

# R&R LIQUOR STORE, INC.

Kenneth Christman Sr.

Patricia Christman Bailey

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*K: It's [the Pepsi Machine] older than all of us! [Laughter]*

*Ok, we just unplugged the Pepsi-Cola refrigerator here. How old is this, do you think?*

K: Circa 1949, 1950. Maybe earlier that because they probably got that the old store and brought it here, I think.

*Wow. I will take a photograph of that as well. Thank you again for agreeing to do this. Like I said before only about three percent of the businesses listed in the Green Book are still operating so it's a significant an achievement that you have this business, that you are still here. You have a beautiful sign out front. I want to know about the sign, but first let's talk about the beginning of the business.*

K: Yeah, my father and his partner started out in 1949 actually in another location not far from here and they moved here in 1952 and so they built this current building in 1962.

*When you say "built this current building" do you mean built by...because you mentioned it was built by a black architect....*

K: Right.

*Can you tell me the story about that?*

K: Well this was this architect in Nashville that actually taught at TSU named L. Quincy Jackson.

P: Let's make sure for the tape that TSU is Tennessee State University.

K: Thank you. And so when my father and his partner had the ability to build this new store, that's who they got to design it. So it was designed by a black architect, built by a black contractor, and owned by a black businessman.

[I adjust Patricia's mic]

*Ok, so the name of the architect?*

K: L. Quincy Jackson.

*And is it the whole building here, including the store next door?*

K: Hmm mmm.

*And did the sign go up at that time?*

K: Right around that time. I think it was probably designed in 1961 and probably built around that time.

*And who owned the land?*

K: My father and his partner, they bought the land from a lady that had a store here previously, that was back in 1950, I think '51. Something like that. And I really don't remember her name. But the store that they actually bought. I remember coming down and kind of playing on the cases in the back.

*How old were you?*

K: I was probably about five or six, somewhere around there. And we would come down to this store, once it was built, we had a routine where when they built this store, they actually built a grocery store next door and so we would come in and buy groceries from the store next door. My mother would be around and we'd buy groceries from the store next door, you know on her rounds, we'd go to more than one store but I thought that was pretty progressive especially in light of the way that you look at the economy now. That you have a store that you buy your groceries from, your own, or someone that was running it. We were able to touch our dollar more than one time.

*Patricia do you remember where you were? I don't know your age differences, did you have any early memories of this store?*

P: Well I remember my father very well as it relates to this store and his hard work ethics. How he would have to sometimes take us to school and then, which school was in close proximity and we went to the catholic school nearby and we would be here first so he could open up and then his business partner would be here or someone on staff and then he would take us to school and so that's what I do remember at a very early age in life.

*Do you know how your father was able to afford...what work did he do before that to have the seed money to start this business?*

K: He was in the dry cleaning business at first. And then after that they decided to try their hand at...this was the 33<sup>rd</sup> [liquor] license issued in the state of Tennessee. So that wasn't very far from the repeal of prohibition, you know. Prohibition, the first license granted in the state of Tennessee wholesalers was number 39, I mean in 1939 that is. So in 1949 to come in and have a store, that was no doubt a blessing.

*Did he have his own company as a tailor? Did he have his own store?*

K: No he just had a dry cleaning business.

*I ask because there were tailors also listed in the Green Book. Had you ever heard of the Green Book when I called you?*

K: Yeah, I had heard of it. As a matter of fact after talking to you, I went online to the site of the New York Museum [Public Library] and they the books from the Schomburg and I looked at some of the books from the Schomburg and actually found the pages that listed the store. It went up to about 1966 I remember seeing a R&R ad but I did go in and look. And they started in 1960 and ran that ad. So I was pretty familiar with it because a friend of mine talked about the Green Book before and he was talking about starting a similar book in these modern times for the African American community to be able to...and there are different facets of the *Green Book*...different facets of the guides for black businesses that you directories that have been doing over a period of time, so I kind of knew about the *Green Book*.

*So, what about you Patricia?*

To be very honest, I did not know about the *Green Book*, but I'm glad that you have introduced us to...well there's a movie out called the *Green Book* and that was my first eye opening about the *Green Book* and then once I heard about your contact with us then I was really compelled to read about it so I went online and got introduced to...it was just a very interesting set of words that opened my eyes to what the *Green Book* was really all about.

*I just learned about it when I first started this project about four or five years ago. But a lot of people didn't know about it. Most people I asked had never heard of it. Even my mother had never heard of it. My stepfather grew up in Tennessee and he said he remembered, but my mother grew up in the North but there are still a lot of people who have never heard of it. So it's a piece of our history. You know it's wonderful that we've rediscovered it because not only was it a travel guide you know for people who were traveling but it also helped people...it was almost like a Yellow Pages that helped black businesses. It was so much more than a travel guide, because there were liquor stores and tailors and haberdashers all kinds of...there were funeral homes. There were all kinds of businesses and the majority of them were black so that's a part of our history too that we just haven't been exposed to, just as Americans, regardless of race. The fact that there were all of these thriving businesses within the black community. And again, this is why it's so rare that you're still here.*

*So tell me about when your father and his partner had the business, you're about five, six years old, you were growing up watching it, at what point...was it always considered to work in it?*

[9:36]

K: It wasn't a situation where...I was, you know, setting out to work in the business. But it turned out that way. I kind of got drafted in the business and stayed with the business for 42 years. I started working here when I was in college and my father had a fatal heart attack in 1981, and so, you know, we just kind of kept on with the business.

*How old was he when he passed?*

K: 62

*Wow, that's so young.*

P: We didn't see it coming and neither did he. And the training that my brothers probably should have received, they didn't because, a lot of times you feel just as energetic at 62 as you do at 42, especially these days. But my brothers have been diligent about being...having a very stick-to-it ed-

ness about the business they have a passion about it and that is one of the things that makes it work for us. It's three of us and we say we are one voice. That's how we feel. And we have another family member. But all of the people that work here, we feel like they're family. And I have some pictures that I'd be glad to share with you along the way and you can see that some of them are living and some of them are not.

*[To Kenneth] When you were in college, what were you studying?*

It was weird, I was trying to get a position...I wanted to go to medical school but I didn't have the aptitude, as far as the chemistry was concerned, so I was studying business management, in fact, that is what I got my degree in. So you know, even though you get a degree in a particular field there is practical knowledge to be understood in terms of operating businesses. So I still didn't have an intention...I guess I should have, in retrospect, probably have done better just to have teamed up with my dad, kind of gotten some guidance as to what would have been the best approach to run the business.

*Were there challenges? There are ups and downs, I'm sure in every business, but were there times when you felt like the business was going to close?*

K: Oh, there's always challenges. I mean we've always had different changes that have taken place within the community. Especially when they put the interstate through north Nashville, it was really detrimental to a lot of businesses. As a matter of fact, that luncheon that we last attended, that was specifically noted that the detriment that that particular construction project wreaked havoc on Jefferson Street.

*And they were mostly black businesses?*

K: They were all black businesses. Well mostly black businesses. There were a couple of businesses owned by Jewish folks, one across the street, as a matter of fact, Glicks Dry Goods [assumed spelling] store. But there were up and down this street, numerous businesses, bakeries, banks, restaurants, all kinds of businesses.

P: In fact they just showed a documentary where Jimi Hendrix and the likes of him and other artists that have been here and played on Jefferson Street. But the interstate, the one of the things that we noted, if you go along, say 1-65...

K: I-40

P: Ok, I-40, there's a ramp that exits off of Jefferson Street in the heart of the business area, however, Church Street, Broadway, all of them have mid-point exits off the interstate, except for Jefferson Street, they put the exits for Jefferson Street all the way to our left and to our right.

K: Right, there's no off ramp from I-40, but I-65 there's an off ramp from there, but the off ramp for I-40 coming at the *end* of Jefferson Street. So it's a 2 1/2 to 3 mile distance before you can get off onto Jefferson Street and of course considering we have a major hospital right up the road, Meharry Medical College and Hubbard Hospital that was ironic.

*Or was it?*

K: Yeah, I'm kind of...

*Yeah, it's hard. I'm writing a book. I just finished my manuscript, and it's a project on the Green Book and there's a whole section about that, about the impact of urban renewal and how it decimated so many businesses. I was just interviewing Mr. Swett earlier today and he had a similar story, but the two of you still have survived.*

P: We have.

*So did you have to beef up your marketing or what happened?*

K: Our survival has been a testament to our family. There is a bond that we have as siblings that was requested by mother and we haven't strayed from that and we have been able to, during the different periods of time contribute in such a manner to be able to keep everything going and it's a testament to family love and that's exactly what it is. There are aspects of community support, but the reality is that there's nothing like family support. Without my brother and sister, I wouldn't have been able to do anything that I've done so, you know, we just all pitch in, work as hard as we have to, well we have at various times and we're still here.

P: Yeah, and I think another thing that's important is that no matter what you spend, we appreciate your business. We say thank you when people spend money here with us, and we make it known that whether it's a dollar or a hundred dollars we have the same appreciation for customer, no matter what you spend and we have had repeat customers. We have customers that don't even live close that continue to trade with us throughout the years and I think they know that we have a humble spirit and that they know that we truly value their business the other thing is, no matter how we feel, no matter if we have a cold, or no matter if we have a headache, no matter whatever personal things that are going on, they stay at home. We come here, it is time for business. We are consistent with our hours of operation and we only close if there's inclement weather. But I want to say this, it may not be a part of what you upload, but I pray. I believe in the power of prayer and I know that God has his hand in our business. I know that what we sell is liquor [laughing] but he did turn water into wine, so I'm just saying that I have always believed in his protection, his provision on us, and I think that is a part of, and definitely is why we are in existence today. We couldn't have made it without Him being a part of our organization, our enterprise.

*I think that's part of the story. Of course that will be uploaded.*

{18:30}

*What is the competition in terms of liquor stores in Nashville?*

K: Well, competition in this particular business is intense. This past year we've had...it's been tumultuous actually. We had a situation where we've just now experienced wine going into grocery stores. Wine wasn't in grocery stores, so you're talking about the impact of that in the business and it's been.

*I'm sorry to interrupt, but is that unusual for Tennessee?*

P: For Tennessee.

*When did that happen?*

K: This year. [To Patricia] Was it this year or last year?

P: Recently

K: All I'm saying is that the wine business changed for retail store operators because it's an impulse item inside of a grocery store. Somebody see's something, they just pick up a bottle but if they come in here with the intent of buying some wine then it's a different kind of situation. And that's just another competitor and we have other things where you have other stores that open that have an impact on you. And also you have the larger stores, we've seen that come in in the mid-80s or somewhere around the 90's we saw large stores come in and those are the big stores and there are even larger stores that are actually looming, trying to get in. And those are the stores that have control of the market. So a small mom and pop operation, small store, it's had its impact but we've been blessed to have a cultural significance because we've been in business long enough to have seen parents, children of parents come back from going to school at TSU [Tennessee State University], Fisk and Meharry. We've seen numerous people come. We've seen people come back from homecoming and this is one of their destinations that they come to. Jefferson Street is a destination for people that went to Tennessee State, Fiske, or Meharry, so they know that this is a part of their experience when they come back for homecoming.

*I think people don't consider...I most grocery stores sold wine and liquor. I didn't realize Tennessee was an unusual state. But it held out for so long. So are you in a "wait and see" period. Is it intense, or do you feel like you've managed to...*

K: Well, you still have to be cautious of what you're buying and make sure that you really watch what you do because they are fluctuations in the market that we can't really account for, in terms of...although there's growth in Nashville. This area just now is coming back after a what I would say is about a 30-year blight, 30-35 year blight. From 1967 or 8 to well until 1998, there was no significant development in this area of Nashville. The picture that you see now with all the condos, those are recent, those are like 2010 or 11 or maybe even 2014 to this point and time. Nashville is becoming very popular so there's a lot of people moving here as you know, there's a situation where Amazon is moving here. So, it's a lot of development going on but the only downside in that is that we're not really included in a lot of development. And we're not really considered in a lot of development. So what happens in our business is there are situations where you have depletions that take place, that you can't get some of the products your customers might want. And so it's challenge. It's always a challenge.

*Yeah, that's a reality that a lot of businesses...that God you own the building and the land.*

P: Right, right. Exactly. And I was going to add that there is wine in the grocery stores but then you have other outlets that sell beer now that used to not sell beer in Tennessee. They may have done it in other states prior to recent change in a bill but however that is also impactful because as you know, we sell beer as well. I wanted to mention that.

*And how many employees do you have?*

K: Right now we have five.

*Including...*

K: That includes us.

*Wow. About how many hours a week do you work?*

Now, I work about probably, I work about 10-hours a day, six days a week. About 60 hours. Somewhere around that neighborhood. Yeah, that about what I do now.

*And what about you Miss Pat? Are you here in the operations or you more [involved with the] management of the business.*

P: I am the voice of reasoning [laughing]. I am, when there are things that arise, I tend to let the brothers do what they're doing. They've been in the business long enough, they know what they're doing. They know the ups and downs and ins and outs so if there is something that they need the voice to be heard and make a decision about what we're doing I think I'm more or less the tie-breaker of that decision. So, I do have my hand on working, here and there. But for the most part, my brothers are very involved in it. But I am aware of what is going on.

*Well it's your legacy and it's your family name.*

P: That's right.

*What is the next step, in terms of the next generation. Do you have your ideal goals...?*

P: Well before we get to the next generation. We're excited about celebrating 70 years coming up next year so that has been really our focal point on what we want to do and engage other...not agencies, but wholesalers. We want to perhaps get engaged with them on that. As far as the legacy is concerned, I think my brother needs to answer that [laughing].

K: Well I don't know, I think...we'll have to decide exactly where our situation is going to be. I know that there's a lot of sacrifice that goes into work for yourself, and sometimes I don't know if that's something that I want my son to experience, although he's here helping out. There's some positive aspects to it and there's some negative aspects to it. Like I said, we're just going to have to think that through. I know we're at an age now that that's not necessarily something that we want to continue doing all the way down the line. We want to try to probably have a little respite on that, so, we'll just have to see.

P: But you know I look at it as it's all positive. I think that life has to deal you some things, some challenges and then when you get past those challenges, you can count it all joy. I mean, it's just a part of living. You're going to have those things that come about, that you have to make a decision on, but we have been able to weather the storm and I have a positive outlook on all of our challenges, ups and downs, pros and cons. That's how I tend to look at it.

*Well I'm also a Fellow at Harvard with Henry Louis Gates...*

P: I've met him before.

*How wonderful! Well then you know Skip, you know how special he is. And I've partnered with the Center for Geographic Analysis at Harvard about doing a mobile app of Green Book sites so I'd love to include you on that so at least you can get some business. You know people who are touring the country and want to see Green Book sites they could come here and stock up on their...[laughing]*

P: Thank you very much.

*Yes, I'd like to send you as much business as I can because I think it's so...you know there's a nostalgia factor, obviously, people love old places but do they actually keep people in business. That's a different thing, somebody spending their dollars here. But I'm glad you're committed and at you own the land so nobody can take it out from under you with all the development that's happening. Because that's the story that we hear all too often, people just can't afford to stay open.*

*So tell me anything about the most distinctive memories or stories about the place that have happened, good or bad.*

K: Well there's a whole lot of memories. I'm going to tell you there's a whole lot of different folks, a lot of different characters. I think the most...the biggest thing that I can remember about the stories about the vast array of people that I've come in contact with all over the world, that come here. I've met people from Canada, I've met people from Germany, I've met people from Sweden, Norway. I've had customers that were...one of our customers that used to come in, he would not miss a time when he would come to a Vanderbilt Board meeting [Pat whispers something] Okay, well, okay, we'll I'm just saying there have been customers that have not forgotten their roots and they were here before they experienced the notoriety that they had and it's just been very interesting to...you know get a chance to experience it.

P: I like what we did in terms of helping people. We like to help children, their functions and their organizations that have come about and need our support and we have, because of our buying, sales that we've had we able to put it back into members of the community. That is one of the things I've enjoyed. Little Leaguers. I had a young man to tell me recently. He said, "Thank you for what you did for my son." And I didn't even realize that he knew that I connected with the store and so he was saying, "Our Little League team benefited from the money that you all gave us." And so it's just been wonderful to be able to give back to children. Not only adults, but to children that can be supported.

*That's amazing.*

P: We used have plaques and trophies, but I think you got rid of them?

K: Yeah.

P: Okay

*After your dad had this business, did he do any other businesses?*

K: This was it.

*Okay, just double checking. About how many customers do you serve? Do you know? Approximately over a day, month, or year? Do you have those figures?*

K: I don't know, you know. I don't know. That's not really the figures I look at, I guess, I'm looking more at the actual...

*I'm not going to make you guess, it's a hard question.*

P: It's been a lot, but we don't have the numbers for that.

*Ok so show me what you have here. [photographs]*

P: Well ever since there was mention of the architect, I've been trying to find that information, and here we've finally found it. Alfred C. Calloway [assumed spelling] was the contractor so we make sure we always mention L. Quincy Jones...

K: Jackson.

P: I'm sorry, L. Quincy Jackson as the architect, but Alfred C. Calloway was the curator...I'm sorry, contractor.

Now this started with, this was the rendering. You may have that. I made a copy for you.

Here's a "Business for Negroes Looks Good" that's is a great article. It talks about Jefferson Street. How we have a business partner, Davis and it also talks about how there were other businesses that opened on Jefferson Street.

K: That's by Robert Churchwell [assumed spelling].

P: He was the black reporter for

K: The Nashville Banner.

P: The Nashville Banner, yes.

K: Let me go get a picture, I'm going to show you...[he leaves]

P: There were insurance agencies on Jefferson Street, accounting, a movie theater. We were a part of that make up, so this [the article she's holding] is great, "for Negroes Looks Good." Can you imagine in 1962 building something that's \$80,000 dollars.

*That's still a lot of money, then.*

P: I think so. Here's another one with a gentleman that worked here. He is still living, Thomas Thornton [assumed spelling]

[Kenneth returns]

K: With Robert Churchwell, this is my pop and this is the...officers in World War II taken in England. That's Mr. Churchwell. His son gave me this. There's my father right there. A lot of these guys were in there who came out of the military and started their own contracting businesses. That was one of my father's friends from Chicago, he started an accounting firm.

*So your father's in here, or no?*

K: He's right there.

*Wow, this is segregated. Is it because they are lighter skinned?*

P: Yes, that's segregated.

35:34

[We look at more photographs]

*It's so great that you have this history and that you're saving these things.*

P: Yes, actually my mother saved them.

[We look at more photographs. Kenneth brings out an article]

P: You know in the articles, when you read them, they said, they noted they will have air conditioning and heat year round.

*That was something. And I guess you would want your liquor temperature controlled.*

P: Yes.

K: Air conditioning was relatively new at that time.

P: But I want to say that what surprises me, pleasantly, is that we have a young generation who says that they love the old school sign, so we can't take it down if we want to, or course we don't want to, but if we did want to we wouldn't because they are amazed at the old school sign. In fact, we've had some people that are artists to come by and take pictures of the old school sign.

*I took a picture of this sign. I was here about a year and a half ago. I didn't come inside, because I was scouting places to see what was still around. And I had to scout like 30 sites a day, so I didn't have time to go in, but that sign...I took a photo of that sign and a friend of mine who is a brilliant painter, his work is selling for six-figures, he's doing really well, he's a photo-realist painter and when he said "I want to paint a Green Book sign" I said, "I've got one for you." I don't know if he'll paint it because he's doing a different project now, but that sign is so special. And plus, I've lived in LA and it's unique to find a sign that is that iconic '60s, it's very California, mid-century. Those signs you see more on the west coast. But you know there aren't any other signs that look like that here or even in the Eastern United States. So please don't ever take that sign down and I think, if anything, in terms of vying for business, you're right, that nostalgia factor, the hipsters, they love this kind of throwback to a culture they don't know anything about....*

P: right...

*But still, that can only help your business..*

K: Yeah, it's not just black, but all kinds of people come in here and they like the way the store's decorated and it's decorated basically in different promotional items that it came out in a period of time and it was still basically available. That sign that you see me and Jay did for the Tuskegee Airmen, you probably won't see that anymore. There's some different things out there that you'll see. Different promotions that Seagram's used to do. Every year, during black history month, they would commission an artist to do a specific piece of art to commemorate black history month so it was a different time and they were more cognizant of where their dollars came from and they kind of found a way to give back.

*Well this is definitely a piece of our history that's living in the store.*

P: Thanks.

*It really is. I'm almost 50 so I guess I'm relatively young, but I'm also old enough to know how many things I've seen just vanish. Things that I've valued that are just gone. So the fact that there's a family that cares enough to keep this going should be celebrated.*

P: Thank you so much. One other thing while we were talking that came into my mind, is that yes, my brothers worked very hard at the business but anyone that has connected with us has to understand that we in some regard are married to the business, so it takes long hours and any extended family member understands that for the most part. We haven't had any issues with them not understanding that we may have to work longer than we thought we would, because someone couldn't come in, because someone was sick and that is a part of being here. And that is part of being connected to us.

*Nobody's going to come in if you can't make it.*

P: Right. You have to be there. Exactly. And you have to know that there are things that you may personally have planned that you want to go to but you can't, because you can't because of your commitment to working and making your business work. And the other thing I want to mention, is that it's just a privilege to me and just a pleasure to be down here. I really enjoy my being able to have the voice of reason here and I appreciate my brothers' respect for me, with what I have to say. Now, they don't always listen to me, but they hear me [laughing].

Now and the other thing I wanted to say because I know we're near the end of our time. Now, with Tennessee allowing sales on Sunday, we can now sell liquor on Sundays, and that was this year. So we have decided to stay closed. We are not changing that tradition. We're going to trust that everything is going to be just fine and so far it has been and we'll be closed on Sunday.

*Is that...for what reason have you made that decision?*

K: The real reason, I decided that, is because, I just feel like I deserve that day. You know, six days a week...I don't necessarily feel like we have to give up our life for that....

P: For the dollar...

K: I don't. You know, you can rest on the seventh day. That's one day you can have and I don't do the holidays...basically we do the traditional holidays that we've always done. Now you only have to close three holidays. But we do the holidays we've always done and if we ever get a chance, we're going to take Martin Luther King day too, so.

*When you say "do the holidays" do you mean you take that day off?*

P: Right. We close that day. Now the days that you have to be closed are Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. I don't know if you've got to be closed on New Year's Day or not. But we used to be closed the five major holidays. We used to be closed on Labor Day, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. Those were the days that we were closed and you know, if I was working seven days a week, I would feel like that I'm a slave to the money and that wouldn't leave any room for me.

P: I think it's a very healthy decision. I think you have to refresh. And then I look at one of the greatest models for being closed on Sundays and that's Chick-fil-A. And they are one of the most prosperous businesses there is. But I feel like for me, it is about knowing that God will take care of it. I am not worried about it. I think that it will be just fine. Those who are committed to come in here and are trading with us will continue to come. And for some, it might be a very trusting step that we're taking. It's a leap of faith. That's what it is.

*Well it's inspiring to me because I work seven days a week and I know if there was something that...like if the electricity...or if there was a way that I couldn't work, that would be the only way I wouldn't work.*

K: Well I've done seven days, when I would come down and open up the market over there, and someone would come in and work and I'd come back and close it, so I mean, you know. The thing about being open seven days, you really split your Saturday and your Monday. It used to that people would buy what they wanted to buy on Saturday and they'd come back in on Monday. So I just still do what we do and keep on being strategic.

*Well you've made a healthy choice, I have not made the healthy choice.*

K: Well you will. It's coming.

[P: Laughing] Yeah, it will come.

45:55

[END]