

Interview with Minister Rodney Muhammad: May 3, 2012

**Day II of Oral History Project with Min. Rodney Muhammad**

**By Venold Johnson**

**May 3, 2012**

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VJ: So, I'm here with Minister Rodney Muhammad. Today is May 3, 2012. Minister Rodney Muhammad, do I have your permission to conduct this interview?

RM: Yes, you do

VJ: Where we last left off we were talking about the Million Man March and how the different black organizations came together for one united cause. You explained the meaning of atonement. What's your position on reparations?

RM: Well, number one; being men of God and women of God in the Nation of Islam, we understand that reparations were not as much a political idea, as much as God's idea. So, it was all part of a divine plan. In the book of Exodus, I believe in the eleventh chapter, the Children of Israel were in a campaign led by Moses to be delivered from the hands of Pharaoh and his people. God then tells Moses to go to the Children of Israel to acquire of the Egyptians, their gold and their silver. This indeed was reparations. Now, if God had not commanded Moses to go get the command from the Children of Israel, what we can glean from that is it had not occurred to them in their passion to be delivered to require some money; to require some type of resource or capital to afford them a life beyond Egypt in the wilderness. Moses then told the Children of Israel and they did all that the Lord had commanded and the scripture says that the Egyptian people, not the government, were made to look favorably on the Children of Israel and so, they plundered them-they did give them their gold and silver. They were slaves so they had no money but to

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RM: have money once they got to the wilderness, they would have had to have gotten that gold and silver from somewhere. And of course, it goes on to talk in the wilderness about them falling away from Moses and the mission and their faith in Moses and the God of Moses and they took that gold and silver, melted it down and formed a golden calf to use that as a way to gain entry back into Egypt. Our position on reparations is that we are deserving of that, but we do believe, as the Honorable Elijah Muhammad has taught us, that it will be our God who will deliver us and whatsoever we receive, it won't come through politics, it will come from God. You have to understand in the Nation of Islam, that we believe, as the Honorable Elijah Muhammad taught us, that the solution to our problem is divine meaning that it will come from God and it has come from God, it is our fervent belief. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad gave a figure like this, as it relates to reparations. We want 10 states, not a neighborhood less. He wanted to give us a picture of what justice looked like. Because our people, sometimes because of the damage done to us, even in our quest for freedom, justice and equality to have justice done by us sometimes out of a damaged perception, we might not look squarely at what is just for us for freedom. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad wanted to give us, as best as possible, a graphic picture of what justice looked like. That would be ten states.

VJ: In my research, I noticed that one of the purposes of the Million Man March was to talk about unemployment, more black men were more unemployed than white men, insufficient natal care, inferior educational opportunities, what does the Nation of Islam do to combat unemployment here in Philly?

RM: Well, let me go back to where you said the purpose of the Million Man March. The purpose of the Million Man March was to at last take his stand. Women were asked by the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan to remain back, because our women had carried us and held us together through our saga in

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RM: America. He wanted to see black men take a stand and he wanted black men to atone for our failures. To take our stand, our rightful place as husbands, as fathers, and as community leaders. He did not want us to go to Washington to make an appeal to White America for us to get a job. When the black man really takes a stand; that kind of man will be shouldered with a spirit of self-determination. He will make his own job. There were those who felt that the social capital was mismanaged or misspent because we did not use the weight of the numbers to weigh upon white America and its political world to give us jobs, but that's not why the Minister went. The Minister went to appeal to a higher God and a higher court for justice. We pray the prayer in the Nation of Islam 'Forgive me father, for I have been unjust to myself'. When we are living far short of what God created us, and he created every creature the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us, with a duty imposed upon it to do something for itself. Then the black man, no less than the ant, the birds, the beasts of the fields and every creature that gets up to do for itself every day that it's on Earth. The black man no less should be getting up to do something for himself. The last thing any species will do in its development that we have found, from the lowest to the highest, is to look for another species to do for them what they can get up and do for themselves. The purpose of the Million Man March was more to that theme than it was to the traditional themes that we had when we marched looking for our captives and the people who have done us the injustice to turn around then and free and do justice by us. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said 'If a man won't treat you right, he won't teach you right'.

VJ: Oh, that's so true.

RM: The Nation wanted. We feel that White America has a responsibility for what it has done and the damage that it has done, they are not capable of executing a satisfactory repair of us, of what they have

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RM: done to us. You understand? If I'm driving the highway and a truck smashes into my car and my car is totaled, just because the truck driver totaled my car, it doesn't mean that the truck driver has the knowledge of how to repair my car. Even though the truck driver is held responsible for what he has done, the damage he has done, the injuries incurred. I'm still obligated. We both to end that obligation, I would take that vehicle to someone that has expertise in bringing about its repair. For the black man's ruin and the black woman's ruin in America, you have to understand. Yes, slavemasters abducted us. Yes, we've been deceived and through every scientific means, you could say, we have been ruined as a people, but just because White America played the central role in bringing about that ruin doesn't mean White America has the knowledge of how to bring about that repair. We say 'You owe us'. Hand over what you owe us and we'll stop having a handout saying 'give us'. Then, let us turn to our God and his Messenger for the guidance that will lead us into the repair. This march was different from any march that we've had since we've been here in America. Every appeal that we have made until October 16, 1995 had been to our slavemasters. This march, our appeal was to our God. We wanted to atone for where we had fallen short. We can't hold the white man responsible fully if we're murdering each other. We can't hold the white man responsible if we're making babies and won't take care of them. We can't hold him responsible where we are falling short in our homes, to lead our homes and to be the real husbands to our wives and fathers to our children; that's our responsibility. When we try to be the real men we're supposed to be and you set up policies that are really mischief, as the book of Isaiah says, 'they would frame mischief using laws'. So, they set up a law like this new voter ID law, but really its mischief because in Pennsylvania since the 90s, there's only been thirteen cases of voting fraud which is way less than one percent. So, there's nothing to justify this kind of law coming. Now, you literally have seniors who have voted, not only who have voted, but who marched so that we would have the right to vote and they've been voting for the last 50 years, but this election in 2012, they won't be able to vote

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RM: because many of them can't secure birth certificates to get the kind of ID that's warranted. So, there's mischief behind this, but they're using a law to frame it, but it's really another agenda hidden behind it. It's not to bring law and order. We want and we believe that white America would be better off when black America turns to their God and shows the real resilience and self-determination in that. Our efforts are more for helping us to bring ourselves up, so we're not a burden to someone else.

VJ: White Man's Burden huh?

RM: Yes, we don't wanna be a burden to anyone, the least of all ourselves and white America would be better off in that. We're scheduled to spend this year, a trillion dollars. Now, a trillion dollars is 1000 billion dollars. So one billion, leaving 999 billion on the table, one billion is 1000 million. According to census, right now we're estimated by a population of at least 40,000. Pardon me, 40 million. If there's 40 million of us and we take 10% of just one billion, that's enough to give every black woman and child two million dollars each and we would still have 20 million left over and 900 million still left over from that billion and 999 billion still on the table from that trillion. So we're spending money to the tune of a trillion dollars, but we're crying broke. It's not the absence of money and capital and resource that's causing our suffering, its misguidance. Why would go to a march and demand from somebody something, when we're spending more than enough money to bring resolution to a whole lot of our social, economic and political problems. No, we don't suffer, the bible says, from a lack of money; we suffer for a lack of knowledge. The key and essential knowledge, the Nation of Islam says, is the knowledge of ourselves. When we adequately know who we are biologically, physiologically, genetically, historically and spiritually, this quality of knowledge puts on a different mental track and it puts us into a whole new set of actions that sets a whole new model for how we operate in America. That means that we would walk out and see stores owned by us since we live there. We would see money circulating in

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RM: us, just like the blood has to keep circulating in my body to keep me alive. But if I cut my vein open and let all the blood run out, then my life will go with it. So when the economic vein is cut from our community and the blood flow goes out to someone else, because everyone that is set up are people who don't live among us. Well, that's not gonna let our community live. So you're gonna see physical deterioration. You're gonna see people with a sense of despair and hopelessness, which is really the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan teaches, hopelessness is the mother of the violence that we see prevailing in our communities today. So, we wanted to end those things. I'll end on this point that in the Million Man March, finally, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan called on nearly two million men and those tens of millions around the country and the world that were with us, but mostly us in America. He calls on us to take a pledge and when you go and Google the words from that pledge, you don't see anything about begging someone else for a job or begging anybody else for anything that God can empower us to get up and do for ourselves.

VJ: I heard you mention the number 2 million.

RM: Nearly two million.

VJ: The Park Service said it was only 400,000. Why do you think they...?

RM: I'm not sure about that. The Metro, the Washington D.C. Metro carries a volume of nearly 202,000 people per day. They admitted that that day they carried 847,000 people. So, you got more than 400,000 people that just used the metro system. We're not even counting RFK that was filled up with busses. You're not even counting the people that drove in. So the 400,000 argument was a miscount and when they say 'White men can't jump, they can't count either'. We filled up an area that was said to be

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able to hold a million. That area was flooded. So, we're confident and we fought those figures and we beat them back and they no longer come out saying it was only 400,000 because that's our history. The black man that paid his own way there and that, we had to fight for him. Because he came down there, he took the responsibility to come and to stand. He took the responsibility to come and take that pledge with the whole world watching and everything and we wasn't gonna let them cheat him, this great moment in his history. As the world saw it, a new respect for us, which the world had not since we've been here for us in America was restored. In a 24 hour period, we gave a death blow to every negative caricature and image that was depicted and exported around the world about us.

VJ: The Million Man March was successful then?

RM: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. Sometimes, you'll hear people say 'Well, Minister Louis Farrakhan didn't have a follow up plan for the march'. Minister Farrakhan had a plan before he was inspired to call the march. If you read Message to the Black Man in America, you'll see that Minister Louis Farrakhan is a student, a servant and chief representative of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad already had a plan. That's the plan the Honorable Louis Farrakhan has. What we have not found are enough black leaders with the courage to embrace that plan. We had a plan before we went to Washington.

VJ: Following the Million Man March, what does this man mean to you? (hands him a newspaper clipping with the picture of Minister Jeremiah Shabazz)

RM: Oh! Yes, this is Minister Jeremiah Shabazz. A great, great brother.

VJ: Can you speak on him?

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RM: Well, yes. Minister Jeremiah. There were ministers here, including Minister Malcolm X, but I would have say that it was Minister Jeremiah Shabazz's reign as minister here in Philadelphia that really put Philadelphia on the map as it relates to the history of the Nation of Islam.

VJ: How so?

RM: Well, Minister Jeremiah grew these mosques. I believe we had seven or eight mosques inside the city, but this entire Delaware Valley territory was cultivated by Minister Jeremiah Shabazz. Businesses were set up. We had schools under Minister Jeremiah and a large juice distribution in the area by Minister Jeremiah Shabazz. I mean, even the bakery was doing a minimum at the height; we were doing 2000 pies a day under Minister Jeremiah Shabazz.

VJ: Where's the bakery?

RM: The bakery was on 60th St at that time. I was not living in Philly at that time.

VJ: Is that where the concept Tribe of Shabazz<sup>1</sup> comes from on that bakery thing?

RM: I'm not sure. I'm not sure, but I do know that there were two or three bakeries. Last year, we had a Nation of Islam history conference and on Friday night, we just had speakers that dealt with the history of the Nation of Islam in Philadelphia.

VJ: Here?

RM: We were set up at another place, but last year we had it here in Philadelphia. We brought in some of the people who labored with Minister Jeremiah and they just attested to how he always was willing to let talent and ability rise because it would further Islam in the city. It was wonderful hearing the great testimonies of this great minister under the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

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VJ: Did you know him personally?

RM: I met him personally. We talked extensively. I eulogized his wife who died and he has two daughters here. One's an attorney, an accountant and an attorney and the other one is a medical doctor. Yeah. Minister Jeremiah was fierce about education and learning. He was a great driver of the Muslim community here. He built up a very large community. This was a very, very great man and a great soldier under the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

VJ: A couple more things to talk about. Do you remember this? Does that man look familiar to you?

(Shows him a news article with his picture)

RM: Yes! Yes.

VJ: Without the glasses! Can you tell me about Grey's Ferry<sup>2</sup>? Do you remember anything about it?

RM: Yeah, like it was yesterday. We got a call from a woman who had been trying to find some organizations to help her. She lived down in the Grey's Ferry section. I think it was St. Gabriel's<sup>3</sup> was the church where there had been a Beef-n-Beer party. People intoxicated came out of there and some words were said to her son and the friend to her son when he was walking home. The son came on home and got to his house and came in and they, some of the whites from the Beef-n-Beer party, came over to the house and we're forcing their way in to beat up this boy. When they had him out in the street, she came out in her nightgown to try to stop them and they start hitting her and everything. Then, the police were called and this kind of thing and about 3 people ended up arrested. They began to do things to her house like put gum in her key hole so she couldn't get in her house and a lot of different things. She had called me and we went down to help him. We did a press conference in front of St.

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RM: Gabriel's to let them know that there was life in retaliation. We would not tolerate a black woman and her child being harassed by a white community. We just wasn't gonna tolerate it. Anyway, we went on a couple of shows. I think it was Wally Kennedy's show. He had a television show here in Philadelphia. I forget what they called it but uh...Philly today...Philadelphia Today or something like that. I mentioned that we were gonna have a 5000 man march about this kind of thing. Everything kind of took off from that. We started coming back and talking to people about the march that we were going to have there. Somehow, it just really caught fire around the country. The March in Grey's Ferry, which turned out to be a very vicious white community.

VJ: So there was a march?

RM: Some of them still marched, but I received calls as far as Seattle, WA, Connecticut, and people that use to live here and knew about Grey's Ferry and they were so happy that I was doing it and calling this march. I think they heard it on NPR<sup>4</sup> and it start picking up on news stations around the country. The pressure grew on black leadership here because of Rendell. With the pressure that was coming on them, they wanted to reach out to the nation. I wouldn't budge on the march. Once we had called it, I was sticking to it. When the Minister got wind of it, he wanted to see would it be a danger to us and to people. A long thing short, when we met with Rendell, we thought, if we had a rally and brought all the leadership together, clergy together and we did something in that way where we got to address this problem of race in Philadelphia. Everybody came to agreement that we could do that, but there were some in Grey's Ferry that were still very angry and wanted to march. The March I called was always march for peace, not war. It was not a march called out of anger, but a demonstration that would let people know that we were willing to stand up for ourselves. Of all the calls I got, the one that stuck with

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RM: me most was when a man came to me and thanked me for calling the march and then he handed me this big stack of paper and it was research on Grey's Ferry. Of course, out of that research, I found out that Grey's Ferry had a 95 year history of beating up black people and getting away with it. Nobody had ever been arrested and gone to jail for the vicious beatings of black people. I asked the man 'Why'd you take the time to do all this research?' So, I said I appreciate it though. He said when he was seven years old, his mother and father were beaten down in Grey's Ferry. There were a lot of people that weren't with us that had a stake in this because they had experience violence in Grey's Ferry. All this came out after I called the march. I didn't know they had that history. We had the rally and everything. Rendell, he caught a little flak from the Rabbis and others because of Louis Farrakhan. Minister Farrakhan was asked, by Rendell, a letter sent by me to him, to come to the city and we could address this race problem. You could say for the first time, the Nation of Islam that has always been seen as a race problem in America. For the first time, the Nation of Islam publicly, by a public official was called in to help solve a race problem in the city.

VJ: That's interesting because isn't Rendell a Jew? Or Jewish.

RM: Yes, Rendell is a Jew. Rendell, as he said on Inside Story and on all the news programs, he said all his life as a Jew, he's been looking at the bloodied bodies of Israelis, Palestinians and everything. Yet, the prime minister of Israel and Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Palestinian liberation organization, could come together and talk. He said Minister Farrakhan has not killed any Jews; he's not blown up any synagogues why would that be a problem if he and I talked to address a specific race problem in a city over which I'm a mayor? You know, you got 46% of the city is black. I can't overlook black people just because of one man. Rendell did a pretty good job standing up for himself. He weathered it politically.

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RM: We tried to have some talks about race and what we could really really do about it. As far to my knowledge, (Minister Muhammad's cell phone rings) since that March was called....

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Day II Part II of Oral History Interview with Minister Rodney Muhammad

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Interviewer: Venold Johnson

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VJ: So we left of talking about Grey's Ferry.

RM: Yeah, but that was it. We pulled off a successful rally. We were at Tindley Temple.

VJ: Where's Tindley Temple?

RM: Tindley Temple is a historic church down in South Philadelphia known for its rallies and things over the year. It's at Fitzwater and Broad.

VJ: Did Temple decline to have it there?

RM: No, they didn't. Tindley Temple is where we were going to go. I'm not sure if Rendell and them wanted to try a place at Temple. I'm tryin to remember how all that started, but I know Tindley Temple was where it ended up.

VJ: I heard the Nation provided security for Antoinette William's family, is that true?

RM: Repeat that again.

VJ: That the Nation of Islam provided security at her house for her family.

RM: We did. We were doing security at her house, 24 hours because we were watching for anyone coming down to try to bring harm to them or to their property.

VJ: Did the police object to that?

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RM: No, we worked along with authorities. We weren't at odds with police with that. I still see police commanders today that remember us about the march and everything and how it was handled.

VJ: I know, just nationally, the LA Riots happened. I want to say it was before this even happened, right? Then, the whole Rodney King thing happened in New York. This was around the same time right? The LA Riots was before the March on Grey's Ferry.

RM: I believe so. Yes.

VJ: Me as a historian, I always try to place things around. What else do you guys do in the city?

RM: Well, you know, you're gonna find the brothers are out many times in the communities, talking with our people, door-to-door. They do a lot of that right here in North Philadelphia.

VJ: Anything in Germantown, Mount Airy, Germantown...?

RM: Germantown, Olney, Mount Airy, we haven't had a heavy concentration. The last real heavy concentration we had in that area. There's a school there right across there from Olney, where after the 10,000 man call, we met with all the men that lived in that area, West Oak Lane, Germantown and that we were gonna start going into that community.

VJ: What school was that?

RM: I think it was the Girls' School.

VJ: Girl's High School. Girl's High School, so Broad and Olney. Speaking of the community and this is just so important because I actually noticed it the other day, when I was waiting for the L Bus, and I never

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VJ: paid attention to it, but there are places where you could walk in and get malt liquor. (Hands him a newspaper article) Can you talk about your campaign against Malt Liquor?

RM: 1999, that's about a couple years after Grey's Ferry, I start looking at these 40 oz. fortified malt liquors sold in the city. Of course, our city's no different from others where this is sold primarily in Black and Latino communities, number one. Here, the deregulated pattern for its sales were primarily stationed at what are called stop-n-go's throughout Philadelphia. We began to investigate it. One of the first things we did was to look chemically at the alcohol content. The alcohol content is very high and far exceeds what's called Ballpark Beer, which is at 2.4 percent. We found some of these beverages to be at 8.9, some even going up to 10% in alcohol content. It is said that out of a 40, you could literally drink 5 shots of a 90% proof beverage. I mean, just out of one forty, you could be consuming something like that. So, it got a real punch to say nothing else. We purchased a lot of those bottles going in the stores and we would hold press conferences with these bottles out there, showing the real menace that it was. Greater was the way that they were being sold. So my effort was a three-phase operation. One was to dramatize and publicize this and draw some attention to it. Number two was to partner with government. We worked with the liquor control enforcement in Philadelphia and the Office of Public Nuisance from the district attorney's office and other community and civic leaders. We worked with them all. Then we went to the liquor control board to try to get some ruling from that board that alcohol that exceeded the ballpark beer level, 2.4%, that that would have to be sold out of state stores. Of course, if it's sold out of state stores, you under a more controlled environment, a much more controlled environment and by the states closing by 6pm and it only being 650 of them in the Commonwealth, we felt that this would greatly limit the access to 40 oz. fortified malt liquor that primarily was a drink for younger adults and some teenagers. We weren't able. We ran into a clash with

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RM: many pubs beyond Philadelphia that import a lot of high impact beers from Germany and other places in Europe. They didn't want any change in the code that they felt would affect them adversely. They were against this and so we ended up having a struggle with people that we weren't concerned with. As far as we were concerned, in these rural areas throughout Pennsylvania, they could have all the beer and stuff they want. I don't care if it's 100 proof. We were just dealing with Philadelphia County and the regular patterns....

VJ: But you don't see the stores, like you do here, on every corner and people drinking them in the stores. It really is a sad....

RM: Of course not. We had public hearings so we could be on record. People talked about menace of these stores. We set up a coalition reform action, a citizen's reform action coalition. The acronym was CRAC and we were calling this 'liquid crack'. People would fill out CRAC sheets, when they said it was something in their neighborhood and they thought it was a menace: broken glass, unsavory elements in the neighborhood, hanging around the store. They would report these stores and we would go and sit with liquor control enforcement and they would send their agents out to these store. We called it a legal harassment campaign, where we began to get these people on citations on a lot of violations that they had.

VJ: I saw it in that one picture with the guy pointing his finger at you.

RM: Yes. I was going in one of them and he was trying to put me out of the store.

VJ: (Mocking storeowner) What are you doing? What are you doing?

RM: Because he saw me in there and I think he had saw me on the news. Right.

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VJ: 22nd and Lehigh.

RM: We called. Alcohol, according to the studies, it was the gateway drug. That means that most children that were addicted to narcotics, their first drug was alcohol and for most of these young people, the choice of alcoholic drink was 40 oz. malt liquor. We were calling it the great gateway drug. We didn't think that people stop drinking it altogether, but the last phase of our thing was to be mass education. Back then, I was on the radio. We were trying to really discuss the health hazards of prolonged drinking of these beverages and that. That was it, but the Nation of Islam's approach to all of social ills has always been to teach our people and affect their appetite. If you can kill the appetite in a man for various things, then he just won't go to it. If you take the entire Nation of Islam's membership and populate us in one city, you could bring cocaine, alcohol; everything and you just won't make any money because the appetite has been sufficiently killed.

VJ: A sense of self, huh?

RM: Yeah. (Minister Muhammad's cellular phone rings)

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May 3, 2012

Interviewer: Venold Johnson

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VJ: So what we're you saying?

RM: It was mainly on the alcohol, just talking about the killing of an appetite. When appetites have been sufficiently killed in us, then you won't find us in the grip of many of these vices that we're normally caught up in. When you're teaching a man about himself, when you're showing them the real quality that goes into his identity, when he grows in love about the truth about himself, you can begin to train that man in how to construct a life based on that image as opposed to the one that he's been laboring under. That takes him off cigarettes, that takes him off refer, cocaine, alcohol-riotous living. Things that seem normal to him, he sees as extremely abnormal and self-destructive now and so, he begins to avoid those things.

VJ: How many kids do you have?

RM: Two sons.

VJ: How old are they?

RM: My oldest son now is 26 and my youngest one is 22.

VJ: Do they have kids too?

RM: My youngest son does have a son now, so I'm a grandfather.

VJ: Congratulations. Congratulations. Do they live in Philly?

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RM: My youngest son is in Philadelphia. My oldest son lives in California.

VJ: What do they do?

RM: Well, my oldest son is in acting school, but by trade, he went to Berean Institute<sup>5</sup> here. So, he's a beautiful and a barber. He's a massage therapist. He did Sports Medicine and Massage therapy he does. He added those things on.

VJ: Are you married? Wow, multitalented.

RM: My wife's deceased.

VJ: I'm sorry to hear that. Well, I wanna thank you for this time that you've given me and talking about the interview. I'll definitely give you a copy of the interview and transcription. Thank you so much for your time.