

GREGG BUCKINGHAM: Well, we're here today, it's June 22, 2004, and we're at the Kennedy Space Center press site and we have Gregg Buckingham and Shamika Walker here as interviewers, and today we're interviewing Mr. Lonnie Blocker, who had 35 years of service here at the Kennedy Space Center. Lonnie, can we start off and just have you state your full name and your birthplace and your birth date?

LONNIE BLOCKER: My name is Lonnie Blocker and I was born in Arlington, Ga., and my birth date is Feb. 12, 1940. I grew up in Fort Pierce, which is about 80 miles south of here.

SHAMIKA WALKER: What is your educational background?

BLOCKER: My educational background is the sciences. I have a bachelor's degree from Bethune-Cookman College, a double major in math and chemistry. I have a BCS (bachelor commercial science) business management oriented from Rollins College.

WALKER: How did you determine your majors?

BLOCKER: Determining my majors was very tricky. I was one of those fortunate students that was, I don't know, I almost use the word level-headed. But I was one of those fortunate students that did well in all of the disciplines. At Bethune-Cookman, I was an A student in all of my classes. I like math and chemistry, and I went there with the intention of majoring in math. And after I was doing so well in all of them, all of the department heads were trying to get me to major in their particular area, and I was the lab assistant as a freshman in chemistry. So I got real close with the chemistry professor, and I didn't want to give up math because that was what I came there for, with the intention of probably majoring in math. So I got a double major in math and chemistry.

BUCKINGHAM: Tell me a little bit, back up just a minute, tell me a little bit about your upbringing, your parents, your -- did you have siblings?

BLOCKER: Yes. It was six of us, two boys and four girls. I was, as I said, I was raised in Fort Pierce, brought up in Fort Pierce. My parents moved from Georgia to Fort Pierce. At the time, I was five years old. This would have been in 1945. My father at that time was a farmer in Georgia and he was a tenderfoot. He couldn't plow. When he'd plow, his feet would swell. So he

got a job in Arlington, that's the name of the town, Arlington, Ga., at the Ford Motor place as a mechanic. Therefore, my mother and my dad's younger sister did the farming for about two years. They did the plowing, the planting, the gathering the crops.

My mother had a large family, 12 of them and six brothers, so she had brothers to help her with the farming, and she and my aunt, my dad's sister, got tired of that, doing the crops every year. So they informed my dad that they weren't going to do it any more, and he had a brother that had just moved to Fort Pierce a year earlier, so we pulled up and moved to Fort Pierce, and that's how we got into Fort Pierce.

My family was a migrant family. After we left Georgia from farming, we were migrants and my father worked in the groves in the Fort Pierce area and my mother worked in the fields, tomatoes, the 'Glades, riding those school buses of south Florida each day, getting up in the morning at 5 o'clock, coming back home at 8 o'clock at night, working in the fields. And I said we were migrants and what I mean about that is that we followed the crops. When June came around, there was no more work in the fruit or the fields in Florida, we would leave in June, soon as school was out, and we would go to the Carolinas, South Carolinas, North Carolinas and gather tomatoes, beans, strawberries, whatever the crop may be, and move on up to Virginia, late June, probably, and gather beans, cauliflowers, what have you, and we've work our way on up to Pennsylvania and start gathering beans and potatoes, and we'd leave Pennsylvania, go to New York and do beans and potatoes. We'd go out on Long Island, we'd do cauliflowers and potatoes. And in about November, late October, we would go upstate New York and we would do apples and potatoes. Around Thanksgiving, we would head back down to Florida. We'd start the cycle over with the fruits and the vegetables and the 'Glades and so forth. So we had a very mobile lifestyle during my early years.

BUCKINGHAM: And was that difficult as a child, to move and keep moving?

BLOCKER: It wasn't really difficult because we only went when school was out. It only affected me when school was out. And we lived in camps, on homes in the fields the owners had, abandoned houses and things like that. The only real hardship was the condition that we lived in during that time we were moving about. You may have a three-bedroom house and you may

have four families in there, four distinct families in there. And your family may be in one room and the only separation you had was the sheets hanging, running some wire across the ceiling. And we all issued two-burner oil stoves, I don't know if you remember those. They probably didn't have those when you grew up, but there were two burners on a stove. It was portable and that was what you used for cooking and so forth. It was a very primitive kind of lifestyle that we lived.

BUCKINGHAM: And when you got sort of toward the end of high school, was it difficult for you to go to college? Were you the first person in your family to go to college?

BLOCKER: I was the first person in my family to graduate from high school, and when I got in the 10th or 11th grade, when we were up in New York, I bought a car for about 50 bucks and I would have parents pay me to transport their kids back to school so they could start on time. So from 10th, 11th and 12th grade, once I got to high school, I would drive back and start school, so up until 10th grade, I didn't get back to school until after Thanksgiving. But once I got in 10th grade and I was old enough to drive and get a driver's license, I would buy an old car for \$150, something like that, and I'd charge each family \$50 or \$60 to bring that child back, and that would pay for the car and pay the transportation back. So my last three years, I was able to start school on time and end school on time. The problem I had when I graduated from high school, my dad had become a crew leader then, he was taking crews up to New York and I was the bookkeeper. I did all the financing, payrolls and so forth. And I was making about \$800 or \$900 a week as a high school graduate, and I had several scholarships, full scholarships. Bethune-Cookman was one of them, and I decided that I don't want to go to college because I'm making \$800, \$900 a week, why go to college?

BUCKINGHAM: Good money for that time.

BLOCKER: It was excellent money for that time. This was back in late '59, '60. And the council of churches ran the day care centers on all the different camps, and they brought in college students from throughout the country. And we had people from Kentucky State and University of Kentucky and different colleges working at the day cares, and those young ladies begged me to go to college. And I told them the same thing I told my parents: "Why go to college? I'm making more money than I'd make." Teachers were only

making at that time about \$3,000 a year, and I could make that in less than six months. So anyway, I was convinced that I wasn't going to college, even though I had the scholarships. And God had another plan. It rained for a whole week. We couldn't work for a whole week, eight days, and I didn't make any money that week. And it was the week before freshman orientation at the Bethune-Cookman, and with them encouraging me to go, and with me seeing that every week wasn't going to be the same, I left and I did end up at Bethune-Cookman after that.

BUCKINGHAM: After graduating from college, did you ever envision yourself working, doing any aerospace work?

BLOCKER: Yes. If you, and I don't have a copy of it, my sisters have that, if you get the yearbook for 1959, Lincoln Park Academy, where the students were asked what do they want to be and where do they want to work, you would see that in my yearbook in 1959, I said I was going to college and I was going to come back and work at NASA as an engineer.

BUCKINGHAM: Of course, NASA was created in 1958 and Sputnik happened. Do you remember that happening?

BLOCKER: Yes, I remember that vaguely. As I said, I lived in Fort Pierce, which is only about 80 miles from here. And a lot of my friends and my parents' friends worked here at Patrick Air Force Base at the time. There was no Kennedy. So we were quite familiar and connected with what was happening here at the space center because that was one of our major employers, especially black males, the custodial work force, and roads and grounds and all those things they had at Patrick Air Force Base and over on the Cape side.

BUCKINGHAM: And did you have any military service?

BLOCKER: No, I had no military service.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay.

BLOCKER: When I graduated from college and came out here, they gave me a critical skills deferment the first three years, and then I got married and I got that deferment, and I got a kid and that sort of wrapped up the deferments.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay. So did you know you had a NASA job and an opportunity just as you graduated? How did it come about that you actually ended up working here?

BLOCKER: Career day. We had a career day at Bethune-Cookman and NASA had representatives there and Ben Hersey was the personnel director at the time, and they came and they interviewed students and they offered me a job during the interview process.

BUCKINGHAM: Now when you came here, let's talk a little about the center at that time. Because the center, as we know it today, did not exist. So when you came, there was nothing on Merritt Island.

BLOCKER: No. There was nothing on Merritt Island as it relates to the space center as it is today. We had what we call, this area was called MILA, and you had a tracking station outside the, just west of the visitor's center. It's still there, I think. The MILA tracking station, that was run out from Goddard. I think Goddard was running that. And that was the only thing that was over on this side, and I'm sort of guessing that was already over here. That may have been put over after the center was built, also. But basically there was nothing over here, and I'm going to back up on that, in that Goddard facility because there weren't any roads over here.

BUCKINGHAM: State Road 3.

BLOCKER: State Road 3 went straight through but there was no spurs going east and west, and you would have had to have a road going east and west to get to that MILA tracking facility. So no, nothing was here and there was no Headquarters buildings or anything of that sort. We...

BUCKINGHAM: On your first day, where did you report to?

BLOCKER: On my first day, I reported off center here to – they had an office complex on State Road 3 – I'm sorry, not State Road 3, A1A in Cocoa Beach, next door to the Catholic school, St. Theresa's, there's a building that was there across from Ponderosa, I think. There was a little office building there and that was where Kennedy Space Center – it wasn't Kennedy Space Center, it was the Launch Operations Center – that was their office and their employment office, where all the employment took place.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay. And you processed in there. Then where did you physically go to work?

BLOCKER: I really didn't process in. Did I process in there? They had another facility, the Cape Royal building on Cocoa Beach, and I think I processed in there because they were renting space out at the Cape Royal building. I processed in there and they didn't have a position for me. They didn't have a place for me, so I was taken around for interviews with the various directorates and that, in itself, was an experience because at that time, there were no professional blacks at the NASA logistics operation center, as it was called. And the attitude of the directors at that time: there was none and they really didn't want any, and that was the attitude that I came into and I had Ben Hersey, who was the personnel director at that time took me around, and I had directors who refused to interview me because they said they had no intention of hiring a black and they weren't going to waste their time interviewing one. And they did not use the term black.

BUCKINGHAM: So you were a sort of pathfinder as one of the first professional blacks hired here at the Kennedy Space Center.

BLOCKER: Yes, that's correct. One of the first. I ended up in a directorate that was called Base Operations, and under Base Operations you had logistics, fire and security, all of the transportation, all of those items under there. And they put me in the, not technical management office, it was the personnel relations office for that directorate. I don't recall the terminology now for that particular branch, but that's where I was placed temporarily for the first three months because I hired in on June 23. And they, as I said earlier, they really didn't have a place for me and nobody was dying to get me. And the assignments, the first assignments that I had in the three months that I was there -- June, July and August -- was sorting mail and making copies. I ran the copy machines and we didn't have the mail delivery that you have now, where the mail is delivered by carriers and they put it on your desk and all that. The mail was dropped off, each directorate's mail was dropped off with the directorate, and they had to have someone to sort it and get it to each individual. I was that individual for base operations.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay. So you started out kind of doing lower-level activities.

BLOCKER: Yes. The lowest level, even though I was one of the few in the directorate with a degree. That was another rarity. That was one of my big surprises once I got hired in, to find out the number of people who were working for NASA that were high school graduates. And at that time, when you were off center, you thought of NASA as being this highly technical place where people were working with all kind of degrees, and when I came out here, that was not the case. We had a lot of transfers from Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, Huntsville and Rome, New York Air Force Base. A lot of guys were truck drivers and all kind of jobs they had, and their managers and military people they worked with brought them with them, set them up as section chiefs, branch chiefs and so forth, and most of them, the majority of them only had high school degrees. Some of them didn't even have a high school diploma. So that was a great awakening, to find out the educational level.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay. Now, I have down in some of my notes that you were in the base operations division and then about '65, you moved to the maintenance and operations branch.

BLOCKER: Yeah, that was still base operations division. I was, at that time, I was technical management, AST technical management and I was responsible for their budgets, budget work. And that was one reason I went back to school. I went back to Rollins and got my master's degree in business there, because of the work that I was doing in base ops at that time.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay. And did you do that in the early, your early part in your career, the Rollins?

BLOCKER: Yes. I did that and I think I got my degree at Rollins in '69, that was six years later. I got my master's degree. Rollins, we didn't have the facilities on site like they have now in the county. I drove back and forth each night to Winter Park to Rollins for three years and got the master's degree.

BUCKINGHAM: And this would be before schools like UCF or FIT.

BLOCKER: None of those schools existed.

BUCKINGHAM: Yeah. Now, as you're working in maintenance operation branch, and I have, in '66, there's a division staff and the plant and engineering maintenance division.

BLOCKER: All of these jobs are still base operations directorate. Base operations directorate is one of two or three directorates that was here at the center at the time, and they were one of the largest ones. You had your engineering directorate and you had the base operations directorate.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay. And physically, as you're working in the base operations directorate during the first four or five years, where are you actually reporting to physically to work, on the Cape side or is this down in Cocoa?

BLOCKER: No, from day one, when I hired in, we worked on Cape side. We had a trailer next door to Hangar D on the Cape side. Most of the offices were inside the hangars or trailers, outside the hangars or trailers on the parking lot, around the various hangars over on the Cape side. After about, I guess '67, '68, they build what they call "splinter city," and that was south of the Hangar D, across the street from Hangar D on the south side, directly in front of the fire station. They built rows of wood structure, wood buildings, office buildings, and they were one-story wood buildings and it was known as "splinter city." So they moved us from the trailers and moved us over there, and we stayed there until construction was done in what is now the Kennedy Space Center.

BUCKINGHAM: The Headquarters Building?

BLOCKER: The Headquarters Building.

BUCKINGHAM: Okay, so you moved from the Cape side then to the Headquarters Building.

BLOCKER: Right.

BUCKINGHAM: Now let's talk about some other things going on at this time. There were sort of two things going on. One is, we're launching from the Cape, the early missions, Mercury and Gemini. Meanwhile, over on the Kennedy side, we're beginning to move dirt and construct facilities over here. What are your remembrances of the early days of those two activities?

BLOCKER: During that timeframe, during the construction phase, we still went ahead and worked in the development of the Mercury as you said and the Gemini, all of that, those were test vehicles at the time. The construction phase, because I was in base ops, they had the interface with I believe the corps of engineers on the construction of the sites so we had the plant engineer, the maintenance and the heat and the air conditioning, all that kind of stuff so our guys were still interfacing with getting all the construction done and I was the, at that time I had moved from the mission I was assigned to in the personnel office for the directorate and I skipped over a little piece of history. After my 90-day period, I was hired on a temporary assignment and I was converted to a permanent assignment in September, August. I was hired in as a GS-5 and because I had a B average or above, I was entitled to GS-7 and hired in. So when they got ready to convert me, they offered to convert me as a five and I refused. I said I would not work for a five if I was eligible for seven and all the white kids were coming in at seven, so I resigned and signed a contract to teach in Fort Pierce.

And a week later they run back and forth indicating to me that our senator at that time was Smathers, that Smathers said that they had to have some black professionals and they had to have somebody and he had authorized them to go ahead and give me a seven, which was a bunch of bull, but I resigned from my teaching position, so I never taught during that period. Then I came back a week later, so I only had a week, that week break and they didn't even consider it as a break because they were still calling me every day, they got the space open and they got this and they got that. And they went ahead and processed me as a seven and that created problems with the assignment they gave me in personnel. The personnel specialist working in the office. The guy that was over the office was a GS-7 and that's why they didn't want to give me a seven. And I said no way. And he had about a D- average from the University of Alabama and I don't even know how he got out of there. He really had nothing that I could see that was special. But they were willing to pay him a seven, they weren't willing to pay me. And I had worked with him all summer so that was one of the reasons I said I would quit first and go work. And I signed a contract to teach for \$3,200 a year. That was what teachers were getting in Fort Pierce. And my salary at NASA the first year out of school was \$6,500. So I turned down \$6,500 to make \$3,200, based on principles.

BUCKINGHAM: OK, so when you came back then, did you stay in the personnel section or you moved?

BLOCKER: They moved me into the Budget Office doing the budget. Project management office working with the budget and I worked with the budget for the various divisions. The first five years I moved from one division to the other but I still was doing the directorate division budget.

BUCKINGHAM: OK, and then I, I see we have a Spaceport News article from 1964 that you were chosen as outstanding young man of the year by the Jaycees. How did that come about?

BLOCKER: I really, I really don't know, to be honest with you. I had been at Bethune-Cookman everything and I had been in who's who in colleges and universities and all that stuff and then I came out here and started working out here and they followed me, tracking me, I guess. And I started a Boy Scout troop in Cocoa. They didn't have one at the time, a black troop. I guess the community work that I was doing, and early on I was single, so I had a lot of time and the things I had done at Cookman and what I was doing out here and the fact that and something probably had to do with the fact that I was the first out here was probably one of the reasons the Jaycees saw fit to bestow that honor on me.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. Now, did you change at some point from base operations to design engineering or was . . . ?

BLOCKER: Yes. I changed in, I changed in. I stayed in the base ops for seven years and I filed two complaints, two discrimination complaints, and as a result of those complaints is how I ended up hired as a design engineer.

What happened, my boss in the budget office, he did taxes. He was a CPA and he did taxes during tax season. He'd take leave and go down to Palm Beach. He had a wealthy clientele and he decided not to come back. And at the time there was only the two of us in the office. He was the branch chief and I was the, his tech management specialist and he decided not to come back. And I was, at that time I was a GS-9 and he was a 13, I believe, and when the job had come open and he called me and told me he wasn't coming back and that he was going to mail his badge in, so I talked to the division chief at the time over that group and asked him would he announce the job at

a level that I could apply for it since I was the only one there with experience on it and I had gotten my master's degrees at that time. And his words to me was, No, you're at the job I want you to be in at the grade I want you to be in and as long as you're here, you're going to be in that grade.

And then when I protested, he said we'll look for someone who's qualified and with experienced. We had a young man that was working in, the copy, running the copy machine. He was in the, McGregor-Warner had the copy contract and he was their interface and all he did was work, the only experience he had was working in that office and they brought him in and he had no experience whatsoever and they asked me to train him and I said no.

And they tried to insist on me training and I refused. And to make a long story short I ended up filing a complaint with the EEO. That drug out for about two years. I had to file one earlier on something similar to that. So at the, they decided to settle with me and one of the settlements were that they would move me to another directorate, give me the equivalent in pay that I was missing by not getting the assignment, but they would not change my grade. So they would keep me a GS-9, but they'd give me the pay and I would move to design engineering. So I went to, no, let me, let me back up a step. I went to Logistics, Launch Operations Support. The position was in Launch Operations Support that they transferred me to and what I didn't know is they were planning, this is the project office, I didn't know when I accepted the, the transfer was that this office was scheduled to be abolished. So they transferred me, I took the pay and they transferred me to that office. I was there two weeks and I received a letter, reduction in force.

BUCKINGHAM: This is around sixty . . .

BLOCKER: This is seventy. 1970, 71.

BUCKINGHAM: OK

BLOCKER: And when I got the reduction in force, it hit me what had happened. That I had beat them, that I had won the skirmish but I had lost the war. And I was in the, we had a union, AFGE, and I was a member of the union and I talked with them and they said let's pull your records and see how much time you got. And I was fortunate that I had one week, that I less than a week over a young man that DE had hired. And if there's a reduction in force, you can bump.

BUCKINGHAM: Based on time of service.

BLOCKER: So I bumped, based on time of service, so I bumped the man in DE. So I went into DE with a very, very unpleasant atmosphere because I had bumped the young guy that was their up-and-coming guy as they had put it and that's how I got into DE, but I had a lot of problems in DE because most of the people I was interfacing with just did not like having blacks there and they were even more angry that I bumped somebody that they had brought in, hired and recruited. And this kid ended up going out the gate in the reduction in force. It was one of the few reduction in force that we've had in the 36 years I was here, I think the only one.

BUCKINGHAM: Sort of at the end of the Apollo.

BLOCKER: At the end of the, yeah, at the end of the Apollo program just prior to the Skylab program.

BUCKINGHAM: And so then you stayed in DE for . . . ?

BLOCKER: I was in DE for 17 years and I ran into the same roadblocks that I had in base ops and I was working for a director and again I had a guy that retired. I was working with a guy by the name of Paul Keith and he was over the C and F budget, the construction and facilities budget, and I was working on that particular budget with him and I was doing presentations and everything and he left to go to NASA Headquarters, I think he took a year's leave, something of that sort, and again I asked to be considered for the position and, different person, same message. You are in the position I want you in, as long as you stay in the position, stay with this directorate, you're going to be in that position and at that grade. As far as I'm concerned, any young man I hear that's 45 years old and hasn't reached his prime, and hasn't reached his peak in his career is a failure as far as I'm concerned. And I have no plans for moving you up for anything.

So once he said that, then I said I will make every effort then to get out of here. And he told me that, "I don't have to release you unless it's a promotion and I don't think you're going to, nobody's going to give you a 14 to leave here." And, fortunately for me, Tom Utspin was the deputy director at the time and I knew Tom quite well because he came from design engineering and we had worked together and he talked to the director of DE and struck

with him of the joys and the wisdom of releasing me and he spoke to his division chief and they released me and I came out to shuttle logistics at that time with Max Jones.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. And shuttle logistics then is responsible for all the spare parts, etc., for the new orbiter.

BLOCKER: That's correct, the new vehicle, that's correct.

BUCKINGHAM: This is a new activity for NASA because of course the Apollo's were one-shot deals, but the space shuttle was . . .

BLOCKER: The space shuttle was a reusable vehicle. It was different from a design aspect, different from a procurement process and one of the problems that we had, it was created from 1960s technology and some even prior to 1960s and one of the problems even before we started flying the shuttle, some of the vendors were on the verge of going out of business because there was no real requirement for their parts. No related business that was related to the shuttle work for what they did.

BUCKINGHAM: It's a one-of-a-kind item.

BLOCKER: Most of the things we did on the shuttle were one-of-a-kind. As you could see, just prior to my leaving here, that was a big issue with the vendors going out of business and we started manufacturing a lot of things and making things ourselves and a lot of plants we took over so that, or kept them in business just so they could make those one-of-a-kind items for us. So that was a new world totally together, and the number of parts on the vehicle, something I think like 240,000 different parts or something like that. So that was a tremendous effort.

BUCKINGHAM: Now how did Kennedy handle that at the time? The logistics effort. Was a group put together or . . . ?

BLOCKER: We had always had a logistics group, every directorate had their own logistics group. But this was the first effort when I came out here, came out to logistics, this was the first effort to combine all of the logistics into one organization and one of the problems we had was with the shuttle contract.

The logistics contract was being managed by, at JSC, so we were in the process of trying to transfer management of the contract to the new logistics organization that didn't even exist. When I came I think it was about 20 people and it was supposed to build up to 108. And I don't think it ever got past 70 or something like that during the time that I was here and then once I left I think it dropped down to 20 or less now. So it never really, it never really developed as it was envisioned, but some of the major role that we had was the taking over the transfer of the management responsibility from JSC.

And we did a lot of traveling in those days. Every other week we were back and forth to Downey, to the Rockwell plant because Rockwell was the prime contractor at that time. And we thought it had to be a better way to do it and running out to Downey every other week, so our directorate made the decision that we are going to move the contract effort to Florida and Rockwell resisted it and JSC didn't think it could be done and we did it and that's why you have the plant on Cape Canaveral down there, the shuttle logistics facility.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. And then you finish your career in that area, I believe . . .

BLOCKER: Yes I did.

BUCKINGHAM: Up until about 1998, which is when you retired.

BLOCKER: Yes. I retired January 1998. When I came over to shuttle logistics, as I said, I left design engineering because there was no growth opportunity and my division chief at that time considered that I was 45 and if I hadn't reached my goals then I was a failure and I met Max Jones. I was doing the equipment budget for the whole center at that time. I had all the equipment budget.

BUCKINGHAM: And when you say equipment, what kind of equipment are you . . .

BLOCKER: The same logistics equipment that you are talking about now. The funds for each directorate. All of that went through DE and I was responsible for that budget. I put that budget together and did the presentations at NASA Headquarters and the various centers and everything.

They provided their input to design engineering and then we put it together into a budget package.

BUCKINGHAM: OK

BLOCKER: So when they came up with the logistics directorate, then that effort was transferred to the new logistics group. And so Max wanted me because he had worked with me, had interfaced with me and, you know, getting his directorate's equipment, making sure he got his requirements into the budget and got them funded, so they knew me and he was, he offered me the job and he told me that it's a new directorate, new branches and everything were being created and it would have growth potential for a branch chief.

He said if I came over he would give me an opportunity to compete for one of the branches and I came over and as the group grew and the branches were established, I did get one of the branches eventually. And so. I retired in '98 because they were in the process of reorganizing again and then the reorganization and the plan they presented, at the time we had two minority, two black branch chiefs at that time, one fellow by the name of Dr. James Brown and myself. We only had those two in the directorate. And the only real change in the new directorate that they were setting up for logistics was the elimination of those two branches. So I decided I wasn't going to back up, and I had 35 years. I wasn't going to go back through that rat race again and I saw no reason to abolish my branch or James' branch and I decided to retire and as you know what happened eventually. James also left and went into private industry for himself.

BUCKINGHAM: OK

BLOCKER: So . . .

BUCKINGHAM: I wanted you to talk a little about your community involvement because we have several articles from Spaceport News along the way about you working with the scouts, which you briefly mentioned . . .

BLOCKER: Right.

BUCKINGHAM: There's also the family counseling centers. Seems like you were very active in the community.

BLOCKER: Yeah, I, as I said when I came in here, to Brevard County, I was a young, single man and I had a lot of energy, so I like to be involved and I was the same way when I was in college. I was in a different organization. So, we didn't have a fraternity here, either. I'm a member of the Alpha Xi Alpha fraternity, so I got a group of guys together and we chartered a chapter in the fraternity and once we got the chapter established, we needed some activities for it.

So I was the president of the chapter. And we didn't have a Boy Scout, a black Boy Scout troop in the area. We had one that was in the process of folding at St. Paul Church, so I had worked over there with them as assistant scoutmaster and the scoutmaster left and the pastor at the church told me that I kept the troop going for about three months after the scoutmaster left and the pastor came to me and told me that I could not be the scoutmaster of his church troop unless I was a member of his church. And I wasn't willing to join his church, so I said no, the troop folded and after about two or three months I decided to start a troop.

I talked my fraternity into sponsoring a troop and that's how I got into Boy Scouts. We chartered a Boy Scout Troop 711 and we started out with three or four kids when we first started out and when I gave up the job about seven years later we had 48 kids and we had probably a hundred and some had gone through it and it was in one of the depressed areas of the city and most of the kids couldn't afford the uniforms or anything like that, so I applied for grants. I applied for grants from The Boeing Company, the good neighbor fund, and they bought tents and camping equipment, stoves and everything for my boys so that's how I got into it and that's how I, I also applied to United Way for grants for my troop and that's how I got involved with United Way and they asked me to join their allocation force which we reviewed the budgets of the different agencies that they serve and so I got involved with that, with the United Way through that allocation process. So I was one of their allocators that would go around and view the budgets and visit the sites and see what they're doing and so forth.

And through that process I got familiar with the family counseling center and year after year we had the same, we did the same agency that we were reviewing their budget request and the family counseling center director asked me about serving on his board of directors. So that's how I ended up

with the Family counseling, that's how I ended up on their board of directors.

And I had the child care association budget also as part of the allocation process and I was asked to serve on their board of directors, Child Care Association, so. Those things started out with the scouts and it just blossomed as I moved around. Things that were interesting to me and a need that involved the children, so I sort of took an active part in joining up with them and helping them out.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. That's admirable. Being that you came so early, I'm wondering if you have any recollections of some of the early people who were here. We know Kurt Debus, for example, was the initial center director. Would you have ever come into contact with him?

BLOCKER: I was in the, one of the advantages of being in the base operations is you came in contact with all of the directors because we supported all the directors and the center director and the deputy center director, so I was quite well-known with Dr. Debus. And when it was time to move Dr. Debus from the E and O Building, which I think his office was in . . .

BUCKINGHAM: On the Cape side?

BLOCKER: On the Cape side. When it came time to move him over here I was responsible for handling his move, so I moved all of his belongings, his desk and everything from the Cape side to his office in Headquarters Building. And I took his wife to Orlando to select his drapes for his office and everything. So I knew him and at that time we had a small work force so at the center here, as far as NASA was concerned, so everybody knew, everybody knew just about everybody . . .

BUCKINGHAM: OK

BLOCKER: Pete Mindelman, what was the guy? I can't even remember all those different names now. The . . .

BUCKINGHAM: Rocco Petrone?

BLOCKER: Petrone. Petrone was my commencement speaker at Rollins when I got my master's degree . . .

BUCKINGHAM: Oh, really?

BLOCKER: Yeah, and we had a group put together, a leadership team of all the people that had gone through the management program. NASA paid for all of our degrees and we'd get together three or four times a year and we'd meet in Debus' office with senior management and they'd talk to us about what was going on and everything, so we got a chance to meet and talk to them on a regular basis.

BUCKINGHAM: What was your impression of him?

BLOCKER: I thought he was probably one of the greatest or the best directors that we've had during that time because that was the early stages and all of the program was in the development stages and we were moving so fast with the various programs and he was not one of those managers who tied the hands of the people below him. He wasn't a micro-manager, so everything went well. The meetings that I sat in on, he had knowledge of what was happening and he was in the forefront of what was going on.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. Very good.

BLOCKER: If you say so.

BUCKINGHAM: This is life at Kennedy.

BLOCKER: Yeah.

BUCKINGHAM: I know actually that we have a few more, more . . . Now, did you ever run into von Braun? Now, I don't know these people came down, I don't know who they saw.

BLOCKER: He, no because I think most of his time was spent at Marshall.

BUCKINGHAM: Marshall, yeah.

BLOCKER: No, and I wouldn't have. I wasn't high enough up to go and hit the beans that he had.

BUCKINGHAM: He probably would have just come down around the launch time.

BLOCKER: Yeah, yeah. We can talk about it on the record if you want to. But we didn't have a visitor center, launch site, visitor's site during the early days for watching launches.

BUCKINGHAM: OK, let me ask you about that. OK. Ok, we're back. Shamika Wlaker, Greg Buckingham interviewing Mr. Lonnie Blocker who is retired NASA after 35 years. We were just talking during the intermission about a little again about again trying to set the stage of what was here in those days and you were mentioning there was no visitor's center, so talk a little bit about when a launch happened. As we all know, special things happen around Kennedy when a launch nears. In the early days, what happened?

BLOCKER: In the early days, in the early days, as I said, there were no launch complex or visitor's complex to watch shots, so what we did, especially Public Affairs, what they would do if they had invited guests, they would take them out to the causeway, to the NASA Causeway on the riverfront there and they would park out there and they would take the special guests, the few they had would go to the LCC, on the roof of the LCC, and in different spots around the center once the center was developing and it was quite some time before we had a visitor's center. One of the points that we would locate and invite visitors who came in to watch the shots was on Cocoa Beach, what is now the Comfort Inn. That was the site, the Headquarters site for where we had the visitors center set up and where people would get checked in and we had all the different congressman having their own buses and their own guests. We had a lot of congressional, a lot of local congressional buses and other VIPs from other centers. Dr. Maxwell from Houston would charter a plane and bring all his guests from Houston and we would register them at the Comfort Inn in Cocoa Beach and then drive them out to the causeway where they could watch the shots before the visitor's center was developed or the Banana River site was developed for watching visitors. So it was sort of primitive. It was just on the road, or on the ground, or around buildings, and so forth. That was the extent of it.

BUCKINGHAM: OK, and I assume from the way you talk that you helped out Public Affairs during these various . . .

BLOCKER: Yes, I've, probably from day one I've, when we started having visitors out, I've worked with public affairs. I've worked with Public Affairs for launches, I did the tours for a number of years, I did the Public Affairs tours for the guests and then I started being a coordinator for, for being an escort coordinator for getting the escorts to man the buses with the drivers and that's what I was doing when I retired.

BUCKINGHAM: OK

BLOCKER: So I sort of evolved into the program because we didn't have a Public Affairs Office and, see we had a small staff and we had to go out and get people and first thing you notice when you're doing tours or you're on a tour or you're just watching or you're listening to people in your office talking, there was no black involvement. There was no black involvement with Public Affairs, so I just sort of jumped in and I think we had two ladies in my office that were working in the shop and down at the beach they were sort of like hostesses. The big thing during that time, the contractors had big parties at all of the hotels and these girls would work the desk at the visitors site and got to know a lot of them and they'd start saying, "why don't you come help us then, why don't you join us and I sort of got in that way and next thing you know we got some black presence in from that.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. Now, what's the first launch you can remember?
Manned launch?

BLOCKER: Well, I was here, I've been here through all of the launch programs, so I can remember the Mercury launches, I can remember the, during that time we had the seven original astronauts and they had these 'vettes, these Corvettes and they stayed at the Quality Inn on Cocoa Beach and a friend of mine was a custodian in the O and C Building there where their living quarters is. So we got a chance to see them and she was, she worked with them real closely and she lived down the street from me. So that was sort of excitement, having the original seven astronauts and the Mercury flights and the Gemini flights and finally the Apollo flights.

All of them were memorable and they all were different and exciting because it was the first time any of that stuff was happening. You know, you had the unmanned launches, you had the Explorer and the things of that sort. But when it came down to, "We're going to put a man in there," it came

down to it, everybody was excited to work it. We were busy, we stayed busy. And we were always playing a role, maybe not a major role, and we knew that the supporting role that we were supporting was an important role that we had so . . .

BUCKINGHAM: Now, for example, Apollo 11, when that launched, were you with guests that day or . . . ?

BLOCKER: No, I think, I don't think, I don't recall the individual shots because I worked so many of them . . .

BUCKINGHAM: Kind of blur to you?

BLOCKER: They just sort of blurred. I was at the launch, I probably worked the launch, because I worked most of them. I didn't miss many unless I was out of town or something, TDY or something. So. But the specifics of any one, the only one that I would really have a good memory of would be the first shuttle launch.

BUCKINGHAM: I was going to say, was it dramatic leading up to that first shuttle because we hadn't flown since 1975.

BLOCKER: We hadn't flown and I think the first one or two times I think we scrubbed because of technical problems or weather or something, I think it was a technical problem, and to finally get it up, to get it off the ground on the first flight, it was an exciting time. That was an interesting period, that time of the shuttle. We had had, in between we had had Skylab. That was supposed to be a big program, we thought we were going to do a lot of things with Skylab and it didn't turn out that way. Politics got involved. The Air Force had their similar program, lab, MO, MAB, MOL or something . . .

BUCKINGHAM: Manned Orbiting Laboratory.

BLOCKER: Yeah, and I think we were fighting each other and that sort of went down the drain with both of us, neither one of those programs lasted any length of time. So shuttle coming after that, after that period was a big challenge and a great success because now we started out with the Mercury 1 guy, with the Gemini 2, with the Apollo 3 and now we're up to, now we can fly up to seven guys at a time. So that was a big, a major, major

accomplishment here at the center, so we were all happy to be a part of it, to be involved in it.

BUCKINGHAM: And do you remember in the mid- to late-70s a lot of transformation around the center as far as building new facilities for shuttle or modifying facilities that were used in Apollo.

BLOCKER: Yeah, the modification on the pads, a lot of the modifying the vehicle. You had sort of a down period, too, a little while, while this was going on. This was in the early 70s, then in the late 70s, the work force, especially contract work force, was cut down to nothing almost, and you had a lot of vacant homes, a lot of opportunities if you were ambitious to pick up some houses for nothing, but it was sort of depressing in a sense because you had neighbors moving out and looking for jobs and going different places and they had a period in there which was a lull. One thing about NASA, being a NASA employee, except for that little small reduction in force in '70 or '71 where it only involved about 30 or 40 people total, we never had a major reduction in force from a civil service standpoint, so our workforce was constantly growing, even during construction period, getting ready for the shuttle flights and so forth . . .

BUCKINGHAM: So the reductions were mainly on the contractor side.

BLOCKER: The reductions were always, the contractor was the first that got the brunt of the reduction. We never, we never, we never really had a major reduction from the civil service standpoint.

BUCKINGHAM: OK. Well, just a few questions here to wrap up. What do you think your greatest contribution was during your years of service here?

BLOCKER: Well, I'm going to, I'm going to, I'm going to say paving the way initially for the people that came behind me, I think that was the greatest thing. I suffered a lot, a lot being the first one that, one of the first and trying to work the problems that we had, the interrelationship problems that I was confronted with and I could see the people coming behind me wasn't having some of the problems that I had had, and that was, that was a pretty good feeling at times. Sometimes it irritated me, it frustrated me that I've gone and done all this work and all these kids coming up behind me and they were walking right on by me, you know? They were just starting. After about 10 years or about 15 years they started treating the black, the new

black engineers that came in the same as they treated the young white engineers that came in. The promotions were, if you were an engineer, the promotions were almost automatic year after year, and what I was seeing happening at that time was that as I stayed around these young kids were just coming in were passing me by, and you know, you look at it, you're happy for them and then at the same time you have a little feeling of remorse, that I'm being, that I'm being left behind. But you've got to look at the big picture, that you opened the gates, that you paved the way to make that possible.

BUCKINGHAM: Sure.

BLOCKER: And in my latter years, I got a chance to appreciate that and I got to know a lot of those young fellows and got to be friends with them and it was rewarding, it was rewarding from that standpoint. Oh, several of them I was mentors for and in fact Wilma Speed was a second-generation group that came. Wilma was one of the kids from the depressed area of my Boy Scout troop, that I had in my Boy Scout troop and to see him grow up and go to college and he got a scholarship to Georgia Tech and then come back here, you know, you've got to have some feeling of pride and accomplishment when you see the fruits of your labor and I had several, I had several young men that were in my Boy Scout, that were in my original Boy Scout troop but working out here now.

BUCKINGHAM: That's good. Any other key moments or events that stand out as highlights over your time here? Either personally or program-wise things that were going on?

BLOCKER: I don't, I don't . . . as I said, I was fortunate enough to be here through all of the programs. The Mercurys, the Geminis, the Apollos, the Skylab and the, I guess the biggest highlight and unfortunately it was a tragedy was the Challenger accident, being here during that time. That was something we really hadn't expected and anticipated and we thought we had a successful launch and that happened and that was the first time we had a major loss of life where you had had seven astronauts lost. We had had some one here and something, we had had accidents, but we never had lost a vehicle before, so that was a trying time, trying to recover from it. That's the most lasting impression of it that I have.

BUCKINGHAM: It was a setback.

BLOCKER: That was a setback and at that time we didn't know whether we would have a job. We didn't know whether it just was going to affect the contractor. This could affect NASA. But as it turned out, we weathered that storm. I was shocked to see it happen again with the Columbia, but if you're doing the same thing that you were doing when you had that accident, the chances are, that you're using the outdated equipment and outdated parts that this was always possible that it could happen. Tragically, it did happen.

BUCKINGHAM: Are there any practices or lessons-learned that you might want to relate to today's work force?

BLOCKER: I don't have any specifics, or a lesson learned. I just think that if you are involved in a program such as this that's unique as it is, you get an opportunity to work in some historical area that you need to take advantage of that opportunity to make the best of it even if you run into a lot of obstacles.

In the long run, it levels out. The playing field levels out and you can look back on it and you can say that you had a very good life experience and a lot of people would have given their souls to have worked out here. I met a lot of people that, in my lifetime, that talk about this place and how great it is and how they wish they could work out here, had the opportunity to work out here. So. Lesson learned? If you start a job, you need to make sure you put every effort, every effort in, in to finish it.

One of the things that stands out in my mind is that we had the change that we had as far as budget structure. That to me was, some of that was, I'm just going to say was downright uncalled for. Some of the things that we did with budget and how we changed from one system to the next system without fully developing the system and we're changing in mid-stream. We ran into a lot of problems trying to convert from one system to the other because it wasn't thought-out well and I think if you come in with a new system, I think you need have the time, the money to support it, to implement it. And I think that's one of the biggest lessons, the things that I saw when I was here and when I left here that we were still struggling with NASA-wide.

BUCKINGHAM: Business systems.

BLOCKER: Business systems, yeah. I just think that somewhere down the line, sooner or later you just got to come up with a good business system that all of the centers can utilize.

BUCKINGHAM: OK.

BLOCKER: And I think if anything, that was one of the weaknesses that I saw here. And it affected your procurement process. Being in logistics, I was aware of a lot of things that just could have worked much better if we had had a unified business system. Hang on a second.

BUCKINGHAM: OK? Well we thank you for your time and we appreciate your taking the time to come out and talk to us. Any final comments?

BLOCKER: No, I just say thanks for inviting me. I was sort of reluctant to come before, as I told you, some of the things that had happened to me and some of the, I didn't want to come and dwell on the negatives and that was one of the reasons that I decided that I really didn't want to do this interview because I wasn't certain whether I could put that bitterness aside, but I thought about it, and I thought about the positive, having worked out here and some of the friends and some of the trips I made out here and that it was something that I probably ought to do and I had had several requests even before I retired from the Public Affairs people to do an interview and I declined because of the conditions that I left under. There were negative conditions, the reorganization and elimination of the two minority branches, so I had no desire to really come back out here and to recap some of those experiences, but as it turned out, I'm happy that I did. And I think that the space program is a great program. I think it's going to be greater. I hope that I'm around when you go to Mars. I'd like to see that on the news. And I won't be a part of it, but maybe I'll get an invitation from Manny to come out and watch that launch if it's here at the space center here and I'll probably be of age where I may have to be rolled out here in a wheelchair.

BUCKINGHAM: Let's hope not.

BLOCKER: But, it's good to see that the program is still viable, is still alive.

BUCKINGHAM: OK, now we talked that you went to Bethune, but tell me, how did you end up going to Bethune? How did you choose going to Bethune?

BLOCKER: I had a math teacher. His name was Herman Lee and he as an excellent math teacher and he allowed me to take his math classes with, when I was a 9th-grader, he allowed me to take math with 10th-graders, when I was a 10th-grader he allowed me to take math with 11th-graders. When I was an 11th-grader he allowed me to take math with the 12th-graders.

And he graduated from Bethune-Cookman and he told me if I decided to go to school, and then he changed and he said, "Go to school, go to college, even if you don't stay but one day. It'll be the best day of your life, go to college, even if you can't stay but one day." And I went to Bethune because that was the school that he went to and he said that they had a great math program and as it turned out, it was the greatest day of my life, going to Bethune-Cookman because Bethune-Cookman is where I met my wife. My wife is also a graduate of Bethune-Cookman and she was a math major also. And we didn't married in college as a lot of people do, but we kept in contact at least after we left college and she was teaching over in Marin County in Gainesville, and we kept in contact and we did get married June 5, 1965, so I just had a 39th anniversary a few weeks ago.

BUCKINGHAM: Congratulations.

BLOCKER: And from our marriage we have two children, we have two boys, Michael and Eric, and they're adults now and they have, we have a total of five grandchildren. So, again, I just reiterate that that was one of the great experiences of my life, that one day in college. Fortunately it turned out to be more than one day. I was able to stay there the four years and complete my education and, and my career here at Kennedy as a result of my teacher Mr. Lee, who I'm grateful and thankful of encouraging me to go to college even if it's not but one day.

BUCKINGHAM: So you were already here and working at Kennedy when you married your wife.

BLOCKER: Yes, I was here at Kennedy for two years and she was teaching in Gainesville for two years at Lincoln High School in Gainesville, and she, we got married on June 5, and then I was single for a year. We got married on June 5, then on June 7 I took her back to Nashville where she was working on her master's degree in math and I came back to the space center

and I was married but I was single for another year while she was gone. When she finished her degree, from Fisk, her master's degree, she came back to Cocoa where I was living at the time.

BUCKINGHAM: OK

BLOCKER: And we've been together 39 years now.

BUCKINGHAM: And are your boys in the area or . . . ?

BLOCKER: Both of my boys live in Orlando.

BUCKINGHAM: Very good. And then, was your wife a schoolteacher?

BLOCKER: My wife taught 35 years at Edgewood Junior High on Merritt Island. She started out as a math teacher, she did about 17, 18 years as a math teacher, she retired as a counselor at Edgewood Junior High on Merritt Island. So we both retired, I retired on January of 1998, she retired February of 1998 and we both had 35 years in the work force and she is now the director of the Central Brevard Community Center in West Cocoa and she's responsible for, she has a learning lab, it's an area where we help children with tutoring and computer skills and elderly people, we have what we call the mouse chasers. Those are the older people, 70 to 93 years old that we're teaching, that her group teaches them computer skills and knitting and quilting and all that, so she's working in the community also with that particular program.

BUCKINGHAM: And you followed up your retirement by being a substitute teacher off and on.

BLOCKER: When I left NASA, I didn't do anything for four months and I got tired and I had a friend who was assistant principal at a school and he asked me about subbing, about doing some sub work, substitute, so I started out subbing for him during the rest of the school year in the 97-98 school year from January to May and when school started back, I had another friend who was driving the school bus and he asked me, well, why don't you drive the school bus and you just pick the kids up in the morning and drop them off in the evening and you got the whole day free in between and you get the same pay. Unfortunately Brevard County doesn't pay anything for substitute teachers, \$8 an hour and I think Orange County was paying that in 1960, \$8

an hour, and so I said, "That's a great idea," and so I drove school buses for a year in Brevard County and driving the school bus is what got me into teaching. I went to school, to summer school, to pick up a group to take on a field trip and the group wasn't ready, and I knew the principal. Her mother and I served on the trustees board at my church, that we were at the same church and I went in to speak with her, and she said, "The Lord has answered my prayers," and I said, "What are you talking about?" "God just answered my prayers, Mr. Blocker. I've been praying for a black male teacher and you walked in. So I know you're the answer to my prayers. And you're retired and you have nothing else to do, so I want you to teach." So she begged me for the whole summer. I turned her down for the whole summer. Then the day before school opened, I had a brand-new shiny yellow bus assigned to me and I was supposed to start the next day and I changed my mind and decided to take the job as a teacher and I've been teaching, at the end of this month, it will be six years. I'm invested in the Brevard County school system and I'm contemplating my second retirement.

BUCKINGHAM: Maybe you can spend a little time with your wife, then.

BLOCKER: Yes, I will do that.

BUCKINGHAM: OK, well thank you very much.

BLOCKER: And thank you for the opportunity to. Again, I'm happy that I was able to add some, to add something to the, the effort that you all are putting forth to try to reconstruct and save the history of what has happened here at, some of the great things that have happened here at Kennedy in the past 40, 50 years.

BUCKINGHAM: It's an important history.

BLOCKER: It is at that.