community College was like? Were there Black students there as well as whites or was it just mostly you all as Black students?

Thomas Brown: [27:19](#)

Northwest was predominantly white. There was—I don't know what the numbers were, but it was a very small crowd of Blacks. We knew most of them. At that time, most of the Black students commuted by bus or car, so they'd get class and left. So a lot of students, I did not get to know, Black students I did not get to know that well, because they did not live on campus. But Northwest was fairly progressive, or the environment was not overtly racist. We had Black football players, we had Black

baseball players, we had Black basketball players. I even tried to run track while I was there. I wasn't good at it, but I at least got enough to get a grant such that I could get my meals taken care of there. And academically it was good. We had black professors. One person, I guess we all loved mostly, it was a guy named McGlowan. He was actually from over in Oxford. He taught sociology. Very, very able gentlemen with a few others. But the environment was, Northwest was a small school, so you got to know pretty much everybody. And in that sense, it didn't feel as alienating. And plus I worked at night and evenings at Chrome Craft, so I wasn't—that first year, or both years— I was not as involved on the campus as some students. I went to class went to work and that was pretty much it until I came to Ole Miss.

Jasmine Stansberry: [29:09](#)

And Northwest Community College, is the location Oxford, correct?

Thomas Brown: [29:17](#)

Senatobia [Mississippi].

Jasmine Stansberry: [29:17](#)

Oh, Senatobia. Oh, okay. So can you tell me about what it was like when you transferred to the University of Mississippi? Like, what do you remember when you first got there?

Thomas Brown: [29:30](#)

Like fish out of water. I was devastated. It felt so, I mean, Northwest was a challenge, but for someone who grew up in Oakland who had had no white peers who had been insulated in many ways from much of the racism that was going on around us. Ole miss was obviously just overly different. Everything about Ole Miss suggested this is not the place for you. There was one black football player. Curtis Ball, that was basketball. A guy named Gentle Ben was the football player. So we had one, two black athletes. UI had no Black professors. In fact, I think there may have been one Black professor in the whole faculty. And as I remembered that person was hired by the federal government. It was not someone hired by the university. Classes were huge. I went from a class of 20 or 30 people to the class of 150 to 200 people. Uh, again, just completely alienating. Uand found myself really just trying to navigate by the seat of my pants, to be honest with you. So I spent a lot of my time at Ole Miss working in the community. Wayne Johnson, who I mentioned earlier, became my pastor, mentor. He had a tutorial program that was ran through the fellow government. And I became the director of that tutorial program, which meant every afternoon I was on campus working with that program. He was also a community organizer, so I spent a lot of time with him in Oxford. Uhe was trying to organize, uBlack businesses there to cooperate with each other. He had a co-op store right there on Number Six [Highway 6], right down from the university, between university and Black Baptist church there, on the street there, the CME

church. And then there, used to be a United Methodist church up the street there where most of the kids went. And so I spent most of my time with him, but I was not in class. I was out doing community stuff, which helped my sanity as a student. And then my last year I got married, and my wife and I had met at Northwest and she transferred to Ole Miss, and we got married there. And on top of that, I also entered the ministry. So, a lot of my time was spent between, being a young married person and being in ministry; and Wayne Johnson pastored in Carrolton. So on the weekends, we went to Carrolton to his church. So I spent a lot of time on the road, the weekend, traveling with him. So Ole Miss was just not a place where I spent a lot of time other than class, a few times I went to the Student Union, mingled with the Black students. But, I just found it to be a very alienating experience. In fact, when I graduated, I did not go to get my gown and hood. UI went home and they, they ended up sending my diploma to my home. I didn't even march. It was just that alienating.

Jasmine Stansberry: [33:17](#)

Were you familiar? I mean, I'm sure you were I mean, familiar with the, the BSU. Did you feel like as far as like being a Black student on campus, did you feel like there wasn't, for you, a place you can go to just feel comfortable as a Black student?

Thomas Brown: [33:36](#)

Well, I did get involved with the BSU [Black Student Union] cause Wayne Johnson was our kind of Black minister. He was kind of our adviser. There was another guy named Theo Triplett, [inaudible] Methodist church there. Both of them worked with us as students. But Wayne, I don't if he was hired by the univeristy, or he just took that on himself. But I, I did some activities with the BSU. There was not much advocacy going on on campus. We did, we were able to get some entertainers. We had some RnB artists to come and play, or sing for us; but beyond that, there was not much advocacy taking place. And I'm not sure what that was all about. My experience of many of our black students was that some of us were struggling with our own identities. Some of the brighter kids who seemed to have a lot of smarts, they seem to hung out more with white kids. And the Student Union building, we had our cubby hole where we went, hung out, played cards, that kind of thing. But, but most of that was socializing. That was not about trying to talk about how we change things on this campus. I didn't experience much of that when I'm a student.

Jasmine Stansberry: [35:15](#)

Were you aware of the protest, the BSU protest at Fulton Chapel in '70.

Thomas Brown: [35:24](#)

I had not heard of that until you shared it. And that's a strange, I don't understand. I came to Ole Miss in '71, and this happened in '70. I heard nothing about nothing.

Jasmine Stansberry: [35:41](#) Wow.

Thomas Brown: [35:41](#) And there was no conversation about the Fulton protest.

Jasmine Stansberry: [35:43](#) Wow.

Thomas Brown: [35:43](#) And, I don't know whether that was because the university had deliberately made sure that something like that didn't get surfaced, and those students who were there at the time there was no conversation about it. So I'm just, I'm just struck really strange. It feels strange that that happened a year before I got there, and there was no conversation about it.

Jasmine Stansberry: [36:11](#) You've talked a lot about Reverend Wayne Johnson, and you mentioned that he was a community organizer and that you worked with him in the tutorial program. Can you say more about that program and where it took place?

Thomas Brown: [36:35](#) He had a community center there that he uses and some of it was in the church. The CME church there, I think it's called New Birth or something now. But some of that was in the basement of that church. But as I remember it, he had his, he had rented a space for this program. It was, was for underprivileged kids. I don't even know the age of this group now, but we would, for two and a half hours or so on each evening, we would bring them in for training classes. They would give, give them a small bag of food, and they would go home. That was extent of it. We didn't do anything with them on the weekend, just during the weekdays. We housed them in the facility to do their classes and to do remedial work with them.

Jasmine Stansberry: [37:32](#) You also mentioned that Reverend Johnson worked with people like Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers.

Thomas Brown: [37:41](#) Yes. Yeah. He was a real radical guy very small in stature, but as I said, he ran a co-op store there where he would purchase food items, primarily meats at a discount and would sell them to the community there through that store. So he operated that store with his wife, Dorothy Johnson, who actually still lives there in Oxford. And sometimes students worked with him and helped him operate things there, but he operated that for a long time until he died I think. It was his way of making sure that the people in the community had food items that they could afford. As I said earlier, he tried to organize a few Black businesses there to help us connect our services, so that we could better serve the Black community. That did not go too well because people were frightened about organizing in that period of time, that period of time. But he would make efforts at that was very much active with voter registration views. Didn't experience him much in terms of speaking to the powers that be in the city of

Oxford. Much of his work was behind the scene working with the Black community, trying to help empower us to take care and do what we could for ourselves.

Jasmine Stansberry: [39:10](#)

Could you say more about your last year at the university? I know you mentioned that you didn't have a pleasant experience and you were just ready to go, but can you say more about like what that last year was like for you?

Thomas Brown: [39:30](#)

The Ole Miss experience totally, probably challenged me to really discover myself in a way that I had not done. I had not been challenged academically like that. Having one of the [inaudible] was to learn a foreign language, so I took Spanish for two years. I was majoring in psychology, so one of my most memorable experiences, most positive experience I had as a student there academically was both my political science classes and my social psych class. And the social psych class. Not was it a great class because of the profess. But one of the things he did for us—this was the beginning of my senior year, maybe my junior year—this guy walks in the class, there were about 150 to 200 of us sitting there. I was, maybe two other blacks beside myself there. He walked in the class, looks at the class, and says, most of you will flunk my class. And immediately three-fourths of the class got up and walked out.

Jasmine Stansberry: [40:46](#)

Wow.

Thomas Brown: [40:47](#)

And when we came back to class, only nine of us showed up. I was the only Black in that group. And part of why I'm sharing this, because it was my discovering myself. I never would've thought that I would take that kind of challenge that I would come back and say. In essence, I said to him, you have to flunk me then because I'm not gon walk. And so it was an empowering experience for me, and yet at the same time, it taught me a lot about human behavior That all these white kids would get up and leave. And so it, it gave me some sense of who I was in a way that I had not really come to grips with and held my own as a student in that class, along with the other eight and ended up getting an A of that class I mean, that was very empowering for me. And it was then that I began to realize maybe I need to apply myself more academically because before then I was basically skating on ice just trying to get through, get my degree, get out of there. But political science classes were excellent, very challenging. I remember one experience when we were taken to Tupelo and we were given a day of meeting with the city planners in Tupelo. At that time, Tupelo, Mississippi was the best planned city in Mississippi. And so we were taught by planners how to go about planning a metropolitan area, which had great benefits to me. I end up being a pastor, now Bishop, in the church. So the way in which you systematically organize

people and plan with the future in mind was significant in that experience. So that was the positive there for me in that regard. But you know, beyond being married and getting which was a major adjustment of course, and being a student at Ole Miss. So that took up a lot of my time. We lived off campus at married student housing and so much of my energy was both trying to navigate academically and trying to get out, with the hopes that I could get me a job and work and make me some money. That was really what my aim was. Uh, it was Wayne Johnson again who, I say tricked me. He asked me to drive him to Atlanta in my car . I bought a '60 Chevrolet Impala it was, in my sophomore year, my junior year at Ole Miss. So I drove him to Atlanta. He directed me to the seminary where I ended up going to seminary, Interdenominational Theological Seminary. And once I arrived, he introduced me to the Dean because he had been a student that himself, but dropped out 'cause he was a part of that protest movement in the mid sixties and felt that seminary education was not gon to be helpful to him. So he dropped out, went back to Oxford, and started organizing working people like Medgar Evers. So he took me, directed me there, told the Dean that I needed an application, I could fill out the application. Then he turned to me and said, Thomas I'm gon leave you here. You stay here, I'm gon catch the bus back to Oxford. So that's actually how I got to seminary was Wayne asked me to drive him there. It meant my car was gon to be there. And, had arranged with a brother of his who lived in Atlanta for me to stay until I got me a job. Then I went back and got the wife, transferred from Ole Miss to Spelman where she graduated. But, but, that's kinda my, my journey in the wild way of how I navigated or was helped to be navigated to where I am now.

Jasmine Stansberry: [45:06](#)

What would you say is your biggest takeaway? Once you graduated, what was the biggest takeaway from attending that university for you, and how did it help or hinder you in your future endeavors?

Thomas Brown: [45:28](#)

Well, on the negative side, I thought it ended me academically. The atmosphere for me was not conducive to learning. As I said earlier, having grown up in very small town, I guess there had to be 1,500 people in Oakland and you get to a campus that's got eight or ten thousand students, mostly whites, with all white professors. Nobody ever talks about race civil rights. It's pure academics. And so that did not help me academically. I got exposed to a whole lot. That's one of the things I take away. Academically, I got exposed to a lot more than I probably would've done somewhere else, perhaps. I guess the positive is more of my learning about myself, about my being able to endure, persevere and my own leadership abilities. I think that that was one of the things I learned greatly over at Northwest and Ole Miss that I, not necessarily a natural leader, but I emerged as

a leader on both campuses. And anything that was about something worthwhile, I generally was a part of. And basically, my peers extolled me there. But in hindsight, I would say, I perhaps should have chosen somewhere else academically. And that's just with hindsight. The other thing that that experience tried—for me, I can't speak for other black students—was that you wrestled with all that energy as a black person and that being in a white, totally white environment, how do you remain, have a sense of integration of of who you are? And I think that, that was the thing that really was a great challenge for me, was feeling torn between my Black identity and here's a white environment that says in essence, everything white is better than anything black could ever be. And so that was part of the wrestling that I went through. It was not until I came to seminary in Atlanta, predominant black institution that I really began to feel like I was piecing myself back as a whole person, and feeling like I'm at home, I'm in an environment that I know I'm well received and that is part of my heritage and my future as well.

Jasmine Stansberry: [48:37](#)

So Bishop Brown, I have one more question for you. What advice would you give black students at the University of Mississippi today?

Thomas Brown: [48:48](#)

That's a big. I'm not sure because the environment, as I hear it, is totally, a great deal different than what it was when I was there. You got all these kids playing baseball, basketball, and football especially, that Black students can identify with; and you got black professors. And so it's a greater university. I don't have no doubt about that. The opportunities you've got now as Black students is to, as I said to you early on, is to be the benefits of others struggle who there. And the whole environment is totally different now and is more embracing of Black people and black people's heritage and Black people's identity. And, that is to be cherished. But to be cherished with the understanding that, as I tell my children, wherever, whatever achievements you are making, they're always on the shoulders of other people. And many of whom you will not know. James Meredith didn't come back, I think, one time while I was at Ole Miss, and we had an audience with him about his struggle there. And, you know, there was no way the environment would have been as conducive as it was for me had it not been for the sacrifices of James Meredith and you introduced me to the Fulton protests, which as I read about that, obviously made a difference, even though apparently white were very disturbed by it, and expelled these students because of that. But that protest I'm definitely sure made the environment different for me, but I can't. So it's, it's, I think all of us have to work at making sure that we leave something positive for the next generation. There were no fraternities or sororities for the Blacks when I was there. So you had no social outing other than the community or in the Student

Union, the Black Student Union piece, as I said, really was not that, well, I experienced, was not that organized or focused in terms of a mission. And so it wasn't really a haven that perhaps you would experience now. So I just think you cherish what you've inherited. You give it your best shot and make a big difference. I'm just proud of people like yourself and others who are, making outstanding achievements there. Professors who are now on campus are making outstanding achievements. It's a new day. And I know it's not perfect, but at least this, this remarkably different. And I just tell people to be thankful for what you receive and give it your best shot. Make sure you leave some legacy there for the next generation.

Jasmine Stansberry: [51:55](#)

Well, Bishop Brown I appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to allow me to interview you today. I want to thank you for that. And I'm going to stop recording right now.