



Interview at Long Beach Public Library

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Jerome Roberts, retired Long Beach Unified School District teacher, talks with his fiancé and fellow teacher, Laura Castillo about how the civil rights movement impacted his life.

Laura Castillo: Are you from Long Beach?

Jerome Roberts: I always say, in answer to that question, I’m from Little Rock, Arkansas. My mom had seven children and we were all born in Little Rock. And I lived there for the first four years of my life. Because of an involvement by one of my siblings, my oldest brother, in the civil rights movement in Little Rock, it became necessary for my mother to make a decision. All of the high schools in the city of Little Rock were closed, and so since education’s such a big part of our lives and very important to my parents, my mother made the decision to have the whole family come out to California. We had cousins that lived out here then. So, I came out here as a very young person and I’ve lived in California ever since.

Laura: Uh, you mentioned a very important part in your life is your brother. How your brother’s steps in civil rights have influenced your life and your teaching?

Jerome: Well, in very big way, again as I mentioned my mother did have seven children. Four of us decided to go into education as a profession. My brother’s decisions to become actively involved in the civil rights movement this country, weighed heavily on my decision to make education my profession, and so, my outlook on being an educator is one that’s rooted in my

own personal experience, as well as my family experience. I feel that education was a calling for me. I, I really enjoy it. And even though I am retired, I am still involved in it, but because of my brother's involvement in the integration of schools back in the late 50s, it really influenced me and it had a big impact on decisions that I made in my professional life.

Laura: Tell us something about the transition between Arkansas and, um, Los Angeles. How did you see the environment? How did you feel that the community received your family?

Jerome: Well, living in the South is very different, to say the least. People in the South are very nice, in general. But the delineation between people of color and white people is very obvious and there are certain lines that you just don't cross. On the other hand, living on the West Coast, living in California, it's a lot more subtle. Some of the differences have to do with how obvious it is that there is an assumed difference between people based on color.

Laura: Do you think there will be a time with no discrimination at all?

Jerome: [Laughs] I'm laughing because I am thinking about something that my brother shared recently. You know that this country was built around an industry that we like to call "slavery" and it lasted for hundreds of years. The civil rights law wasn't passed until 1964. We're going to have to have hundreds of years after that to see a balance in those scales. So, to answer your question, I am hopeful that we will get to a point in this country where people will stop judging us because of a color code, but I am also realistic, it's going to take time.