

DR. EDWARD CLINTON DAVIS—BEN MOORE HOTEL MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

DECEMBER 31, 2018 – 1:30pm

This is Candacy Taylor and I'm at the Ben Moore Hotel in Montgomery, Alabama with Dr. Ed Davis. And we're here to talk about the hotel. It is December 31st, 2018 and it's about 1:30pm. And thank you for meeting with me. Ed, can you please state your name and what your relationship is to the hotel?

My full name is Edward Clinton Davis and my dad was Edward Lee Davis, nicknamed Big 2. That's a funny story behind that one, but he purchased the hotel, somewhere in the 1970s and he passed away in 2014 and since I'm the only son, I've been doing [the] majority of the leg work to take care of the place.

Tell me more about your dad and the "Big 2" story.

Well from what I've heard, like I've said before, I was a surprise. My dad had me when he was 50 and my mom was 40, by the way. But all my sisters are about 20 years older than me, so I had to always hear second hand stories, but they said he was a phenomenal football player and he would always gain a large amount of yards to a touchdown every time he handled it and one day the crowd would say, "We want 2! We want 2!" And during that time, segregation wasn't completely integrated into the schools and he had an old jersey with a huge number "2" on it but the other players had nice jersey's, new jersey's, with the regular size "2." So when the crowd said, "We want 2!" The coach put in number 2, but they was like "No, we want *big* 2! No, we want *big* 2!" And the name stuck as Big 2. He went on to get into the Hall of Fame for football over at Alabama State University. And he's like a football legend. And when he was here we'd go to all the games and everybody would know him so that was great growing up knowing, you know, being the son of the football legend.

That's amazing. And he was also a big business man, right? Tell me about the businesses he had on this street. Tell me about this neighborhood...is it Jackson, or is that the main street here?

Well the hotel sits on the corner and in front of the Malden Brothers Barber Shop, this is Jackson Street going up and down. But in front of the hotel, it's a little tricky because it's right at the intersection, the streets change. That's High Street and right in front of the hotel is Highland Avenue. So the streets change. But my dad, he was a teacher for over thirty years. He retired as a teacher, that was his main thing.

What did he teach?

He did P.E., health; he was a football coach for a number of years. Mostly at Loveless, Loveless is a junior high I believe. But besides there, he was at Booker T. and over at Carver High School.

So how did he come to own so many businesses?

Well starting back in the 1960 era, property wasn't that expensive and especially not on this side of town. So, [I'm] not exactly sure but he always told me that, "They make more money, but they never

make more land.” So every time he had a chance to, maybe buy a house that was delinquent on taxes, or that were going through a foreclosure, he would always invest in it. And he tried to keep them close together as much as he could. That’s why we have almost two blocks of houses, of property on this street.

And how many businesses did you say as we walked up, that he purchased?

Now, just on this side of town, it’s approximately about 17 [businesses].

That’s significant. Even, when people are just trying to make ends meet, still he had money to buy property. Did he run these businesses at all? Or he just bought them and leased them to business owners?

As far as I can tell, his business was just to lease them out. He leased the businesses out and he didn’t run them himself. The one business that I remember him having was a daycare center, a geriatric daycare center. It was in Washington Park, right across the street from Brenda’s BBQ. I remember as a kid going through, I would see him have buses come in with older clients, that would come in just to enjoy themselves, playing chess, checkers, and he had a cafeteria and he’d feed ‘em and you know he did that for a very long time.

So when you were young, he was in his 50s. So as a child do you remember him as being a football player or as a business owner? Did he teach you about entrepreneurship?

Well, the reason I stayed in school so long now, going through the Bachelor’s and the Master’s and the Doctorate, is because he always told me he wanted me to make money with my mind and not my hands. He had had a hard life on using his hands and he didn’t want me to get hurt and he didn’t want me to have the same kind of struggles he had. So he really encouraged education with me. He would take me to places like this and he’d show me, but I never really got my hands dirty until recently. Now, I’ve gone out and I’ve gotten my carpentry license and I’ve learned how to do different things to fix up the houses when the tenants need it. So that’s kind of where that is.

What did you get your Doctorate in?

My Doctorate is actually in Educational Leadership and Law. My Master’s was in Educational Administration and my Bachelor’s is Biology.

So what do you hope to do with your Doctorate?

Well, looking more towards a position at a college-level. I taught twelve years in high school, I did a few years in junior high, and currently just adjunct teaching at different places but um, I don’t know. Anything I do...like he encouraged education with me I try to give back and just want to help somebody else, learn a job, get a degree, something that can better their lives.

What was your grandfather, your father’s father like, do you know?

Well unfortunately, when I was born every relative that I could have known had already passed away. I’ve never known any grandmother or grandfather on my dad or my mother’s side. I didn’t know any aunties or uncles. As far as I know, it’s just been me and my three sisters.

Your father bought [the Ben Moore hotel] from somebody, he didn't inherit this from his father, or did he?

No, he actually bought this. Now the owner and the builder of this building, his first initials are "D.C." D.C. Moore is the son of Ben Moore. Ben Moore was the last born slave here in Montgomery, so his son named the building after him. So that's where Ben Moore came from. And as I remember the story, Ben Moore came up with a filtration technique that he used when he was working on a farm in Tuskegee, and that brought in a little money to help his son go to school to get his architect degree to build a building. And I believe this building opened in the 1950s. I'm trying to be a little more exact, because I think it was 1956.

[10 minutes]

I know my dad purchased it from him in the 1970s. And when Stephanie Hicks did a news interview with me earlier, at the early part of last year, someone actually stopped in the middle of the street and she said that she had her wedding reception up on the roof garden back in 1976. So that's the last working date that I know of, of the hotel.

So it must have still been in decent shape? Do you think? Because I know after integration the neighborhood changed. That's what Mr. Malden told me.

Even that was before I was born.

I'm just trying to get a sense of...do you have any photographs or know what the place looked like when your dad bought it?

Not when he bought it. I've just seen a lot of old articles about, you know during the day it was the roof garden and at night it was the Afro Club, and during the Afro Club that had tons of performers, Tina Turner was listed, B.B. King was listed, a local performer, King Tut, was listed. And I actually just rented out a property down the street to King Tut. He's still alive. He's still kicking and he wants to make King Tut's Barbecue, so he's going to open up a barbecue place.

So talk about what your role is here, what you've inherited, what your plans are, your dreams, what you would like to do with the space.

Well, [pause] I've been thinking about that. I've been thinking about that for a long time. And even if...I don't want to lose it. My most important thing is that I don't want to lose it. It's been in the family this long, it's important to my Mom, and it's important to my sisters and I don't want to do anything to lose it. But I'm not looking to gain anything either. If I can find a way that would even help someone else gain the money without losing it, I would be fine with that.

A different situation but kind of the same concept, I noticed that my dad had a tree farm. You know he wasn't in the tree business but he just leased the land. He said, "I wouldn't sell it or do anything to the land. You can make all the money from the profit of the trees, or do anything you want." And he just did it that way. He didn't have to lose the land and they could make the money off the tree business. Even if there was a similar situation where I just had to lease the building out, without making a profit from whatever business it was, if it was restored and could bring something back to the community, I would still be open to it.

Honestly, even at thirty-nine, I still do what my momma say do. So whatever momma say, that's how it goes. And she usually turns it back on me and asks me what do I think, so. But anyway, I've had suggestions from everything to turning it into a museum. I've had suggestions of someone telling me to turn it into a storage facility. You just saw how the second and third floor was made, you know they told me maybe put little doors on it, get it climate controlled, and since we are just one block from downtown Montgomery. A lot of the businesses could maybe store paperwork or something here, to kind of help out. Also, I have had people say they wouldn't mind having a reception hall here. So that top floor could definitely be used as receptions again. It has a beautiful view. It's glass all the way around so you can see all of downtown. That would just simply be beautiful for any kind of occasion and the first floor, the Majestic Café. If it was reopened and had food, you could get everything here. You could get all your food, nice scenery and everything all at one place.

[15:00]

I thought that the cafeteria could be opened first to help revenue come in to help fix up the rest of the hotel. Just open the cafeteria first. So those are a lot of different ideas that I've had come through.

Those are all good ideas. How long has it been in your possession?

I've only been working with this maybe four years now. About four years now.

Did you try to raise money for it? I don't remember.

Well, I did start a GoFundMe and they broadcasted on the news report, but the thing I got in from that though, is that I was trying to say I didn't have any funding now to put into the building and I was looking for help but what I was getting was a lot of people calling me asking me for money for them to come out and work. And I said, "I wouldn't start a Go Fund Me, if I had the money to pay you. But if you want to come out and do some Pro Bono work or something to take off for your taxes and just come out and work, I would appreciate it." And they were like, "No, no, I don't want to do that."

As I was saying before there definitely may be ways to get either state or federal funding. I can talk to you more about that.

Like I said, I don't want to lose it and the only offers that I've ever had from the state say it was going to be a three million dollar project and they would offer up two million if my dad would've taken up a million from their loaning company. It wasn't any of my business at the time, but just hearing it, I thought I don't know if that's a good idea because I don't know if he'd make the money back in time to pay them back and I'd hate to have that option of losing that hotel at all. ASU offered to buy it. But they didn't necessarily want to buy it as much as have it donated to them. So they have the radio station but they wanted to have a television station too. Just like they have the building dedicated to radio, I think this building was going to be dedicated for a television [station] but again, I didn't want to lose it.

Have you looked at...do you know who Theaster Gates is? He's an artist and he's done things, community projects around different properties that have been pretty amazing. You should google him. But he would do things like inherit,

well he didn't inherit, he would buy an old bank I think it was in the south side of Chicago, near Dorchester for like a dollar, and it's something like this, because there's so much work that needs to be done and it becomes a liability because now you own it but how can you make sure it's still standing and you need to do so many renovations, but he's found ways to partner with different organizations. He's almost become a...he's part community organizer but he's also done things...development deals and brought them and made them into these incredible spaces. And he even inherited the entire Jet and Ebony archive, of all the magazines, and he's put that as kind of a library for people to come and look at those things. It's a beautiful space now, what he's done with it, but it's millions and millions of dollars later. But he got it for a dollar.

Wow.

So you know it's a similar situation where someone comes to you wants you to "donate" it, like this university, they're going to put millions of dollars into it, and make it into a TV station, or whatever but if you could find that kind of investor who could actually do something that you want that will relive the history. That's possible. That happened with the Dew Drop in New Orleans (unfortunately, the deal that was on the table fell through months after this interview). It was a Green Book site. I just interviewed him, Kenneth Jackson, and he struggled for a long time trying to get...I think he did a Kickstarter campaign and tried to get money to rehab it and finally said, "I can't do it anymore. I can't do it myself." And he found the right buyer who really still cares about the history and wants to bring it back and feels good about who he sold it to and he's still involved in part of the rehab so...there's so many different options.

Yeah, and I have considered, like I said, and since we do have 17 properties around this, I thought that even if we sold it and somebody had it, and they brought this spot up that everything around it, the property value would go up as well.

Yeab.

And I'm trying to bring business to the area. Across the street is going to be Montgomery Tours. Valerie Smedley, she's the owner of the business, she's going to be opening it up. Now I do have to say, I do have a big heart and just like all the other properties around here, I rent them out and lease them out for next to nothing. And I just hope that people will return the favor and do something good for it, so you know, a lot of people so far they've gotten their business started with me. And I know how hard it is for a business to start out and I tell them I'm always in favor of a black business, so maybe rent it out for me for maybe \$100 a month, I'll do \$100 a month for rent if you go through the steps to get your business license and if you put in the work, because I don't know all the steps for getting restaurants and...I know they all have certain criteria that they have to meet and I don't have the funding to bring things up to code like that but making the rent \$100 a month, if they really are serious about it, I think that gives them enough leeway to invest in it and bring things up to code, how they need to be. And some people have taken an interest in that because it sounds like a great offer and they've got a business started but they haven't fixed up the place like they said they were. What they did was once they got the business started and got their name out there they moved to the east side of town into a different location and it left me hanging. Of course I didn't hold them to a contract, you know I just wished them well. So that kind heart has kicked me in the butt a *whole lot*. I wish I could continue to do it, but unfortunately I can't. But it's kicked me in the butt a lot.

Yeah, I think people come in and don't realize how much rehabbing costs. The money it takes to bring something up to code. It's a lot of money. It would be great, even partnering with the Small Business Association here and seeing if they can help get that third party involved who would help bring these...rehab these places.

I've had a few offers...you know when they say you give somebody an inch and they try to take a mile? I think sometimes, I'm so nice, people try to take a little more and try to take advantage and I've even had people that, instead of taking out a business loan from the bank or going somewhere, they try to ask me if I would be their bank. And if I will give them whatever, \$100,000 to fix up their building to do their business and instead of me collecting rent, be their business partner. And of course, that is a definite "no" from me, especially if I have no idea what their business is and I'm not experienced with that side of it. I would prefer to just collect the rent, or lease and give them the space.

[24:39]

Hopefully your generosity will come back to you, but I believe it does come back around. Sometimes you don't know exactly how or when, but it does. You have a good heart.

So your family had no connection to the original owners?

No.

Alright, just to clarify. Did you know what the Green Book was, before I called you? When did you hear about the Green Book for the first time?

I heard about the *Green Book* for the first time, just a little bit before you called me, I talked to someone at the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum and they have an organization, "The Southern Black Belt." My dad was in it and I was going to the meetings in his place. And they keep us updated on maybe grants and things that come up and churches that have been fixed. Before this year, I had no idea what the *Green Book* was but I was amazed to hear that there was a book out there that actually told the African-Americans in that time a safe place where they could go to sleep, to eat when they were on the road. I thought that was very unique, very nice, you know very needed at that time.

And then to hear that your property...

Right, right that was an even bigger surprise that this property was in that book, on that list.

And your dad never mentioned it? Because you would have heard of it, but he never...

Yeah, but for my age and for that time and him focusing me, you know, more on education. I didn't get to hear a lot of those kinds of stories. You ever heard of the hatchet man?

Tell me that story?

I didn't tell you earlier?

You did. I want to hear it again [laughing].

I was a little hesitant about telling you that at first and I'm a little hesitant about telling you now, but the thing is, to me it's part of history and it's hilarious to me now. But I never, ever heard of the name Hatchet Man until I had to get a substitute teacher one day and the substitute was an older lady and she connected my name with my dad's name, and she mentioned the "hatchet man." And I told her I'd never heard of it and she was like, "Oh, I'm so sorry, they might not have wanted you to know that." And of course I had to Google it and when I Googled it the whole legal documents of everything came up. And I had never known my dad was married before. He had no children or anything from his first wife, but Reverend Abernathy married him. That was the preacher who married them and when he said, "You may now kiss the bride." And Reverend Abernathy stepped between them and he kissed the bride first. And everybody thought it was like a joke. They laughed about it and whatever, but it came to turn out that Reverend Abernathy and my dad's first wife, they were having an affair together. And my dad went up to the church and he caught them together and he chased Reverend Abernathy around with a hatchet.

Ok, so where did he get the hatchet?

He said he picked the hatchet up from the front of the church. Yeah, they were right at Dexter Avenue Church, Reverend Abernathy's church.

At what church?

I think that's Dexter Avenue Church. It's the church that directly across the street from the police department on Ripley. It's directly across the street. But he said it was at the front. Maybe during that time, somebody was using it to do some landscaping, but he chased him with the hatchet and it just so happened that the police were, the police station was right across the street and the police were patrolling and they picked him up and arrested him. Reverend Abernathy and Martin Luther King were like best friends and Martin Luther King was an editor for Jet Magazine and he wrote an article saying that my dad was guilty of attempted murder but there was no trial, nothing had ever come out. And my dad sued Jet Magazine and ended up winning and it was stated as being the largest sum amount being won by an African American during that time, in the 1960s. It was somewhere around \$75,000. But that was one of the things that gave him his initial funding to purchase these properties and things he has now in this historical district on the same street where Martin Luther King's house is and the Martin Luther King Museum [laughing]. Yes, that's hilarious. But that was the hatchet man story that was new to me until a couple of years ago.

That's a great story. That's amazing. Because this was King's stomping grounds and where he strategized the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Yeah, Congressman Lewis came by a few months ago and yeah, he met with me and took a couple of pictures and he visited all the properties on the street and the hotel and of course he had to go in and stop and see Mr. Malden. And hear those great stories. Malden has a lot of good stories about Martin Luther King, he said he was a very funny comedian, as well as a great leader.

We talked about Congressman Lewis a little bit earlier today with Mr. Malden. Maybe he could help figure out the strategy on how to bring this back because this was his stomping ground too. He used to hang out here.

Yeah, I loved the picture. It was Reverend Abernathy, Martin Luther King and Congressman Lewis all locking arms right in front of the hotel with the Majestic Café logo behind it.

I think I saw that picture today. Mr. Malden showed me a picture of them all walking with King in the middle. But I didn't know that was Lewis.

[Delete million man march]

It was an amazing shot. It may have been, I don't know, Mr. Malden has a book out.

He gave me a signed copy but I haven't read it yet.

I can't remember if that picture is in that book, I definitely have a picture and I just thought it was amazing because you had a chance to see Martin Luther King, and Reverend Abernathy and everybody locked arms right in front of the [Ben Moore] Hotel with the Majestic Café right in front of it. Now unfortunately, my GoFundMe has *only* collected about \$90 over the year, but with that at least I was able to get some of the exterior weatherproof paint and I hired someone to repaint the Majestic sign and the Ben Moore Hotel sign, but other than emboldening the words, the sign itself, I was told that the look that it has, like an antique, the back in the day look, I should keep that as it is.

Yeah, you should.

I didn't bother that.

Well hopefully we can get you some money to do something significant with the property. It's so special and these are tangible links to our history...to segregation, to integration. It's the story of this country. So it's really important and I know with all the excitement of the Green Book, there may be opportunities for you to do something. Just hang in there. At least you're at a place where you don't want to lose it, so just hang on to it. I think opportunity will come.
[looking at my notes]

And the barbershop is still open?

Yeah, the barbershop is still open and you actually probably have more the good artifacts inside the barbershop still. I don't know if he was able to open it for you or not.

No, I met Mr. Malden at his house. He said there's a shaving, something he was going give us [to tour objects with the Smithsonian exhibition]. Something he was going to give us. It's an incredible opportunity to be in this space. I'm so thankful that you agreed to do this.

No problem. No problem at all.

Is there anything I missed? Any other stories you want to tell?

No, no. I know my Mom's okay with the "Hatchet Man" story. I was thinking my Mom might kick my butt for telling that one, but she actually finds it pretty funny now, too.

That's a piece of history. And you never imagine that these people who are so stoic in their photographs and you know they're just people.

Yeah, everyday people. And even people who end up being great people are still human and still make mistakes like everybody else. And it is kind of comforting to know that but yeah it's just funny to think of their story and people that I hear about through history, act in these certain little ways that end up to where we are now. I'm like "Wow."

Well without the stories, we wouldn't know the truth, I think, because how you present yourself in photographs and what gets written in the history books is just one part of it, right?

Definitely. [END]