

Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg

Interview with Frank Jordan, May 8, 2016

Conducted by Jan Blodgett

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Summary: Frank Jordan, born in Mecklenburg and having lived his early years in Iredell County, is the owner of Lake Norman Limousine Service. In this interview he offers a brief narrative of his life and the establishment of his own two businesses, a painting company and a limousine service. Jordan talks about the work underwent to renovate the Ada Jenkins Center and shares some comments about the state of Black entrepreneurship in Davidson.

Interviewer: Alright, this is Jan Blodgett interviewing Frank Jordan on May 8, 2016 on Town Day. So, Frank, let's start at the beginning. Did you grow up in Davidson? Where were you born, where did you grow up?

Frank Jordan: I was born in Mecklenburg County, but shortly after I was born, we moved to Iredell. That's where I went to high school, in Iredell County. I was two years old and then we moved to Iredell.

Interviewer: Okay, so what schools did you go to in Iredell?

Frank Jordan: Dunbar High School.

Interviewer: Okay, and where is that? I don't even know where that is.

Frank Jordan: That's up there on Center Street and Moore Street.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, okay. Nice. And then, after high school what did you do?

Frank Jordan: Well, what I done, I went off to work for Merita Bakery. No, no, let me back up. I started being a lead man at Asbestos, right over here in that gray plant.

Interviewer: Okay, so the plant on the Depot Street.

Frank Jordan: Right. I started off being a lead man there. And right after I left there I went to Merita Bakery and I was assistant shipping clerk. That was down on Trade Street in Charlotte, NC. And I left there after four years and I wanted to get a job closer to home. So, I started working at Reeve's Foamex. I spent 27 years in that. And while I as working there I was partly doing my own business while I was working. I was working on 2nd shift and, at that time, I had, like, 27 employees. I was the supervisor down there at that time. And so, after I stayed in there for a while I went and took some business courses to start my own business.

Interviewer: Oh, so where did you take those, at CPCC?

Frank Jordan: Yeah, at Central Piedmont. And so, after I finished up doing that I continued to work on at Reeves Foamex. I continued to work there. And somehow or another a union got in there, and after the union got in there they start cutting back, talking about they going to ship a lot of their plants to New Mexico—and which they did. So, I worked until it closed down to two plants. We had one in Cornelius and one down the road about two and a half miles. But I started at the one uptown in Cornelius. That's where I was the supervisor there for 27 years. But after they closed that plant down they transferred me down to the other plant that was still in operation and where I worked there about three and a half, and then they really just shaved down to little or nothing. And so, what I done after I left from down there, I just went on off to doing my own business. So, I used to have a garbage route when I was working on 2nd shift.

Interviewer: And how does the garbage route work?

Frank Jordan: I used to pick up the biggest part of the Peninsula. I was picking up. But see, that didn't—and I had grown the capacity that I had and I had to let somebody else take it over, which is Thurmond Ross, he took it over. And so, that was a blessing to me and to him as well.

And so, after I done that I decided that, okay, when I was laid off down here, as I was going off and started doing my own thing—well see, I have a commercial painting company too, as well. I started a painting company shortly after I started the limousine business. The two of them, they up and running, they're fully established, and so I just enjoy doing what I'm doing, meeting people.

Interviewer: So, I didn't know about the painting business. I knew about the limousine, but—

Frank Jordan: Yeah, we have the commercial painting business. We do a lot of the new homes and do—most of them we do repaints. I like the repaints because when you start doing a new structure you have to wait until John Doe finishes to get paid, then you have to wait until Paul come do his part to get paid, and then you on the end waiting for your money. And so, it just extended my money too long, and my employees that were working for me, they wanted their money weekly on Fridays. And so, I had to figure out a way to do that.

Interviewer: So, what's the name of the company?

Frank Jordan: RJ Painting.

Interviewer: RJ Painting, okay.

Frank Jordan: Yeah. And so, the limousine business, so, I have guys who work for me, you know, regularly. Terry Spring, you might know him, and I think you met my son, Stan. Yeah, Stan, he's another one. And then we have a couple of guys retired from the military, they drive for me too as well.

Interviewer: So, how many—what kind—do you have cars, actual limousines?

Frank Jordan: Yeah, right now—

Interviewer: What have you got?

Frank Jordan: Right now we have nine vehicles in the limo fleet. And in the painting business we have two trucks that, you know, take our supplies and ladders and all this and all that.

Interviewer: How do you find a limo? I mean, what do you do?

Frank Jordan: Well, what happened, when I was working at Reeves, it used to be everybody would go to Freedom Park, we didn't have no place else to go. You remember that?

Interviewer: Yeah, I remember you went to Freedom Park because that was—yeah, yeah.

Frank Jordan: Yeah, and so, I ran up on a guy down there, he pulling in a black stretch limo. And I walked up to him, I said, you know what, I'd like to do this someday. He said, you can. I said, well I bet those things cost a lot of money. He said, well, they're pretty expensive. And so, we started talking, started talking. So, I messed around and I talked to a funeral home up here in Mooresville and I said to him, I said, will you be willing to sell some old cars when you're finished with them. He said, of course I will. He said, in fact, I'll sell you one now. And so, I bought it.

Interviewer: So, it was meant to be.

Frank Jordan: Yeah. And so, I bought it, and then after I bought that one—it was an old funeral home car. Everybody was laughing when I pick them up because it didn't have the bar and the TV in it, but that was fine. You know, you have to crawl before you walk. I can understand that. And so, in doing that, I messed around and I borrowed some money and I went down to Atlanta, Georgia, they had a fleet down there, and I bought a car. Then I flew to Fort Lauderdale, Florida and I bought another car. And I bought most of the vans from around in here off lots like Ford Motor Company. We bought a lot of vans from that. And so, like I said, right now, of what we have, we have nine vehicles in the limo fleet and two in the painting business.

Interviewer: So, how do people find you? You have two weddings—

Frank Jordan: We have web.

Interviewer: You have a website? Okay.

Frank Jordan: Yeah, website, and plus repeated business. Repeated business keeps me in business. I have guys I've had for 12/13 years.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. You do the airport run, right? Because that's probably—

Frank Jordan: Yeah, all the time.

Interviewer: Is that, like, your standard money maker is get people to the airport?

Frank Jordan: Yeah, yeah, that's what we do. We stay at the airport most—you know, I'd say 65% of the time we're at the airport. Then the painting business, it pretty much] runs itself. You know, you go out and you bid on the job and get all the material and then you come back, and you tell the guys where they'll be working, this is what you need. And I check on them, you know, during the day and see how well they are coming along, see if they need anything, and see everything's still safe and all this and that.

Interviewer: So, how did you learn to bid on it? How do you figure out how much paint this room needs and that room?

Frank Jordan: Well, you go by square footage You figure, you know, one gallon will do one room if it's not in too bad of shape. But if it's in bad shape you may end up spending about two gallons in there because you're going to have one gallon of primer and then the other gallon your finish coat. Then you run into a lot of sheetrock work. It's a really, really unique task when you start dealing with sheetrock because you have to, you got to fine tune that stuff. You know, if you have bad places in it, you have to sand it down, prime it, and then paint it. So, there's a lot of painting. Most of the limousine—the limousine, you have the chance to meet all the celebrities.

We have met them all. Over the 31 years I've been in business doing that I have met them all.

Interviewer: Who have you met?

Frank Jordan: You name them. The boxers and the dancers, the judges and the highway patrolmen, the preachers and the lawyers, we met them. The wrestlers, the boxers, the football players, basketball players, baseball players, we met them all.

Interviewer: Now, when you started, were your customers mostly Black?

Frank Jordan: Yeah.

Interviewer: —or was it mixed, or did you build out? I mean, so how did that happen?

Frank Jordan: Yeah. It was Black right here in Davidson. First of all I had to go down to Charlotte to get a permit in order to operate. Then after you get that permit you have to go down and record it at the courthouse. Then after you record it at the courthouse you have to come in Davidson and let the Davidson town zone you. Then you got to take that back to the zoning board in Charlotte. And then after you finish doing that then you have to go down and record it at the tax place down there. There's a lot to it. And, like, right now we're regulated by the police department. We have to have those medallions in your cars in order to go in and out of Charlotte in the airport. You have to have a particular sticker in order—yeah, I mean—and then you have to have your car updated every year as far as having your inspection done through the City of Charlotte. You go to the police department to have all that done. Now, also you have to go through another loophole at the airport, you have to go through their inspection with the vehicle. And along with that we have to have a permit with your picture on it. Yeah, you have to have that at all times. And then they'll fingerprint you and check you out, your criminal record. They do all that stuff. You have to be drug tested. And it's good, it's good to have that protection because, you know, you're picking up a president or a high celebrity and you want to make sure he's protected. You know, I mean, you don't want him getting up in your car—you have to have the right insurance. That insurance, I mean, they take us for a ride. Yeah, I mean, it's very

expensive. And in doing that, you know, my name got pretty much spread out. And we also do a private school route. We pick up school kids from Pine Lake right up the road here. We used to go in and out of Charlotte probably each and every day out at Peninsula. We had to run down there to pick up kids every day.

Interviewer: Now, how did you get connected with that?

Frank Jordan: Just by taking people to the airport. They say, hey, would you like to have a school route, would you be interested in a school route. Then just the word-of-mouth start spreading like poison ivy, you know.

Interviewer: So, this is pretty impressive that, you know, you've managed all your own businesses, you've had these careers and you keep going. Did you have people growing up that you saw did businesses? I mean, where does this drive to be your own boss come from?

Frank Jordan: Well, I'll tell you when I was rooted. I was rooted when I become a supervisor, I had the experience under my belt. And I say to myself, if I can do this for the next man, make him some money, I can make myself some money. And plus, while we were in management we had to spend so many hours per year training, in seminars. Seminar, seminar, every year, seminar, seminar, seminar. Which was good. You know, the day and time that we live in now, I mean, hey, that's been very helpful to me. So, like I say, you know, they'll see you out and take somebody to the airport and they'll say, hey, if you'd like to have a school route you call Paulette. And Paulette called Jane, and Jane will call Paul, and just keep going. But right now we have 12 kids we pick up. We have had as high as 35. Yeah. We pick up off Brawley School Road out there at the Point, and that's where we pick up. I had a call last week, they wanted me to pick up off of [highway]v150 down below Big Daddy, which that's—you know, you're getting into a lot of traffic going down there.

Interviewer: Yeah, if you're on River Highway in Mooresville, that's—

Frank Jordan: Yeah, you have to go through a lot of traffic. And I told them I have to think

about that one. Yeah, we have to chew on that one a while and see how it's going to come out. But, you know, for the most part when I started this business we only had something, like, 6,000 residents here in Davidson. That's all we had. But today, do the arithmetic.

Interviewer: I know, there's, like, 12,000 and—

Frank Jordan: Yeah.

Interviewer: —and then Cornelius has grown and Huntersville is so much bigger. And—yeah.

Frank Jordan: Yeah, and you take in River Run. I mean, you have a lot of residents here in Davidson today. And I can say to anybody, you know, if you set your mind to do what you want to do, you can do it, but you got to put forth the effort and faith behind it. You know, faith without works is dead. So, you have to put all that together and just put your hands to the plow because some days is not going to be easy, now. You know, you have to expect that and you have to roll with the punches. When they're good you appreciate it, when they're bad you still appreciate it.

Interviewer: Okay, so, now, you live in Davidson? Right? Okay.

Frank Jordan: Yeah, I've been in Davidson 47 years.

Interviewer: Okay. So, tell me a little bit about how Davidson has changed.

Frank Jordan: Well, the increase in the community has changed. The lake has really made Davidson famous. Davidson College, I mean. I used to pick up down there and say, Davidson, I don't know where Davidson—you know, they would say that. But now, they know. Seem like the community has tightened a little bit together from what it used to be. You know, across the track they seem to pull together a lot more than they used to. Because I can recall a time where you never had anyone come across the track unless they knew somebody that died or something. But now, you know, we do services over there with DCPC [Davidson College Presbyterian

Church].

Interviewer: Right, you got the book club,

Frank Jordan: Yeah, and they had the book club. And then we have a cover dish on the green, then we use this congregation house here, we use that. And so, that has really brought us closer together. Yeah. Davidson's a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful place. I don't stay no place else, I love Davidson. I mean, everybody that see me get along and, you know, you don't—you know, you're going to have little bumps in the road once in a while, somebody probably taking somebody pocketbook or something like that, but other than that the place to live, this is the place to be right here.

Interviewer: So, do you remember—of course, you weren't here the whole time, but businesses on Main Street—so, there were lots of barber shops, but there were other businesses in the community. There was—Castella had a flower shop, or pizza places, and—can you talk about some of the businesses or what you—what's changed on the west side? Or what's been there?

Frank Jordan: Well, the west side, you don't have—one thing for sure, let me say this, the Ada Jenkins Center, I was a part of putting it together.

Interviewer: There was a big change in the community to lose a school. It was part of the community. So—

Frank Jordan: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, see, the thing about it, we had to organize a board for that school. Davidson Presbyterian Church, USA, we-leased that building through Rev. Shirley, we leased it. And when the lease ran out the town said, well, we're going to turn it back over to the County and let the County tear it down. So—

Interviewer: I want to back up just one second because not many people know about Reverend Shirley. So, which church was he and just a little bit about who Reverend Shirley was?

Frank Jordan: Davidson Presbyterian, USA. See, he stepped up and he said, I see a vision at that place over there. He said, we can use—I tell you, I wish he were living today.

Interviewer: I know.

Frank Jordan: He said, down the road you're going to need that building. And sure enough it has come to reality. What we done, went in there and sand the floors, and painted, and put windows in it, and—

Interviewer: Ripped out ceilings.

Frank Jordan: —ripped out ceilings—Lord, the ceiling, and took up about six inches of wax on the floors. Clarence was over there.

Interviewer: Yeah, I was over there. Yeah.

Frank Jordan: Yeah, yeah, yeah, you know what I'm talking about. I mean, we had to do a lot of hard work, but we pulled it together. And when I ride by that place today I feel chills because I see so many people there. It makes me feel like we accomplished something, you know. And when you're doing something like that, that makes a lot of difference to the community and all the other churches here because everybody uses it now. You know, once upon a time, you know, no one wants to use it, it was leaking so bad, it was run down. So, we brought it back to life. So, I appreciate myself for being a part of that.

Interviewer: I appreciate you did, too. Well, thank you very much. Is there anything else you want to think about that if you were going to tell your great grandson?

Frank Jordan: Well, I'd like for them to take on my legacy when I go to the other side. I have two grandsons and they're fairly young, and one of them has finished college and the other one, you know, finished high school back about a year or so ago. And I would like to see them continue to live here in Davidson. You know, take the legacy on because, see, we're going to run

out of Black entrepreneurs here. We're going to run out. And so, I would love to see some type of program in this town to train those kids for tomorrow, because we're having so many young kids falling between the cracks and we don't do anything about it. We don't know what's going to happen after we go to the other side. So, I would love to see some type of program, and to train them to start their own business. You know, and I'm sure the government, they could get some help from the government if they show faith and effort that they want to do that. You know, we want to see more—we don't have it. Right now, presently, we only have two Black entrepreneurs, that's Ron Raeford and myself.

Interviewer: We've had more in the past. So—

Frank Jordan: Oh, yeah, yeah. And, you want to keep that going because seems like your town is balanced when you have Black business and White business working. You know, they work with us, we'll work with them, it just seems like it's balanced. And if you don't have that, you know, you just—it's like it's a one sided town.

Interviewer: Yeah. Are there any particular barriers that make this harder for the young entrepreneurs in Davidson right now? Is it the cost of renting property? Or, you know, do they have a place to run a business? Or—

Frank Jordan: Well, and too, is short of that as far as running a business. See, I run my business out of my back. And, we don't have a lot—and then it all depend on what business they go into. You know, you got to go into where, you know, you can park your car or they can walk to your shop. You got to look at that, too, as well. And it may be where, they can't afford to rent the buildings. You know, that could be a problem. But all that stuff you have to take into consideration when you go into a business. The renovation of the building, of the land—

Interviewer: Whatever equipment you're going to have—

Frank Jordan: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: Honestly, the thought of buying a limo, I mean, even used, that's one of—

Frank Jordan: Yeah. Well, I tell you one thing, it wasn't easy. I'll tell the world that. I was hard, but I just kept the faith. You know, some days are dark and some days are light, but what you got to do, you got to take the sweet with the bitter, you know, and that's what make it come to reality. So, I just want to see some young people become and start doing something.

Interviewer: Me too.

End of Recording.