

Albert Eugene Carter

Interviewed by Janéa Williams

“My name is Albert Eugene Carter. I was born on April 2, 1945 in Alexandria, Virginia. I lived with my parents and my brothers and sisters when I was growing up. My mother’s name was Nellie Carter. My father was Albert Carter, Sr. I have seven sisters and four brothers, so there were twelve of us. My sisters were Pat, Doris, Margaret, Marion, Janet, Alice, Agnes, and my brothers’ names are Malcolm, William, James, and Louis. So I came from a large family! The place where we grew up was a little town, not too fancy, but it was a nice environment. It wasn't bad; it was just a little town.

When I was young, I liked choir and the band and stuff like that at school. There was a teacher, I can't remember his name, but he was very inspirational. He was in charge of the band and the choir. He was an inspiration because he told me at a young age that I could do it. He was also my science teacher, so the way he got me involved was to say that *if I didn't* go in the choir and the band, he'd give me a bad grade in Science. My mother and father also pushed me to excel. I was a fun child, I liked to have fun, and I wasn't really serious about anything.

When I got to high school, that's when I got serious. I went to Luther Jackson High School in Merrifield, Virginia. It was about 29 miles from where we lived, so we took the bus to school. Back in those days there was segregation, so the Whites went to the White schools, the Blacks went to the Black schools. Yes, I had homework, but because the bus ride was 29 miles, I used to do my homework on the bus. When I got home, my homework was already done so I'd go out and start playing. Then as I started getting older, I was chasing the girls.

My neighborhood was wild. Basically speaking, with the older people, coming up in my generation, the rule was ‘*Do as I say.*’ So if they thought you were wrong, you were

wrong! Like if a friend of my parents told my father I did something wrong, whether or not I did, I'd get beat for it. If someone said I did it, that was it. You couldn't dispute anything like that. It was cruel, but it helped me later as a parent. When my own kids were growing up, I wanted to listen to what *they* had to say, not what somebody else said. My children were always right, because I always made them prove to me that they were right. I didn't say, '*My kid didn't do this-or-that,*' I had to find out for myself.

The most important thing I learned from my family was love. We were poor, but what we really had was love. We cared so much about each other that I guess we really didn't care that we didn't have a whole lot of *things*. We loved each other. It rubbed off on my own family because you don't have to have a whole lot of money to have love. You have to care for everybody, so we cared for everybody. I would have to say that love is what they brought us up with. Through hard times and stuff, my mother always had love to share with her children and everybody.

So we never had any conflict when I was growing up. Even though our family was big, and there were twelve of us, we never had an argument because my mother would stop any dispute right off. She would say, '*Uh uh, we don't have any argument here.*' So we grew up realizing that there was no reason to argue because she was going to step in between us and stop it by whatever means necessary — even if she had to beat us both! So we took the lesson not to argue. In my own family we don't argue either — we have *a conversation*. And if it doesn't work out, we jump to something else, so it cuts down on arguments.

That also helped out in the long run because I'm more of a friend to everyone than an enemy. You can't rub me the wrong way; I don't get upset. I may lose my temper a little bit, but all of a sudden I sit back and it's over. I can't argue, because it doesn't solve anything. I learned this at an early age from my family. If I run into someone I want to fight with, after I beat you up, it's still the same — we didn't solve anything. The bottom

line is to stop and think about yourself; it's not worth arguing about and it's not that important.

When I was your age, I did a lot of playing. I played and didn't do much studying. My best friend was Gary, so anything I did, I did with Gary. There was really no other friend I had but him. There were some other guys, but I don't even remember their names now. Back in those days, we mainly played baseball. Baseball was our pastime. That was really the only thing we *could* do because we didn't have the facilities. We used to hang out right across the street from my house. Gary's father had a big yard, so that's where we used to play baseball. We didn't go anywhere else, we just played ball.

Yes, my parents were really strict. They had rules like at 'dark time,' we must be in the house. It was the policy. My sisters had to be in by dark, whether it was wintertime or summertime, it didn't matter. They had to be in by dark. And, I had to be in by nine o'clock no matter what happened; no matter what I was doing, at nine o'clock I had to be home. In fact, if I came in five minutes after nine, I'm in trouble! My dad would be standing right at that 'doggone' door when I came in — so I'm definitely in trouble. The only reason why he did this was that there was so much trouble going on in the neighborhood that he wanted to make sure that all of his children were accounted for! The reason why he made sure that his daughters were in the house at dark time was because at that time, teen pregnancy was running wild in our little community.

Yes. I was a devil. I always tried to push the envelope. If they said to be home by nine o'clock, I would push for 9:15 or 9:20. I knew I would get a beating, but I always pushed it. I was always the one to do it. Then when I started doing it, my younger brother started following me, so I was what they called the troublemaker in my family. I was number eleven and the troublemaker.

No, I didn't have to work to support the family when I was young. But while I was growing up, we had a wood-burning stove. So when I got home from school, my job

was to cut down a tree, split it up and stack it behind that stove before my father came home. If I did not do this, I got a beating. That job was passed down from my older brother William, to my brother James, and when James left home, it got passed down to me. I snapped the taboo because when I started working. I started buying the coal — hard coal and soft coal — so we burned coal instead of wood because I didn't want to cut down any more trees!

I cut down a whole forest around my house — everything. You'd have to see it to believe it. We had a White area and a Black area, and there was a wooded area between them. Every day I had to cut down a tree to make heat, until I cut down almost every tree in that place. It did give me a perspective on responsibility. I had responsibility at a young age, my dad didn't care what I wanted to do— he wanted that tree cut down! So, it was a pretty tough message.

When I was young, I used to raise racing pigeons, not the common pigeons like we have here, but these were little racing pigeons. So I'd take them out, band them, and then release them. Whoever's pigeon got home first, and called it in first, got the prize. Well one particular day my friend and I had our pigeons out flying and the rest of them were in the coop. We had these little drop switches where the birds could come in but not get back out. So on that day, a cat got in there and killed every one of my pigeons that was in the coop. He didn't want to eat them. We had dead pigeons and feathers everywhere. Well, me and my friend went and killed that cat because we were really upset. I still don't like cats today because of that. It was really a trauma for me because these were specially raised pigeons and they cost money. The ones that were out flying he didn't kill, but the rest of them, he got them all.

Growing up we never had any illness because my parents believed in the old remedies like castor oil and all that stuff. So, any sickness we got, they'd give that to us and we never we got any major illnesses. I didn't really go to the hospital until I moved up north

here. When I was a child, every problem was solved right at home.

When I was your age, I dreamed I could be anything I wanted to be. I dreamed that there was something out there for me, and that I had to accomplish something. I didn't know *exactly* what it was. Even in high school, the teacher would give us a certain curriculum that we had to follow, but I was like a wild child. I was following my own dreams. Sometimes they failed, and sometimes they didn't, but I used to tell everyone that if you tried something and you failed, '*Don't give up.*' You've got to keep going, keep pushing, and this is what worked out. I landed a whole lot of jobs that I normally wouldn't have had, and I got a chance to learn a lot of trades that I wouldn't normally have gotten because I would accept everything. To me, a challenge really was a challenge!

My friend, Calvin Scott, taught me how to drive. He would let me drive his car, even though it was illegal. He let me drive his car and I started driving, driving, driving. Then I bought my own car. I really knew how to drive, and I was *ready* for motor vehicles. When I went to take the road test to get my license, I was driving so good the guy wouldn't even let me finish the test. He said, '*Look, take me back.*' So he took me back to the place and wrote my license number and he said, '*There's other people that want to learn how to drive and you know how to drive already.*'

So, I lived with my mother and my father in Virginia until I moved to Boston. Then I lived with my brother until I got married. I moved into an apartment with him, and then when I got married we got an apartment, too. My wife Johnnie Mae lives here with me. We have five children, four boys and one girl. Albert is the oldest, — then we had Wayne, Tyrone, Clarence, and Angela.

The birth of my children was a great thing. After my first boy came in this world we were trying for a girl. All we wanted was a boy and girl, but every time my wife got pregnant we'd get another boy! So we'd keep trying, and got another boy. Finally, we

ended up with four boys before we got a girl. It got to the point where we actually ran out of names, because I didn't think that far ahead about what their names would be. The guys —they wanted to change their names — so I said all they had to do is go to City Hall, pay ten dollars, and you get your name changed. Just like that, because they all have their birth certificate right there at City Hall.

One scary thing does come to mind that happened to me here in Massachusetts. I didn't have my license at the time, but I was driving from Stoughton to Worcester when I hit a chunk of ice and the car spun all around. What happened was that everyone who saw the car spinout stopped to give me a chance to stop spinning. I thought I was going to get in a major crash but I didn't. That was scary.

I was born in 1945 so I don't remember World War II, but what I do remember is the Vietnam War and Cambodia. I can relate to that. No member of my family went into the service. I thought that was one of the biggest gifts that the Lord gave us. I didn't want anyone to fight because it was not a war that they should have fought. I look at it like this, why should you fight for your country, this country, when you come back and are treated like a second-class citizen? The United States wants to put your life on the line to protect the country, to protect freedom for your country, but you can't even be free in your own country, so why do you want to fight? That has always been my theory and as fate would have it, none of my children, none of my four boys had to go to the service. I really would have stopped them and taken them to Canada, I wouldn't let them fight in the United States. If I'm going to be treated like a second-class citizen I shouldn't have to defend my country. Like all these people dying in Iraq and Afghanistan come back to America and they tell you what you can say and what you can do. It's not fair.

What kind of jobs did I have? Well, I had the opportunity to do a whole lot of things in my life that I passed on. I started off as a carpenter, and I worked as a carpenter for ten

years, but I didn't like it, so then I worked as a cook. That was best job I had, because I was cooking at Mass General Hospital in the ACC and I was preparing food for the cafeteria line. Plus, at the same time, I was doing parties upstairs, special parties for the people, and what was happening was it was making me a respectable cook. I had to prepare different food that they really wanted, so I was learning how certain things were suppose to be cooked and how they weren't cooked. And I had responsibility to see that the cafeteria line had their food. So that was actually a juggling act, but it was really good. I worked at that for 25 years but then I had this ailment in my legs so I became a supervisor.

They had to amputate one of my legs, and then because I waited so long they had to amputate the other one, too, so I'm totally handicapped. It's been a long time and I've had a lot of surgeries.

The biggest adventure I had in my life so far was when I got to go to my last family reunion. I had been out of contact living here in Massachusetts for 15 years. So, I got a chance to go and see my mother and father before my mother died. Ten years later after my mother died, my father died. That was the biggest event of my children's lives, too. I left Virginia as a little upstart raising hell, then all of a sudden, I come back with children of my own as a grown man.

The hardest thing for me to do so far in my life was to say 'no' to my children. When I was growing up, my father would say 'no' at the drop of a hat. So I had my mind set that when I became a father I was going to actually talk to my children, and not just say 'no, no, no.' The biggest thing that they found was that I would not say 'no,' so they actually pushed the envelope. They would say something like, 'Well can I go do this, or can I do this?' I'd hesitate before I would say 'no.' But in some cases I had to say 'no,' because if they went to this place they'd stand a very good chance of getting in trouble. That was because of what was happening in Boston at that time. The police department was no longer just grabbing people because *they saw them do something*; if you even

just associated with a person who did something, they'd lock you up. That's what I was trying to tell my children. *'You know, I really want you to be able to go these places, but if you go with a gang, whatever one person does, you're all going to be held responsible.'* If four or five guys walk down the street at the same time, you may think it's only four or five guys, but the police see it as a gang! So whatever any one does, all five of you are going to be held responsible. The kids didn't want to listen to me, then one day they all wanted to go down to the movies, so they went down to the movie theater. One little guy saw a bum in the street with a dollar hanging out of his pocket; it was like a sting that the police had set up. So this one guy came by and took it, and about a block later, policemen came from everywhere and locked them **all** up!

Now me and my wife were getting ready to go down south on vacation at this time. Our children were grown so we could go on vacation. But I couldn't go because of the \$500 bail I had to pay to get him out! And I told him, *'You see what I was talking about? This is the same thing I was telling you about. You were targeted because you were in a group. One person did it, but they threw all of you in jail.'* Of course the judge threw it out—said it was entrapment because they were set up. The judge asked the lawyer, *'If you were a child and you saw a dollar hanging out of a pocket, would you pick it up?'* He said *'Yeah,'* and he said *'Well this is what happened here!'* Children will be children, now if he had gone into this man's pocket it would be stealing, but this man was baiting him to do this so it was entrapment.

By that time, the case was over, but it proved the point for my children. That was exactly what I was saying to them. You walk down the street, you are a gang whether you want to be or not. It's not just boys, it's girl gangs too. There are girl gangs in high school just like the boy gangs. You go with the flow or you're in the middle of a fight. They're stopping the boys from fighting, how about the girls?

So telling my children *'no'* was the hardest thing I had to do. *'No'* with no explanation is

bad news because the child will always want to know why. When I really want to do something I want to do it, and it should be asked. When my niece was in high school, she would say, *'I would rather talk to my Grandma, because nine of ten times, Grandma would say yes.'* She would say she was going roller-skating at Chez Vous. That's what she said, but she wasn't going to Chez Vous, she would go towards Chez Vous, and into Chez Vous, but the minute we'd pull off she'd go do whatever she wanted. We'd come back just before Chez Vous closed, and she'd come out just like she'd been skating. Then one day, out of the blue, I decided, this girl isn't doing this much roller-skating! So I caught her. *'I went to Chez Vous and you weren't there,'* so now she lied to me. So, she couldn't go to Chez Vous anymore because if we were looking for her, what if she got hurt? The first thing is we'd be looking for her at Chez Vous and she wouldn't be there. I got to trust my children. If they say they going to be here, I got to trust that they are going to be where they say they going to be. Then, if something happens, you've got a starting point.

So as a parent or a grandparent, it's very, very important, to tell me where you want to go. I'm either going to say that you can't go, or you can go, but be careful, and let me know. You don't need to call me every five minutes, I trust you. I want you to know I trust you to the point where if I had any doubts, I wouldn't let you go. I trust you to be intelligent enough to call me to let me know, *'I was at this place, now I'm going to this other place,'* because we really love our children.

The person I admire the most would have to be my mother. She raised sixteen kids—twelve really — because four died. Raising sixteen children, working every day, having time to discipline the whole crew and making sure that all of them were nice people. She made sure that none of us got in trouble, no one went to jail, no one got on drugs, nothing; that was all because of her. So you have to admire this lady because she made it all possible.

The happiest moment of my life was being married. I was the happiest person on earth. I met Johnnie Mae in Boston, and within six months of meeting her, we were married. I'm not talking about just going together, married. We've been together for forty-six years, and we're *still* happy. So that was the happiest day of my life.

Right now I'm retired, so just getting up in the morning, to just be awake makes me happy. It sounds corny! But, I just had a birthday, and I turned 66. I've had a whole lot of health problems so just being alive is a blessing itself. After I wake up in the morning, I praise the Lord for giving me another day. I could be in the funeral home with them preparing to put me in the ground!

My greatest accomplishment in life is to help out other people around me, especially my grandkids. Now that they are older, my grandkids have come back and said, *I really appreciate you Granddad, because without you I'd have been in prison.* Or, *'Without you I would have done this or that thing.'* They gave me the compliment that I had done something for them, and that is the greatest accomplishment.

The main thing, the *only* thing I've learned is that you've got to listen. Like I was saying to you before, your mother and father love you. Everything they say to you—they're not saying it out of hatred or out of: *'I'm the boss so you've got to do what I say.'* I know this is how a lot of young people interpret it. Maybe they don't want you to go through the same thing they went through. The only way they can prevent it from happening is they've got to communicate. But it's a two-way street, and you've got to listen. Instead of just having an attitude, guess what? Everything your mother said came true! I wonder how she got so smart? *She's experienced.* Everything I say to my children came true, because **I** already did something and got into trouble for it. Should I let you go down the same path and get in trouble? People say *'they have to find out for themselves.'* Well, the only reason that people have to find out for themselves is because they didn't listen!

I really appreciate talking to you. I don't think there's anything I have to add, I think I talk too much. If there's anything you want me to talk about, let me know, because I want you to get an A in this subject. You were alert, you were attentive, and that's going to go a long way for you in your life. When you listen and observe things, that's going to help you go a long way. It really was a privilege talking to you, if there's anything you need, I hope I'll be here. Out of everything we talked about, take one of these questions and practice it. I told you the truth, I didn't tell you how *it should be*. We had poverty in Virginia, but all twelve of us, eleven of us now are held in the light. Not one of us went to prison or did drugs because our mother and father taught us values. We learned that you don't need all this stuff. People smoke marijuana and do crack cocaine as a crutch. If you pay attention, observe, you see that this one of the most dangerous things in America. Don't do drugs, and you'll go much further in life.

Like I said to you, I'm so happy that I have an opportunity to do this for you. Even though you're making the drum for me, I get a chance to talk to you. I have four boys that I raised myself, and one girl; they're all adults now. But to get to talk to a young person again is really good. I figure that I have something to offer you at a young age, because you accept what I'm trying to tell you. I don't want people to think that I'm trying to change your life; I'm not doing that. I'm trying to help you be aware of what's going on, so that you can have a different outlook. You have your opinions, now I'm giving you another opinion, so between both of our opinions, who knows, you just might make it! I'm not saying your going to, but at least you're going to try. Instead of just having your own ideas, I know your family is teaching you and giving you their ideas, too. So that's a lot of ideas! So, if you put them all together, you're going to be good to go. You know what I'm saying? And I appreciate you taking the time to come interview me. Thank you very much.”