

# CHATTANOOGA HISTORY CENTER

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[0:03]

Bourassa: This is Marie Bourassa, on October 22, 2010, interviewing Greg Beck. And Mr. Beck would like to tell us about his experience.

Beck: Hello, I'm Greg Beck. And I'm, at this time, 63 years old, and I want to tell a little bit about my experience in the industrial world, here in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Hamilton County, Tennessee. I graduated from Howard High School, and in 1966, and at that time there been just a ground swell of support for Civil Rights and equal access. And in 1966, all government projects that were here in Chattanooga and Hamilton County had to hire African Americans. And a portion of their contracts were with the US government, and so therefore they had to comply with what was called 'affirmative action.' And so I was a part of that affirmative action for Combustion [Engineering], now who is Alstom, but then was Combustion Engineer. At Combustion Engineer, it was at the beginning – not really the beginning – but it was at the sort of the height at that time of the nuclear industry, and nuclear power industry, and we made nuclear generators at Combustion Engineer. When I came in 1966, I weighed, I guess, about 145 pounds and it was questionable whether I, whether I should be one of the employees or not. But the guy, who was a human resource guy, took a chance with me, and I spent 18 years at Combustion Engineer. Well, at that time, the salary at Combustion, when I came in was \$2.50 an hour. On \$2.50 an hour in 1966, you could probably buy a home. And there were a lot of homeowners there, African American homeowners, who were working at Combustion on, maybe less than \$5.00 an hour. And they had, it was then a gainful living, employment. Some of the conditions that we worked under were...we had, for a while, we had separate bathrooms, 'white-only' bathrooms, and 'colored' bathrooms...

Bourassa: In 1966?

Beck: In 1966. And some government people came in and said 'that had to go.' You have to have one water fountain, we had a white and a black 'bathhouse' we called it, where we would

change because it was factory work...it wasn't foundry work. Quite a difference in factory – fabricating was what we were doing, fabricating nuclear generators.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: And they had to have, they insisted that Combustion do away with the bath - dual bathrooms and have one shower house we called it...and everybody had to use that, black and white. And so that was a new experience for us, for black and for whites, having that kind of close action, interaction, with one another, along with the employment situation where it was all white at one time, and just a few blacks at Combustion. And then it became where the mandate was a certain percentage, had to be African Americans. We didn't have a Hispanic situation as we have today, but it was solely that African American, and later on a few women were hired in the plant, but not a whole lot. Combustion, at that time, didn't have the regulations that we have now from OSHA. I think OSHA came in, in the late sixties...

[4:59]

Beck: ...but until then, there was a lot of – I was a grinder. And the grinders, we had these machines that ground excess, excess metal off of the wells that we had – that the welders had put on the huge vessels, and so it spewed out a lot of smoke – we called it grinding dust. That dust was mixed with, with a powdery material plus, particles of iron and steel. And so we didn't have breathing apparatus? –

Bourassa: No masks?

Beck: No masks. We had eye protection, but we didn't have any masks. And all day long guys would breathe that fine dust mixed with some metal in it as well – fine particles of metal. And that was the grinding dust. And then in late 1968-1969, '68, '69, they came in with these regulations and a lot of these people had worked for so long without any mask on that they didn't really want to use them. So we had to be forced to use those masks. And we didn't know – there was a lot of cancer, there was a lot of lung cancer going on at that time, and we didn't know why. We couldn't connect all the dots.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And it took a long time to develop lung cancer but we didn't, we didn't know what was going on. And a lot of people in that plant, at Combustion, would die from lung cancer or heart disease. But today, when, after that, the OSHA came in, we did begin to experience a more of a healthy and a cleaner atmosphere at Combustion Engineer. And then later on Combustion folded, and now we have what is called Alstom over there, which is really a safe and a, and a clean environment to work in. The community accepted you as somebody who was progressive and up and coming if you worked at one of the factories; US Pipe, Mueller, Wheland, Combustion. If you worked at one of those, our industry back then was manufacturing and

combustible type industry, which put a lot of soot and a lot of smoke in the air along with the ... we didn't have the emissions program back then with our cars...

Bourassa: Right...

Beck: So you would come, if you would over the Ridgecut you could look over at downtown Chattanooga and you could see this haze over the city, and I think that's when it was coined one of the dirtiest cities in the United States. But all of that's cleaned up. we would have, there would be long smokestacks, I mean they would be 75 feet high. And you would see the smoke...

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: ...coming out, and the barometric pressure would keep the smoke at a certain level, so you would see the smoke come out of the chimneys and go lateral, they would go straight, they wouldn't go straight up in the air, they would go straight out to the side. And so the whole city was experiencing what was going on in these factories. We were breathing it all, everybody was truly together then because we were all breathing the same dirty air. But if you worked at one of those factories, one of those foundries or factories, you were considered a person who had money, and therefore when you walked into a bank or to a credit union, you were given what you wanted because they felt like you had a good and sustainable job back in those days. And so therefore a lot of people who were from, originally from the inner city, like myself, experienced instant credit, opportunities to buy new cars. Whoever heard of buying a new car in the sixties?

[Both laughing]

Beck: We bought new cars, drove some of them right off the car - showroom floor, we didn't realize that that's not the way you buy a car [laughing], but we'd go in and we'd order them right off the showroom floors, so the sales people didn't care just so they got a chance to sell a car.

[9:43]

Beck: Education, in those days, began to just open up, and UTC and at UT and at some of the community colleges that were around at that time. And I did get a chance to do some time at Chattanooga State as well. But our economic situation began to change because I went from making \$1.50 an hour at Rossville Yarn Processing to \$2.09 an hour, and then when I left Combustion Engineer I was making the huge sum of \$9.12 an hour [laughing].

Bourassa: What year did you leave? In the eighties?

Beck: In the eighties. 1981.

Bourassa: Ok...

Beck: I was making \$9.00 an hour, and that was a lot of money in 1981. And so I left Combustion and went to a nonprofit organization. But that is, mainly what was going on, there was an economic boom because of those industries, those factories and those foundries, there was an economic boom in the inner city, and that's when there was a, I guess a migration from the inner city into the outer suburbs, by a lot of African Americans...

Bourassa: Ok...

Beck: And when you say you have a home paid for. Nowadays, that means you've probably put thirty years into it and you probably were one of those people that was part of that economic boom back in those years. So that's about the extent of what I probably need to say about the industry part.

Bourassa: I have lots of questions.

Beck: Ok.

Bourassa: Where did you go to high school? First of all.

Beck: Howard High School.

Bourassa: You went to Howard.

Beck: Yes.

Bourassa: So...

Beck: And it was about education back then. Because at Howard, you had teachers who – keep in mind – there was only a few professions that African Americans could take advantage of. And one of the biggest ones was teaching.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And in the sixties, the teachers who had taught for many years saw something happening. They saw a change in society coming.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And they saw a people that they had responsibility over for training and instructing. They saw themselves as more than just a read and write arithmetic English history teacher. They saw themselves as life-management skills teachers as well. So they would go beyond the call of duty because we were about to embark upon a society that heretofore had been closed, mostly to African Americans. So if you were a teacher who had a child, and was about to go out, or had a student who was about to go out into society, that had been under your auspices for the last couple of years. They felt more of a responsibility to make sure that child was going to be able to take advantage of those opportunities that were about to come, present themselves to them. So

they would talk to us about some of everything. They would talk... Teachers hardly talked to you about your, the way you talk now, and the way you present yourself, your presentations, your whole presentation of yourself. That means dress, and poise, and all of you, what makes up the person. Teachers felt like they had to do more than teach the curriculum. They had to sort of like, be surrogate parents. So you'll find, if you looked into the history, closely into the history of Chattanooga, it's not because Howard High School was a school that turned out 3,000 students, but it's because of the depth of what was taught to us, there along with the curriculum. And if you'll look around you'll find, you look around Chattanooga, you'll find a lot of your leaders in this community, African Americans leaders, are from Howard High School, or have some kind of connection, somewhere in the bloodline, with Howard High School. And when you left there, you were a person who had principles, values, and facts – along with the facts that you set to school to learn you had principles develop, and a value system that was enhanced whether it was created through the teachers or it was maybe supported by the teachers, but you had more than what you have today.

Bourassa: Ok. What year did you graduate?

[14:53]

Beck: 1966.

Bourassa: Ok. So you went right to work at...

Beck: I went right to work at Combustion.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: I graduated in June of '66 and before the year was out, I was at Combustion.

Bourassa: Ok. And when you were talking about how they integrated, you know, the restrooms and bathhouses, what did they call it?

Beck: Bathhouse.

Bourassa: Bathhouse. Ok, was there a lot of resistance to that, within the company, like with the workers or the management or anything?

Beck: Well eventually, the white workers stopped coming to the bathhouses.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: We eventually took over the bathhouses. They would, they would just go straight home. When we went in, there was a few white guys who welcomed us, and there were most of the guys who would say, 'I'm not gonna do that.' So they didn't go, they just stopped coming, and I don't know what they did to clean up but they, they just stopped coming. And we had a few that

were still, that had no problems with it. And some of them were so dirty, they had to, had to shower before they went home. But most of them stopped coming and when I left Combustion, there was none coming. I don't know what they were doing but there were hardly any coming compared to what was coming there. I spent almost 20 years at Combustion and there were hardly any that was taking advantage of it. There was a lot of blacks who didn't go when the opportunity came, so it was on both sides.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: Did you like working there?

Beck: Oh, yeah, that was something that was above and beyond anything that I ever thought that I would be able to do as far as being able to earn a living...

Bourassa: Great.

Beck: ...in Chattanooga. In fact, I was one of those who was confused on what I wanted my career to be about anyway, so that seemed to be a good thing, to hold me until I started to. And until you start to be aware of yourself, and be aware of, and start to think about what you want to do with yourself, so it did well. In fact, when I went to Combustion I had a wife and a child, I had a, I got married at 19 years old and my wife was 17, and they said it would never last, and so we'll be celebrating 44 years of marriage this year...

Bourassa: Congratulations.

Beck: ...wonderful years. Six children, and 7 grandchildren, so they said, maybe it won't last [laughing]...

Bourassa: [Laughing] But so far...

Beck: ...but so far it has.

Bourassa: Yeah. Do you remember the, you were probably kind of young, but do you remember urban renewal – like the Golden Gateway, and the building of 27 and 24?

Beck: I remember, I remember Carver Hospital, and the Golden Gateway, and I remember, now that's way back, that was a predominantly black hospital, because we weren't allowed to go anywhere else.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And I remember going to Carver Hospital, that's where, right where, Blue Cross is now.

Bourassa: So it was on Cameron Hill?

Beck: It was on, no it was where the, it later became Shoney's after Carver Hospital. Shoney's, Zaire's, and then after Shoney's moved out and after Zaire's moved out, then Blue Cross took it over. And that's where Carver Hospital was. I remember the, is it I-24?

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: I remember I-24 being built and constructed. I remember all of that happening at a time, I must have been, maybe 9 or 10 years old, 10, 11, 12, 13 – somewhere like that, years old. And I remember those big caterpillars going back and forth when they were building I-24. Well, 27, if you're going over the Gateway there, that area. Urban Renewal, I don't remember that term, I remember looking back on that, and I think Urban Renewal is still a phrase being used now...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: But that must have been a, the beginning of that whole, renewal process in the, the south, well then, it wasn't south Chattanooga, it was just, it was downtown Chattanooga, and later on. South Chattanooga meant way out in the Alton Park area, and way out toward the Georgia line, but now the notion of South Chattanooga is all the way back up again to Main Street...

[20:18]

Bourassa: Yes.

Beck: Just south of Main Street. So all of that's back to South Chattanooga again. [Laughing].

Bourassa: [Laughing]. Yeah. Did you, what side of town did you grow up on?

Beck: Well, I started right there, in South Chattanooga, at Baldwin Street, right off of Main Street.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: That's as far back as I can remember my life, is about 6 years old, 5 or 6 years old, right there on Baldwin Street, I was born at Erlanger Hospital.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: And so we lived on Baldwin Street, in our own home, we had a home, back then. And after then, we had, we moved maybe in 1955, I believe, we moved to Alton Park, Spencer J. McCallie homes<sup>1</sup>, and they had just constructed this new school, called Howard High School,

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer J. McCallie homes was a public housing development constructed by the Chattanooga Housing Authority in 1954. This new concept of housing was created to provide housing accommodations for people displaced by the Urban Renewal associated with the construction of the local interstate highway system. McCallie Homes was followed by the CHA's construction of Emma Wheeler Homes, Maurice Poss Homes and Mary Walker Towers. Additionally, single family and duplex developments occurred in the neighborhoods of Oak Hill, Alton Park and

brand new school, and then they had this brand new housing project, which was Spencer J. McCallie homes, and everything was just really, really looking up for African Americans then.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: We thought...

Bourassa: Well, yeah...

Beck: Well, it was...

Bourassa: Comparatively, yes.

Beck: Comparatively, yeah. It was. Because actually that was considered the ghetto over there, but we still, we didn't know that we were, we didn't know that we were poor. We were homeowners.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Yeah, well we didn't know that we were poor.

Bourassa: Yeah.

[Both laughing]

Beck: And our home was there where the, what do you call the chicken house now? You call it Southern something?

Bourassa: Sure.

Beck: Allright. But it was right there off of, at the beginning of Rossville Boulevard, where Baldwin Street ends or begins, and it sort of makes a curve right around where Zarzour's is. We lived in the back of Zarzour's.

Bourassa: Oh wow.

Beck: Yeah.

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Piney Woods. The net effect of this residential growth was the transformation of Alton Park from a majority white population to a predominately African-American during the 1950's and 1960's.

([http://www.chcrpa.org/Projects/Land\\_Use\\_Plans/Alton\\_Park\\_Plan/Alton\\_Park\\_Master\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.chcrpa.org/Projects/Land_Use_Plans/Alton_Park_Plan/Alton_Park_Master_Plan.pdf)) Spencer J.

McCallie was located along 38<sup>th</sup> Street near Central Avenue. In 2000, the development was set to be demolished by the CHA through a \$35 million grant, but they quickly ran out of money to redevelop the area. Part of the problem was about \$3.5 million the housing authority had to unexpectedly spend on cleanup after discovering 78,000 tons of contaminated sand at the Spencer J. McCallie Homes site. (<http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2012/jun/05/alton-park-still-hopes/>) About 600 units of the development were finally torn down in 2002, but replaced with only 275 units. (<http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2012/mar/08/rome-project-eyed-model-westside-community/?print>)

Bourassa: That's really interesting.

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: Did you know that family very well?

Beck: Yeah. We would go down to Zarzour's all the time.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: Cool. Are you still friends with those...?

Beck: No, they don't even know me, and that's probably two generations...later.

Bourassa: That's true. Yeah, ok. So what did you do after Combustion Engineering?

Beck: Oh, I went to, left Combustion, and went to Inner City Ministries...

Bourassa: Oh ok.

Beck: ...and stayed there and created youth programs and whatever. And got acquainted with a lot of, a lot of philanthropical organizations and learned what business in Chattanooga was all about. Got involved with a lot of business people, and after then, I went to another nonprofit organization, Bethlehem Community Center, and from there to the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department. And from the Sheriff's Department to the, to the city courts and from city court to the Hamilton County Commission.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: So that's the progress of Greg Beck.

[Both laugh]

Bourassa: Gotcha. So tell me what your memories of pollution in the 1980s, because I've heard some pretty crazy things about how dirty it was here in the '70s and '80s. What did you think about when you think of it?

Beck: Well they made jokes about it on the television...

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: ...on the news. They would show that fog, smog, they called it back then – I haven't heard that word in while...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: They would show that smog, and they would predict that this was what was gonna happen today, and the pressure, barometric pressure was – that’s when I first remember hearing that word – that would keep the smog pressed down right here...

Bourassa: Like a bowl...

Beck: Yeah. Like, in the city, and the way, the way we’re positioned geographically, you don’t have any outlet for all of this, if it’s pressed down, you don’t have, the mountains and the ridges keep it in there.

Bourassa: Right.

[24:53]

Beck: So I remember that. I remember, I remember the lung problems that people had, I remember the asthma that a lot of people had, and I remember the breathing problems in South Chattanooga, there was an awful smell that we actually grew up with, coming from Cotton Chemical. And I believe, I really believe it’s still out there, because sometimes I smell it.

Bourassa: Near the Chattanooga Creek?

Beck: Uh, yeah.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Yeah. And I remember that. We would sit out on the porch, and that was just a part of life, that awful smell...

Bourassa: Really...

Beck: And we didn’t know that some people said that we actually smelled like that when we went to the other side of town...

Bourassa: That’s interesting.

Beck: ...People said – but we didn’t realize what we smelled like.

Bourassa: Because you were probably used to it.

Beck: We were used to it. We were immune to it.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: When it was really poignant, we, you’d notice it. But normally we wouldn’t until somebody came from the outside and said, ‘Wow, this smell’s in the air...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Around here. So that's greatest memory I have, not necessarily of the smog and ...you could have, we had situations where we had to deal with like, at Combustion, our cars – you would buy a new car – but there were a lot of people that covered their cars up. Because you would have this – these little speckles of iron that would settle on the cars, and it would do something when it mixed with the dew in the morning, the paint – had a little, you could barely see it, but it would start rust. And so a lot of guys covered their cars up.

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: Well whatever was falling on the car was also going in your lungs.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Ok so...

Bourassa: In addition to working in those factories.

Beck: Right. And anybody that was driving by, walking by, just, you know, just being in the area, US Pipe, and Wheland, and Combustion. Combustion didn't throw out a lot of bad(?) but those other pants did. Combustion was more of a, the biggest thing we did was internal, we did a lot of pollution inside the building.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: But we had large furnaces that, we had to do something, they had some coal that stoked those furnaces as well, so they probably put out a lot of the dust as well, but not like the other foundries, like the foundries did.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: What did the creek smell like?

Beck: I lived right next to the creek. At Spencer J. McCallie homes the creek was about 3 blocks away.

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: So whenever something came down from north Georgia, that they...and out on Central Avenue Cotton Chemical dumped a lot of stuff and I think, maybe back then, Velsicol<sup>2</sup> put stuff in the creek as well. We didn't know.

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<sup>2</sup> Velsicol Chemical Company was located at 4801 and 4902 Central Avenue in Alton Park, and operated for 44 years until it closed in 2007. It has been classified as a Superfund Site by the Environmental Protection Agency but

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: We didn't know at all. And we would smell stuff from the creek. And I was happy to be a part of that clean up effort when I was there at, at the Bethlehem Community Center because we partnered with a college out of Cookeville, and we, with the community and we started a clean up effort.

Bourassa: For the creek?

Beck: For the creek.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: That started all the way up Central Avenue and went down past, well actually they rerouted the creek, and then they got a lot of the sediment out of there that had gone through there for 10's of years, for decades.

Bourassa: What did they do exactly, to try to clean it up?

Beck: Well they actually went in and they just dug it up, dug up the whole sediment, and they rerouted the creek. And you know, right down the side of it. And so they worked on that for maybe 2 or 3 years, in that small area.

Bourassa: Was that the late 80s, early 90s?

Beck: Yeah, that was, yeah that was in the 90s, early 90s, I believe, yeah.

Bourassa: Wow. Did you ever play near it [the creek], as a child?

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since remediated, although whether it actually worked is disputed. The Velsicol plant operated for more than 40 years, manufacturing herbicides, pesticides and other chemicals including benzene and benzoyl. Those two chemicals have been classified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a carcinogen and probable carcinogen, respectively. (<http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2011/apr/21/velsicol-site-plan-hold/>) The 36-acre Velsicol site is known to hold 36 carcinogenic pollutants in amounts above allowable industrial screening levels, according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency documents. (<http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2012/aug/09/neighbors-worried-by-sewer-work-near/>) The Velsicol Chemical LLC site (Velsicol) is located approximately 3.5 miles south of downtown Chattanooga, in Hamilton County, Tennessee. The original manufacturing plant was constructed in 1948 by Tennessee Products Corporation as an expansion of its coke plant operations. In 1963, Velsicol purchased the plant site, including the Semi-Works Plant and the Change House areas. Velsicol subsequently purchased the Reilly Tar Area in 1971. Velsicol operated the facility to produce benzoic acid and its derivatives and chlorinated toluene-based products. Herbicides and insecticides were also produced and a ferro-alloy plant operated at the facility for several years. All manufacturing operations ceased in March of 2007 and the site has undergone demolition to remove the manufacturing equipment and most of the ancillary facilities. During the operational history of the site, waste materials were stored, treated and disposed of on-site. These past practices contaminated soil and groundwater, which require the continuation of ongoing remedial actions and the implementation of other corrective measures. ([http://www.tn.gov/environment/swm/ppo/velsicol\\_tnhw105.pdf](http://www.tn.gov/environment/swm/ppo/velsicol_tnhw105.pdf))

Beck: Oh, we swam in it.

Bourassa: You swam in it, really?

Beck: Yes.

Bourassa: Oh my God.

Beck laughs.

Bourassa: Did you ever...?

Beck: I didn't swim, I mean we got in...

Bourassa: Wading...

Beck: Yeah, wading.

Bourassa: Yeah. Did you...

Beck: There was some places that were, that were not so deep, and sometimes we'd go down to play, down and wade in it, stick our feet in it, walk around through it, you know.

Bourassa: What was the water like – was it filthy? Or was it like...?

Beck: Oh no. It didn't seem filthy. Sometimes...No, no, no.

Bourassa: It just seemed normal?

Beck: It seemed normal.

Bourassa: Just the smell?

Beck: It didn't even smell that bad.

Bourassa: Oh ok.

[30:01]

Beck: But it was a funny green color.

Both laughing.

Bourassa: Wow. Yeah.

Beck: But sometimes it was, we didn't know the difference, we were kids. Nobody told us anything about that.

Bourassa: Right. You didn't think anything of it.

Beck: No. We'd play and try to go across the creek without falling in, that kind of thing. And sometimes you'd fall in. There was a place, back, way back up Central, there was a place where kids actually swam, and I never got in it to swim, I never got totally wet in the Creek but, I have waded in the water. Yes.

Bourassa: Did you ever hear any weird stories about people getting sick, or having a weird experience with that?

Beck: But you would never know, I mean if you think about it, it's not, it's not like it is now. I mean everything is on the internet, and everything is...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: ...instantly recognized, and the information was not like it is now.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: So if something happened, if there was an incident, instantly everybody knows about it all over the community. But if you have, you're talking about, back in the sixties, in the early sixties, if anything was going...in fact, there a young man who drowned back there, behind down Central. Even after I was grown, so I was grown, in my twenties, so I think about 40 years ago, there was kids still swimming in that thing. And one young man drowned. So that was the extent of what we would hear about anything. But if anybody had any problems, any kids broke out with anything, or had any unusual thing to happen to them because of being in that water, we wouldn't, we wouldn't know about it. The community wouldn't know about it. If they would go to the hospital, I don't know if they would have any, they probably be going to the clinic, and the clinic didn't...

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: ...have any in depth understanding what, the effects of polluted water would be on people, back in those days. So they just treated you for whatever they saw on the surface.

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: But they wouldn't know the root, or what caused it. So there's no telling how many rashes and, and little things that people had to deal with back then...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: ...because of their, their close proximity to the creek, or to any of the air, that was being breathed back in those days. There's no telling what they had to deal with, that we'll never know about.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: And some of it may be passed through generations.

Bourassa: I hope not. That's bad.

Beck: There's a reason why they closed Charles A. Bell school. Charles A. Bell school<sup>3</sup> was sitting right on the creek, and it was also built on top of a landfill.

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: So the effects of that, we understand now, that most of the teachers that worked out there, died or have some kind of lung problems, or some kind of cancer, from working in that school.

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: And tracking the kids that came through that school, see you're talking about a junior high school, there was an elementary school. You got about what? Three years in an elementary school?

Bourassa: I thought it was like 5 or 6 years.

Beck: Five years. So if a kid, see there was no way to track the physical condition of every kid that went through that school.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: I never go, went to it, but I went one year to Alton Park junior high, which was on the other side, about a block down the street, sitting close to the Creek. In fact, our practice field was down next to the Creek.

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: So if it was, if we were practicing next to the Creek, and the Creek is, the, the Creek has saturated the ground underneath the practice field, there's so no way of telling what kind of fumes or what kind of things we were breathing...

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<sup>3</sup> Charles A. Bell School, located at 3501 Central Ave. in Alton Park, became vacant in 1991, and was full of lead paint, asbestos, and creosote. Alton Park has several former industrial sites that are contaminated with chemicals, including the former Anchor Glass factory, the U.S. Pipe and Foundry site and Charles A. Bell, whose buildings and land contained asbestos, lead paint and creosote. The 10-acre triangular site is covered with thigh-high beige grass that hides abandoned tires, rotting wood, rodents... (<http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2011/aug/23/b1-bell-school-demolition-begins/>) The L & N Railroad tracks which run in a north-northeast to south-southeast direction are to the west of the site and the Southern Wood Piedmont Company is to the north. To the east, Central Avenue separates the southern portion of the site from the residential area of Alton Park and the Demolition Landfill which was capped and closed in July 1992. The site of the former Charles A. Bell School is adjacent to the Demolition Landfill site. Given the proximity, there is a potential for the recreational site to be contaminated with metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). ([http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/pha/FormerCharlesA.BellSchool/Former\\_Charles\\_A\\_Bell\\_School%20HC%208-7-2008.pdf](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/pha/FormerCharlesA.BellSchool/Former_Charles_A_Bell_School%20HC%208-7-2008.pdf))

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: ...even just being down on the practice field.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: So the, those kinds of studies, those things were there but nobody touched them. Looking back on them, nobody knows why a lot of people from out there maybe don't think right, or don't breathe right. Nobody has tracked that.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: Nobody knows right now. And nobody knows what effects people, the effect on people out there now. Nobody is saying anything about it. I haven't, maybe, it is, I haven't, I don't have privy, I'm not privy to that information right now, so I don't know, maybe. Maybe if I go and inquire about it...

Bourassa: Yeah.

[35:15]

Beck: ...I would find out some things. But right now, that's, right now that's not on my radar screen right now.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: And your whole community was along the Creek, or right near...

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: ...or you said three blocks...

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: ...that your house was from it.

Beck: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Bourassa: Wow. That's crazy. I've heard some crazy stories I think before, prior to the fifties, about you know like a, a pig, going into the Creek and coming out bald, stuff like that. I've heard crazy things like that before. I don't know if that's true, but...

Beck: That was a crazy story.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck laughs.

Bourassa: Yeah. I think it was in the thirties maybe, that that happened. I don't know, but...yeah. Wow. So in the eighties, when they started doing Chattanooga Ventures, I mean how did you...In the eighties did you think, 'Oh my God, this place is so filthy?' Did you feel that way?

Beck: No.

Bourassa: Or was it just 'This is how we live, and this is normal'?

Beck: This is normal and I appreciated anybody who was trying to clean up anything. What was I thinking about in the eighties? In the eighties, I was thinking about probably ministry, I was not thinking really about environment. I was thinking about changing lives, and I was concentrating on people from the South Chattanooga area, young African American kids from the South Chattanooga area. And whatever behavior they had, I attributed that to lack of information, and probably family structure, but I never attributed any of that to environment, which now they're beginning to say that there, there may be some link between behavioral problems and children from that area...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: ...with pollution that was so prevalent out there for so many years.

Bourassa: Yeah, that's pretty sad.

Beck: Yeah.

Interviewer: Wow. So you, when they, if you compared to how downtown looks now where the Aquarium is, and how the air looks here, and how it smells, like does it just seem so much better to you?

Beck: Well compared to what used to be...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: I fished down at the Ross Landing, we used to go down there and fish in the eighties, but I understand you can't fish down there now. Because the fish are considered, from the dam, down to here are considered polluted...

Bourassa: Oh, I didn't even know that.

Beck: Yeah. I think they have mercury in them, it it, or something.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: They ask you not to, for you not to eat the fish that catch down here close to, this far down, because of all of what you, what they would accumulate coming down.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: But on the other side of the dam, I think that there's some good eating and good catching.

Bourassa: Yeah, I know people fish over there, for sure.

Beck: But down this side, this far down, there's not a whole lot of fishing, I think there's some warning signs about eating the fish.

Bourassa: I'll have to look for those next time I'm down there.

Beck: Yeah. Beck laughs.

Bourassa: Wow.

Beck: As far as the development down there, we didn't understand what the city fathers were up to, but now we see how our children now are having a real nice place to go visit...

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: ...and they don't have to go out of town, they can spend a weekend here, right here at home, and experience a lot...

Bourassa: Oh yeah.

Beck: ...right here, on our river. And in different places that we have developed around here. Parks are developed, everything has developed, I think. The jobs are coming in, where they...

Bourassa: Getting better?

Beck: Getting back like it used to be, you could get a job here. You know. It used to be, then it got to where, like the economy as all over the nation, you know went into a slump, and I think, I don't know who's going to be the first to come out of it but, we're headed fast toward being a viable community, to get a job and from what my forecast is about the whole thing.

Bourassa: Ok. So how did you get into you current position? Like what brought you into -

[39:49]

Beck: Well, it was probably something in my, in my, my DNA I guess, it was something I've, I was in church, and I saw the preacher, and I wanted to be a preacher.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: And I started paying attention to politics, I wanted to be a politician. It was, and I'm both of them right now.

Beck laughs.

Beck: And I was in a situation where the, the commissioner for the district that I live in, decided to become a state representative.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: And vacated the position. And at that time, I was, I was just in the right place at the right time to be picked.

Bourassa: Ok.

Beck: And I was appointed for my position first, and then I ran for it the second time. The first time for full term, and now I'm on my second term, full term, elected term as County Commissioner for District 5.

Bourassa: Ok. Do you like it?

Beck: I love it.

Bourassa: Really?

Beck: Yeah.

Bourassa: That's great.

Beck: I love it because it allows me to – all of my adult awareness time has been spent –

Beck coughs.

Beck: Excuse me – in community service...

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: ...in one way or another. I wouldn't stop to count the hours that I put in to community service, I don't think it would be fair to my family...

Beck laughs.

Beck: ...to really know how many hours I've been away from them in community service.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: But I've been fortunate enough, to – when I, when I started out, it was about young people. And so I had 3 children, and I had the opportunity to raise them while I was doing my job in youth work.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: So I wasn't away from the family. I wasn't away from them – I involved my wife, as well, in my youth work. And that was a blessing for me because there are a lot of people that have a career but their kids and family are not included in their career.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And that presents a lot of problems. So therefore, my children got a chance for me to be their hero as long - as well as, me being a hero to a lot of children around here, who are now grown and have children of their own. And I've had successful youth programs that touched the lives of many young people. I've been just probably as successful as some teachers, I think teachers touch the lives of most people...

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: ...on a continual basis. And so, I think we fall somewhere short of that. But anyway, community service has been all about - Greg Beck has been all about community service, and community service has been all about what Greg Beck is gonna do with his life, you know.

Beck chuckles.

Beck: And so, I don't know if I said that right, but anyway, you know what I mean. And being a County Commissioner has given me chance to serve not only the few people at my church, or, or the extended family of a non-profit organization, but the entire county.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: And so I don't think, really I don't think I was destined for anything higher than that, because the decisions that I help make, my voters, one-ninth of the votes on the County Commission, affect 307,000 people.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: Now if that was a school, that would be a lot of folks? that I would be responsible for. If that was a church, it would be the biggest church in the world.

Both laugh.

Beck: But, so I, and my voice, is the voice that represents 34,000 people in District 5. My voice, and my vote.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And so, to, to, to have that kind of responsibility, and to advance to that, that level of service, is probably, I think, where, where I really feel like, that I've really reached out, you know, reached my potential as a servant in this community.

Bourassa: Well great.

Beck: Mm-hmm.

Bourassa: Great. It sounds like you're really passionate about your work.

Beck: Mm-hmm. I really am.

Bourassa: What are the, what do you think the greatest challenges facing Chattanooga are today?

Beck: Crime and jobs.

Bourassa: Crime and jobs.

Beck: Education, I think would be the thing that would eliminate crime and jobs.

Bourassa: Well, yeah...

Beck: The job problem.

Beck laughs.

Beck: I think it all starts with education.

[45:00]

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: So, the spin-off from that, if there is no education, if the education is not working in the life of the individual, they're not going to be able to get a job. And if it's a person that's gonna be adventurous, or is gonna be a progressive anyway, and they're locked out, they're going to find some kind of way to make money.

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: You know, a person who gets in trouble, selling drugs or burglary, that kind of thing, is a person that probably is a progressive person, a person who is going to make something happen in their lives, but they just don't have the connections with the basic principles and value systems that make you and I a solid citizen.

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: You get those, you're supposed to get all of it at home, but if the home drops the ball at least you can get somewhat of a fix on who you are and why you are at school.

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: So you're not going to go to school and you're not going to pay attention to what's going on at home, or a family is not functioning as a family at home, the church can be a, a, a hook, or a, a last, a catch-all, if the church was about doing all of those things that the home and the school couldn't do.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: So I don't think the church is set up to do all of that. The church is set up to support, to bring in the principles.

Bourassa: Mm-hmm.

Beck: You know, if a, a person can, if they miss all of that other stuff, they can at least learn what's right and what's wrong. And do right.

Bourassa: Right.

Beck: And sometimes doing right will land you a job, will land you a, maybe a good spouse, somebody who can help you. And you know, if a person has got conscious, there's a lot of good things that can happen to them. But if you have a situation where you don't have a functioning family and you have a kid that whose ready for life and is not receiving all of those instructions for life, and the stuff that he is receiving is stuff that's being acted out in front of him every day, and if he don't see anything progressive, he don't see somebody getting up to go to work, and all he hears is just stuff that's so mind-boggling and stuff that's so vulgar that it can't even be repeated. And then, for a, a chance, he may go to school bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to be at least involved with somebody else to leave that environment and to experience another kind of environment. But if he goes to school and with a big struggle, he may learn how to read, but that's about all. And he comes home and he hears all kinds of negative stuff, that the parents are saying about even the teacher and there's nothing, there's nothing scared, everything is negative. And then this kid somehow goes out, and with all of the bombardment and negative stuff coming through television and through music, and this kid goes out and commits an offense and goes to jail, then that's where he learns the other part of how to be a bad person. Then he comes out and maybe, just maybe, he's, he identifies a gang somewhere, where he can get the family atmosphere. Where he can have a forum for expression, where he can have somebody who will love and honor what he says and protect him, and all they need to do is a few things to make some money. You know, why not? I mean, here's a kid that didn't have a chance...

Bourassa: Yeah.

Beck: ...didn't have a chance to be anything else. So my greatest passion [coughs], for even my, my whole, my whole presentation of Greg Beck, is to be somebody who can tell somebody how to be a good person. And how to be a solid citizen. And that's my goal, that's my, that remains my goal and my objective. And my time is running out. I'm sure, 63 years old, I'm sure my time is running out and I spent 37 years trying to do the same thing. And I guess I was just called for it.

Beck laughs.

Bourassa: Yeah.

[49:55]

Beck: But it's, you know, it's, it's a life, and life has been good for me here. And maybe, a lot of things have gone by me, and I didn't realize that they were going on, and I didn't realize that the business people maybe were, had me, had, had my community targeted for pollution, or for some things that they could get by with. I didn't realize all of those things maybe. I didn't realize maybe some red lining, or I didn't maybe realize that there was a disparity between the health situation between one culture, one group of people and the other, I didn't realize maybe that there was a plot or a plan to house certain African Americans and a certain group, a certain number of African Americans. I didn't realize the fact that there, there a certain culture, there are certain ethnic groups that are not even in jail here in Hamilton County. I didn't realize the big picture but now I do, and still, I say, that I've had the opportunity to live and to learn and to love, and to raise my family, and to grow here in Hamilton County. You know, it beats being in the ground pushing up daisies.

Both laugh.

Bourassa: For sure, for sure. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Beck: No, that's about all. I think this has been a good time, talking with you.

Bourassa: Yeah, thank you for your time.

Beck: Ok, all right.

[51:28]