

## Interview with Dr. James Jones

Mr. Howard: Alright, Dr. Jones. We talked last February about the project, so why don't you start out by kind of telling me what's happened since then and where this is going?

Dr. Jones: Sure. We really started this because we saw ourselves needing the information. What are we going to do with all this information if for some reason we can't continue? So we had no idea. Trying to do that, the first solution appeared to be, we need more members. As you heard before, we thought we could get the college members. That was really our big thoughts, getting all our ROTC people to come to us. We were able to get a lot of input from ROTCs because a lot of them did fulfill the requirement to join the American Legion. You know financial, [inaudible 00:01:33].

But, we have always felt, and that's one of the things I'm the proudest of this unit and this project, it's just bringing to life what we feel already. All these pictures around have something to do to with the life that's buried in the District as it was before all these guys came. They argued about it, they fought about it, they sought legislation, they were good examples. They did all kinds of things for citizens of the District, especially black citizens of the District. At that time, when they were working, belonging to organizations was really important and that's one of the things we're confronted with now in this project.

To be in the American Legion, the VA, the Masons and all those things was a really a big deal. And all of us who have gotten to be older have decided, have been involved in some of those things on our way, in growing up and what we are doing to the community, we are hoping that this project will bring some of the youngsters in with that same need. Need to belong to something else.

This generation we're dealing with does not exactly feel that way, and that's one of our big problems. I'm hoping that, when the American University [inaudible 00:02:57] is working very hard -- right? -- to bring them in. When I went to school, 'cause I was doing GI Bill, I was always on some kind of charity, but the GI Bill is what made me function. How I got the GI Bill to work for me was both the American Legion and the VA would talk to Howard University's Veterans Office, because they were slacking off. I was going to school and the VA was sending the check to Howard, and I was still getting notices I was going to get kicked out if I didn't pay my tuition.

So, those two organizations went over and said, "Hey this guy's a veteran." I was more than a veteran, I spent 20 years, these are youngsters. [crosstalk 00:03:43]

up to 37 was all my adult life. That didn't mean anything until the American Legion and Veteran Affairs decided they were going to stand behind me. So, I knew, from my own case, they had the ability to get things done for veterans. I was hoping that we could do that also, but we don't get enough people coming to us, because they have so many other avenues. I mean, every now and then we get somebody that asks us about rights and things, we're so glad to get the question, everybody jumps on it. We don't get enough people that do it.

There are so many other things doing civil rights, we don't get enough opportunity to fight those, so we have to grab what opportunities we can to help to do it, because VA Hospital is one, and that kind of thing.

Mr. Howard: I know that when we talked last time, you wanted to see this project as ... The result of the project as a way to promote the Post in your community and raise more awareness about it.

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

Mr. Howard: Have you been able to work on that?

Dr. Jones: Somewhat. We not satisfied with where we are. We are getting more people in, we're getting more people in who are ... interested, but I guess the generation, I guess you know how old people are, let's put it on the young folks, but they don't seem to need us to give them guidance. When they really do, they really do. Sometimes I sit down and talk to this guy, [a former] Marine, he reminds me of that 'cause he knew I was in the Air Force and didn't have a weapon, so he constantly [crosstalk 00:05:33]. There's another Marine, you know, it's the same way.

But, we want to do that to some folks too. That we're here as American Legion we can, during the [Obama inauguration], we had coffee and donuts and a sign out front, that was so pleasing because some of the American Legion folks were walking by and it was cold and they came in to get coffee and donuts, and I went to Kentucky, Lexington Kentucky, and there was a guy who had stopped here, I didn't recognize him 'cause I didn't remember who he, but he said, "You guys are really doing a good job. You gave everybody coffee ..." Well, we gave everybody coffee, but it was satisfying to know that spending that time, that's the kind of thing we would like to do. Just don't have the kind of opportunities as our predecessors had.

Mr. Howard: Will this prize enable you to do that more do you think?

Dr. Jones: I think so. You know, the argument about the VA Hospital is an ongoing argument. We have had people to go over and volunteer, and we've had people to be patients that, Mr. Robinson, who was a past commander, he went through the whole system of going through the VA, and he was a good example to tell somebody, "If you got this and this, you go here and here." 'Cause he had to do it personally. We can get answers for them. I've talked to the VA downtown, and I said, "You need to use Post 5 to answer some of the questions that you get." He said, "Well, most of the questions I get, people are asking about license plates and stuff like that. And I don't know why they won't ask us about the hospital." Because we have had people who spend time there, and can give them information.

Mr. Howard: You mentioned earlier the Smithsonian and they've reached out to you. What are they interested in about Post 5?

Dr. Jones: Well, for instance, I was saying, one of the tasks we have is not letting James Reese Europe go ahead of Post 5, in terms of people interested [just in him]. I have to always make sure that those are tied together. Now, the Smithsonian, I felt that they needed to be interested in Post 5. Not only do we have a history in the military, we have history in civil rights, and things of the District, probably as much as any other organization in the District. We can probably find more evidence where people in this Post were involved in than any other Post in the District. Now, one of the reasons is because we're a lot older than the other ones, so we've been doing it a lot longer, but the Smithsonian, I thought, was going to really get into it. I think, it isn't dead, but when the African American Museum started, there's a lot a competition to get in it, lot of competition.

We didn't have the clout to get in front of the line, but when they couldn't change, couldn't separate us from James Reese Europe, and want us to just give information about James Reese Europe, we didn't do it, so now they're considering it. Because we have a historian who tells us, "Oh this is of value." And those kinds of things, and the whole Smithsonian, especially the African American museum, and probably [inaudible 00:09:22] also, they have become more interested in ... They're down to us now. They've done Jesse Jackson, they've done everybody else, now they're down to us.

Mr. Howard: So, you mentioned that there are Post members here who are were in the civil rights struggle, tell me about some of the highlights. What they did, who they were, that kind of thing.

Dr. Jones: Well, if you look at one of the yearbooks, I don't remember when it is, it shows you some of the letters they wrote. It shows you some of the things they had to do with D.C. Government, because some of them were government employees, the ones who were fortunate enough to work for the Post Office didn't have the same kind of problems, but they all were interested in some way. Also, I think one of the things that's probably never written out, they were good examples for the black community in the District. All these guys were standup citizens and were involved in civic organizations, were involved in recreational organizations. So, you had representatives that first hand, that you can see around the wall [portraits of Post 5 commanders], that were important to what district was happening in the District.

And, we've seen letters that went to the Congress. We've seen letters that went to the D.C. Government. We had a person who had worked in the Post Office, I guess forever, he had been hired ... He'd been in the Post Office.

Speaker 3: Laws.

Dr. Jones: Yeah, Laws.

Speaker 3: Laws was in around 50 years.

Dr. Jones: 50 years. And to sit down one time, I sat down and talked to him and he told me that the Klan met in the Post Office and I said, "In the Post Office?" And he said, "Yeah, the Klan. So we had to go out and go in the Post Office." He told me about, he had experience when the ... he was on the prison train, when they were guarding [German] prisoners, but as the prisoners came on the base, they went into the clubs. He couldn't go in the clubs, he was the guard; they were prisoners, they could go into clubs on the base, and he couldn't. I can remember as a youngster that the German prisoners came to cities in the South, and they housed them in the black neighborhoods, because it was easier to know them there. If you saw a white person, he had to be a German citizen.

So, those kind of things, he brought all back to me, and being in that arm, just that fact meant that he fought against it. He did, because he had comrades and things like that.

Mr. Howard: And so these letters, were they something you knew about, or were they discovered when the American University started kind of going through?

Dr. Jones: Well actually, [inaudible 00:12:23] discovered some of them. So, I guess when the project started. I wouldn't say people, otherwise, didn't know about them, but I gave them a lot of history about the projects, because I had less history about what's going on. If you asked me about segregation in Memphis I could talk all day, but segregation in D.C. was new to me. When I came, Walter Reed was segregated, but it very quickly changed. So, I didn't have the experience that many people in Post 5 had.

Mr. Howard: What else have you learned since this project started?

Dr. Jones: Well, once again I learned that all of these guys looking sharp and doing things around, they were all grunts down in the fight of trying to get things straightened out. They weren't politicians. Whether they got recognition, and did that kind of thing, they did grunt work, they did together, just the fact that they bought a couple of houses for this [inaudible 00:13:32], I don't know anybody else who'd have done in the [inaudible 00:13:36]. That in itself says they are upright, they're examples of what the community can do. We can get the youngsters to spend some time realizing what they've done.

And, to be very frank, until this project started, I didn't realize, on a different level, I knew they'd done well, not saying this guy and this guy and this guy, but a bunch of guys before me, now I know which one did this, which one did this, which one did this. As I was telling you about, the Kansas Tribute once wrote a whole article about one of our past masters, and that was in Kansas. So it became important to me, it was very educational to me.

Mr. Howard: You had mentioned, last time, that you felt that the membership initiative of the project--

Dr. Jones: Yeah.

Mr. Howard: Is your opinion of kind of the future of the Post from before the start and to now changed at all?

Dr. Jones: Well it hasn't, but it's like writing a will. When you write a will, you're not doing any plan of dying, you're just saying, "If I die." Or "When I die." In our case, if we have to do something else, but that's all we have in the [inaudible 00:14:53], what we need to focus on is [goad] people into working, and the only way we're going to do that is getting some new people in, and getting the old people to start pushing, 'cause this is what we're supposed to be. We've got lots of folks who have the correct ideas on how it can be done, if you don't believe that, sit

here and they'll tell you in a minute. We should be writing notes like this. He corrects me every time I make a parliamentary error.

But, he's always right, so I can't get on his case. But that's what we need, see? We need somebody to say, "Do it like this." So that's why Mr. Robinson [inaudible 00:15:39] sitting right here, and many times I got punched in the side 'cause ... Did you? No I didn't. So I had to do it, but that was important to me, because it gave that value of what we're doing, and how much value ...

Mr. Howard: Anything else you want to tell me about the project at the Post?

Dr. Jones: No, I think the project is an excellent project, I'm glad all of the people have gotten involved in it. I even think the publicity from the national [office of the American Legion] is going bring some of our old members out of the woodwork, but I think once we are together and show, back to young people again, that we are valuable to them. If for no other reason, they need to rub elbows with us to find out how to be 65 years old. See, they need to learn. They think they're going to be hip hop all their life and wear their pants down on their butts, that ain't gonna happen. They're gonna jerk 'em up when they get to be 40 or 50. But that's the part of the project I want to do. That's why membership is so important.

Mr. Howard: Awesome. Thanks so much for organizing this and taking the time.

Dr. Jones: Thank you. I'm not finished.



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