

David A.W. Mitchell

Interviewed by Denzell Beasley, Tashia Ezell-Cuff, & Jenny Nguyen

“My name is David A.W. Mitchell. I was born in Boston, MA in 1940. My two middle initials come from a doctor who wanted to marry my mother in Washington DC. She didn’t marry him, but she gave me his two initials.

My father, Rev. James W. Mitchell, was a minister, and my mother, Eleanor B. Mitchell was a schoolteacher. She graduated from Miner Teachers College in Washington, DC with very high honors. Later she continued her education at Boston State Teachers College. I think she got her Master’s Degree there. She was also a licensed real estate broker.

Everyone in the family called my grandfather ‘Pa.’ Years ago, Pa had house on Joy Street on Beacon Hill. People used to burn a lot of wood and coal in the city in those days, so his doctor told ‘Pa’ to move the family out of Boston to the country. This was before my time, but I was told that he bought a house in West Stoughton and they owned the property across the street, too. When the family got bigger, he built a house at the intersection of Pleasant and Turnpike Streets in Stoughton. Today, you can still see the two big pine trees there.

This was all before my time, but I was told that he had 50 acres of land and he had a horse-drawn pump that he would use to pump out people’s septic tanks and dump it on the land. So they had very rich land, and they used to grow crops in that. Also, before people had cars, Pa had a stagecoach. He would pick up the wealthy folks out there in Stoughton and some of the neighboring towns and take them into town on 138 when it was a carriage road. He would take them to the clubs downtown.

When the depression hit in the 1930’s, people of color had very little employment, so you had to do for yourself. Pa was smart in a lot of ways and he had enterprises to

support the family. He had trees on his land so they cut trees for lumber, and he bartered different things for food. My mother told my father that they should sell part of the land so they would have money to pay the taxes, but he wouldn't do it, so they lost the land. If you defaulted on your taxes, they would take your land, and that's what happened.

At that time, there was no welfare, so the family moved to a camp in Stoughton called Breezy Meadows. My mother told me later that after they moved out of Breezy Meadows Camp, there was a flash fire and 18 or 20 people were killed in the fire. So we were very lucky because if they had still been staying there, most of our family would have been wiped out.

Before we moved to Canton, we lived in the projects on Albany Street in Boston. I went to pre-school at Albany Street Development, and I went to first grade at the Aaron Davis School on Yeoman Street. Some of the older kids in the family went to the Dearborn School. Since we were a big family, the older kids taught us younger kids what they knew, and they would help me with my homework. There was also a recreational center down the street from the place where we lived. It was kind of like a community center today. We would go there to play until there were some incidents where kids were pulling knives, so we went back to playing at home. Living in the housing development, if you hung your clothes out on the line to dry, people might steal them. Also, if you had a car, people would break into the car and steal the radio. So that's why we moved out to the country.

My mother heard about a house for sale in Canton. The owner had died, and his wife didn't drive, so they decided to move. The house was about 600 feet off of Indian Lane, so my mother bought it. There were seven of us who lived there in Canton. Jewel, a child from my father's first marriage also lived with us for a while.

There was another Black family who lived there before we moved in—their name was McLean. We also had *another* neighbor, Mr. Sullivan, who didn't like us very much.

He had wanted to buy the land, before my mother got it. I remember that our electrical wires came across his land. In about 1950, he knocked down the power lines and we didn't have any electricity. So when I was going to school, we had no electricity! It was like living in a war zone. But, like I said, my mother was very smart. We had a well out back, so she would drop food down into the well to keep it cool. Eventually, we got an icebox to keep our food cool. Back then before people had refrigerators, you had to drive to the icehouse or have ice delivered to keep the icebox cool. Our routine was that we would have dinner, then after dinner we would take baths, then do our homework. We had to study by oil lamps. Oh yes, we had to do chores! We had to help out with taking care of the animals; we sawed wood, and lugged water from the well.

I grew up during World War II, when some things were hard to get, but I had a good life when I was small. My mother did a lot for our survival. She used to make the brown soap from scratch. I remember her with her apron on, making all kinds of things. She had planted trees around the property, so there were a lot of squirrels. She would shoot the squirrels then I would run out to get them. We also ate rabbits, blueberries, raspberries, and wild grapes. In the fall we would pick the wild grapes to make jam, jelly, and grape juice. My mother was a good cook, so we had a lot of the things that wealthy people had, and we had more than some people had.

There was a German farmer who lived in Canton where we lived. During the war years, food was rationed, so you couldn't buy steaks or chops or a lot of staples. Those things went to the troops. But this farmer liked my father, so once in a while so he would let us buy a 100 lb. sack of potatoes, and we would buy milk and eggs from him, too. Later on, we had our own goats and chickens so we had our own eggs and milk.

My mother was very strict and she was very smart. She taught us how to behave for survival. She taught us not to step out of line, even if people made fun of us. You didn't '*get smart with*' anyone in authority for your own protection in those days. When I was younger, there was a community center on Route 138. My older brother and sister went

there and they learned how to dance and things like that. I wanted to go too, but I was too young. Later, though, I went into the Boy Scouts. There was a family in the area that would give me a ride to scouts because they met on the other side of town.

I remember that we moved out there after I finished kindergarten, and I was suppose to go to first grade at the Ponkapoag School. I was just five years old. They said I couldn't start first grade until I was six, but my mother fought it. So I started school there when I was five. She knew a lot about the law, so she was willing to challenge things like that.

I also remember that there weren't many people of color. From what my mother told us, we were just the third family of color in Canton. There was a lot of discrimination, but my mother emphasized education as a way to succeed. I remember that my mother took us out to the library and showed us how to find the books so we could read.

We had a quiet life in Canton. We used to go swimming at Glen Echo Lake, which was half-in-Canton and half-in-Stoughton. My Aunt Helen lived in Stoughton, and my cousin Jimmy Fisher lived there, too. After graduating from Stoughton High, he went into the service and became one of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. He's still alive and lives in Brockton.

So I went to the Ponkapoag School, then I went to the Elliot School on Washington St. for sixth through eighth grades, then I went to Canton High School. There was one boy at school who rubbed my hand and said, *'Oh you're chocolate. Does the chocolate come off?'* So one time I got real mad at him, and when I got off the bus, I punched him up the side of his head and stuck his face in a muddy puddle of water. Eventually, though, we became friends.

At Canton High they had a tracking system — a fast track and a slow track— and I was in the fast track. We used to play baseball or football out in back of the school. There was this one Italian kid who would always call me names — Black this, and Black that. So finally one day I got so mad that I beat the c__p out of him! I still have a scar on my

hand from that fight because he had long fingernails and he dug them into me.

Then there was this other kid, Eddie – he was really tall. In school we used to have to sing the old Black spirituals like ‘Old Black Joe,’ and when we did, he’d look down at me, and just laugh. He was too big for me to fight, but he had these two beautiful twin sisters, Loretta & Lorraine. So one day I said, ‘*Eddie, I got something good to tell you and show you.*’ So we went around to the back schoolyard where the girls were. I put my arms around the shoulders of both of his sisters and said, ‘*You know Eddie, I just really love your sisters.*’ He was so mad he stormed off, but he never bothered me again after that.

I took up the flute in grade school, and when I got to high school, I played trumpet in the Canton High School band for two years. When I was in my first year of high school I also took woodworking. There were some Portuguese kids in my class who used to call me ‘nigger’ because they thought of themselves as White. So one day I smacked one of the kids in the head because I got tired of this. My older brothers had taught me about Judo and things like that for self-defense. Gerry Souza, who I knew from middle school, was good with his ‘dukes,’ so we fought into the second year of high school. My older brothers Peter and Michael used to look out for me, and they had Black Belts in Judo. One time Gerry came after me, and my brother was waiting for him and threw him against the side of the building. Then HIS brothers got into it so that went on for a while.

Like I said, we didn’t have much money, but education was a really important thing for my mother, so she taught us that. She taught us a lot of important things like she would say, ‘*People can call you names and beat you up, but they can’t steal your knowledge from you.*’ She also told us that ‘*Society doesn’t owe you a living,*’ and she encouraged us to keep on learning and continue our education. We learned never to just walk into someone’s office. Always knock on the door first and wait until they ask you to come in. She told us to go to the top person — try to go to the president of a company or office, and if you can’t see them, go to the vice-president. We learned manners and how

to deal with people. She taught us well.

My parents got divorced in 1950. My sisters and brothers were all going to Canton High then. It was a very good school system, but they all did better than me. I went to Canton high when I was a freshman, then my mother got a house in Boston again, so we moved back here. First, I went to Boston Technical High, and then I transferred over to English High, where I got in a fight with this White guy. I was eating my lunch and he just whacked me and knocked my food on the floor, so I went around the corner and knocked him out. But, it turned out he was an epileptic, so they threw me out. He had started it, but we didn't have the money to get a private lawyer, so I couldn't fight it. From there I went to Brighton High where the White kids sat with the White kids and the Black kids sat with the Black kids. I mixed and sat with everyone because I grew up color blind. But, I was in a class with this one little White kid who jumped on me one time, and bit me in the chest. My mother took me to the doctor and she filed a report. Someone at school said to her, *'Your big old son picked up this little White kid and hit him.'* But my mother came in with the doctor's report and said, *'My son doesn't bother anyone. You're nothing but a big liar!'* So, that was Brighton High!

This was all after the family had split up, and my father had moved down South. So I spent my last six months of high school in Tappahannock, Virginia, at an all Black school. That's where I graduated from finally. I wasn't used to that kind of segregation. I remember going to a movie with my father where the whites sat up top, and the people of color sat down below. I went there once or twice, and then I didn't want to go there anymore. I also remember waiting in line at a little ice cream place there in Tappahannock and this White man turned around and whacked me! This was around 1956 or 1957. I wasn't used to living a segregated life, so I wasn't very happy there.

At first my father didn't want me to go out, but finally he got me a car so I could go out to dances. I was about 16 or 17. Then I used to go with him to his church service in

Miller's Tavern, and then we would drive to West Point. We would stay over night at a young couple's house in West Point. There was a lady named Sadie who would cook us an evening meal, and then we'd have our breakfast at another house. What I remember most about West Point was that there was this big industrial plant. And, there were no screens on the chimneys so there was this white ash that blew up out of the chimneys and covered everything— cars, houses, everything! I wondered why the people didn't fight to change it, but they said most of the people there worked for the company.

When I lived there, we would go to youth activities at some of the White churches, but that's all I remember. So, I learned a lot about the South and what was going on then. It was depressing to see how people were treated because of discrimination. But, I survived that, and after graduation I came back to Massachusetts. My mother signed me up to go to a radio & TV school over on Huntington Ave., so I did that for a while, then I went into the service.

I think I was lucky that I went in the service. When you turned 18, you had to register with the Selective Service system. If you didn't, you would never be able to get a government job. So when I turned 18 — all of the other kids were drinking, hanging out, and smoking marijuana and I didn't see any future in that, so I joined the Air Force. I think that joining the Air Force was one of the best things I ever did. I was in the Air Force for four years, stationed at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. I was in the Air Missile Maintenance Unit, and then I was assigned to the Transportation Unit. That was great because I love to drive! In fact, I used to drive the '*recreation run.*' That was a bus that shuttled women to and from the base for visits and dances and things like that.. So that's how I met my wife, Georgia.

We got married while I was still in the service. You had to get permission from the military to get married, and they even required pre-marital counseling for couples. So we got married and my daughter Angela was born while I was still in the service. I got

out in 1964, and my son, David, was born in 1965. But Georgia and I ended up getting a divorce. We came back to Boston and lived at my mother's house at first. There was still a lot of racism in Boston at that time so it was hard to find a job. And people didn't like Vietnam Veterans either. We had a hard time, but eventually, I drove a taxi. Later on, I was in the plumbers union (Local #12). Some of my closest friends are people from that union, and also people at the Shelter for Homeless Veterans downtown. I worked there for eight years when I didn't have union work. I got to know and really like a lot of the people there.

My brothers and sisters are: Michael, Peter C. (deceased,) Jacqueline, Pamela, and Jean. My mother had wanted my brothers to go to Stonehill College because they were interested in aeronautics. But they decided to go Lowell Tech instead, and from what I know, they were the first students of color to go there. They got their degrees in electrical engineering. Michael became an engineer and worked in a lab at MIT. He was one of the engineers who worked on the first moon landing. He was also a flight instructor who taught pilots to fly four engine planes. Later he went to Lesley College and became a schoolteacher in Cambridge. He's retired now.

After we moved back from Canton, my sister Pam came back into Boston and stayed in the apartment we had on Wombeck Street. She continued her education at Boston Business School, which was a two-year school. Then my mother advised her to try to get into Northeastern University. But here she was a woman, *and* Black, so basically they told her, *'You'll never go here!'* So my mother went to the President of the University and she managed to get Pam accepted. So, she graduated from there with high honors, and then she got accepted to Tufts Medical School. At the time she graduated, there were only about 14 people of color. That was in 1979. Then she went to Chicago to do her internship, and she's a doctor there now.

My sister Jean has been running the METCO Program for more than 25 years. She was the first woman of color on the Boston School Committee, and she has an Honorary

Doctorate from Salem State College.

One thing I learned from my father was that life goes on. He told me that when you're working a job, every week you take out the money for all of your bills before you do anything else. Then you take another 15 or 20% and set that aside, so if you ever have to go on unemployment, you'll have some money set aside to make up the difference. I still go by that today! Another thing he told me was never to leave one job for another job unless you're absolutely sure that the person is going to hire you. His saying was something like *'don't get off a horse in mid-stream.'* So I learned a lot of things like that from both my mother and my father about how to make the most out of life and survive.

My mother taught me that if you associate with bad people, others will judge you the same way, so choose your friends wisely. Learn to think ahead and know how to do things for yourself. So I was raised to have respect and get an education and I still believe in those things today. We were raised in the church because our father was a minister. When I was young, I went to visit the prisons with my mother because those were the jobs that a minister's wife was suppose to do.

What has been the happiest moment of my life? Well I always loved the last day of school before summer. And, when I turned 16 and got my license! My oldest brother lived out in Brockton, and he had a 1949 Ford with dual exhausts and extensions on the mufflers — glasspacks. That's when they used to drill holes in the muffler and stuff a lot of steel wool in there to baffle the sound. But when I was taking my driving test, I was backing up a hill and the wire on the muffler let go. There was this loud **boom, boom, boom** sound, and the Trooper said, *'What was that?'* So he gave me a ticket, but I got my license anyhow, because my brother knew him, so I guess that helped.

What makes me happy now? Keeping my health together makes me happy, and being able to advise people on how to live a good life through prayer. Taking care of your health is really important. If I can get up in the morning and see straight, and get

around, I say, *'Praise the Lord.'* That's a blessing.

What's my greatest accomplishment in life? Well, being able to adapt and to relate to any kind of person is important. I was raised to be color blind — I wasn't raised with prejudice. That was one of the best things I've learned. My advice is to you is to stay with your education and stay out of trouble. Don't hang around with bad people because they will just bring you down with them. If you see people trying to pull you down, leave! What's the Bible say? *'Shake the dust under your feet and leave them be.'* My best advice is to stay away from drugs and alcohol and stay out of trouble, and you'll enjoy a better life."