

Robert Houston Interview by Ky Buckner

Black Lives Next Door, Center for Mason Legacies, George Mason University Libraries

July 16, 2021

Summary:

This interview focused on the life story of Robert Houston. Born into a "radical union" family, Houston was further exposed to political activism when he studied English at Syracuse University. Participating in the Black Power movement moved him deeply, and when he came to George Mason College in 1968 to teach English, he continued to advocate against racism and the Vietnam War. After administrators controversially decided not to renew Houston's contract - alongside two other outspoken professors - protests and petitions were held demanding the three teachers be re-instated. Their demands were ignored. After leaving GMC, Houston taught in Mexico before eventually winding up in Arizona. He went on to publish multiple novels and taught for many years at the University of Arizona.

Ky Buckner [00:00:40] Hi, Dr. Houston, can you hear me?

Robert Houston [00:00:43] Yes, I can. Can you hear me?

Ky [00:00:44] Yes, I can hear you perfectly. How are you doing?

Robert [00:00:48] Good morning -

Ky [00:00:50] Good afternoon. How are you doing?

Robert 00:00:56] Can you see me?

Ky [00:00:57] Yeah, I can. Yeah. Sorry. How are you doing?

Robert [00:01:02] Well, fine. Thank you. I hope you are, too.

Ky [00:01:05] Yeah, I'm doing. I'm doing great. I just finished up some lunch and I'm ready for a wonderful conversation.

Robert [00:01:11] Well, going as soon as we get done here, I'll have my lunch. So it would work well.

Ky [00:01:19] Awesome. Today is July 16th, 2021, and we're here for an oral history interview with Dr. Robert Houston. My name is Ky Buckner and I am conducting this interview on behalf of the Black Lives Next Door research team at George Mason University. Thank you, Dr. Houston, so much for taking the time to talk with me today and welcome. So to begin, would you mind just introducing yourself?

Robert [00:01:49] Well, I'm Robert Houston. I'm a professor emeritus of English and creative writing at the University of Arizona. I did my doctorate at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. I published a number of novels that have been made into films and so forth, and I was a professor of English at George Mason in 1968 and '69.

Ky [00:02:27] So can you tell me a little bit about your early life? Where are you from and where did you grow up?

Robert [00:02:33] Well, I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, of all places and went to Birmingham Southern College. Then I did a stint in the Air Force as a Russian linguist, an Air Force intelligence to the NSA and then Turkey then finished my degree at Birmingham Southern, went to Syracuse for an M.A. in Creative Writing and Literature, then to George Mason. Then, two years in Mexico, act as director of theater and creative writing at the University of the Americas and to Mexico, and finished my doctorate at Iowa. Then and then, I was hired here at the University of Arizona in the creative writing program here and I've been here ever since.

Ky [00:03:49] So were there moments in your early education, elementary or high school that led you to become interested in English and creative writing?

Robert [00:04:00] Oh. I you know, I guess, like most people....some people say "I wanted to be a writer from the very beginning when I was five years old." No, [I did] not really [think that]. I did - I did it [writing] and I was pretty good at it, but that was really a theater major and spent time in New York living on the Lower East Side when the 60s, which was a really exciting period, doing theater there at Cafe La Mama and open theater at other places. Did other theater in New Jersey and then decided I didn't want to live in New York and didn't want to go to Hollywood and... Writing fiction allows you to be your own writer to be all the actors in the production, to do your lighting, to do your sets, to do everything. So that seemed to me much more interesting thing to do.

Ky [00:05:21] Hmm. So your interest in theater translated into writing fiction very easily because of that. Interesting.

Robert [00:05:29] It gives you great training to visualize things. As soon as you learn rhythms of dialog, you learn all sorts of things in theater that can transfer fiction.

Ky [00:05:46] Yeah. Could you tell me a little bit about your family and your upbringing? What did your parents do for work and did you have you have siblings?

Robert [00:05:57] Yes, I do. I did write a sort of memoir, an autobiographical essay that's been fairly widely anthologized of reconstruction that goes into all of that. You can find that find it online, so I can send it to you, the link. My father wanted to be an artist, but it was the Depression and he couldn't finish high school, so he eventually became a steelworker in Birmingham. Which is a huge company town at the time. And my mother was from the country. Her father was a coal miner. And my grandfather on the other side was one of the early, he'd been an IWW, a wobbly which was the subject of one of my early novels, the *IWW Deportation*....And was one of the founders of the CIO in the 1930s and, uh, in the south, and so I grew up in that sense of a very strong, rather radical union background. He was very much interested in civil rights, and that was rather different for Alabama in the 1950s, as you might, well, might imagine. And. The college I went too, Birmingham Southern during the "troubles" in Birmingham was polled by the *New York Times*, as an island of liberalism in a sea of bigotry. So (chuckles). I had an atypical youth in Alabama, a very typical in other ways, in that I accepted segregation was the natural order of things because I knew no different.

Ky [00:08:38] In experiencing somewhat of an atypical - you mentioned radical union background and upbringing, did you find that you had a different outlook on life or values than maybe your peers did at the time in Birmingham?

Robert [00:08:55] Yes. Yes, I did. And going into the Air Force, which was a very integrated environment at the time and then after that, I was at Selma in the march there, and when I lived in the Lower East Side, I was very much involved in matters of civil rights. So it was sort of a natural transformation for me from my grandfather's having had threats of a cross the world go in his yard because he was in favor of integration and civil rights to, to an active interest in civil rights...

Ky [00:09:55] So you mentioned a second ago the timeline of your education of going from the school in Birmingham to to Syracuse and then eventually to George Mason and Iowa. Can you walk me through the leading up events that led you to George Mason and what specifically led you to that college?

Robert [00:10:22] Well, you know, let me – may I give you a bit of context?

Ky: Sure.

Robert [00:10:30] Okay. In the late 60s, the American university system was undergoing a great growth spurt with colleges and community colleges, junior colleges, as they were called going up all over, four year universities expanding, and colleges like George Mason expanding into four year colleges because it had been a community college at one time. And so there was a great hiring glut. Quite different from nowadays. And so when I came out of Syracuse with an MA - Syracuse did not have an MFA at the time, those were quite rare, Iowa and a few other schools have [those degrees] - I had a number of job offers. One was in Roanoke, I wanted to be in Virginia, which is close to New York and close to my family back in Alabama. And I was offered without an interview, actually, a job at George Mason, where they were hiring a number of young professors with or without doctorates at the time, with the expectation that you would complete your doctorate while you were there because they needed bodies. And, I and Jim Shea, and Larry Leftoff, and [inaudible]...there were a number of us there in the English department, it was a small department at this time, you know, who had that minimum qualification, so when I was offered the job, it suited me. It was a perfect location, a perfect growing school. There was no creative writing teacher before me. As far as I know. And. It was just the right fit for me. Now I read that when I left, the only creative writing teacher who was hired was Larry McMurtry, who would've been a wonderful interview were he were still with us, unfortunately he's not...

Ky [00:13:31] So at the time around when you got hired, when Mason is hiring a lot of these professors, there also is an inclination that they are hiring a lot of people with previous military experience that a lot of administrators have military experience. Did you experience any of that?

Robert [00:13:57] I only knew, and I think this helped, the chair of the English department, Jim Jackson, was a retired colonel in the Air Force Station, quite near a base that I was stationed with in Montgomery, Alabama. So we had that connection. But surprisingly, Jim was quite liberal and in a later period in which I have fallen out with the administration of George Mason he [Jim] was very supportive. So I don't know. I don't know about the higher administration. As a young assistant professor, you're - all that's above your pay grade. You don't really get to know those people.

Ky [00:14:47] Of course. So while you're at Mason, where did you live?

Robert [00:14:54] I lived on a farm in a farmhouse that I rented, a great big old farmhouse in Haymarket, if you know where Haymarket is. At that time it was absolutely rural. A realtor in Manassas have bought 300 acres of land that is going to subdivide, of course, and just wanted someone for one hundred dollars a month to this huge farmhouse. So I did. It was about a forty-five minute drive into Mason at the time. But it was lovely, the beautiful Blue Ridge [Mountains] from the front porch, woods and creeks.

Ky [00:15:43] You lived there the whole time you were teaching at Mason?

Robert: Yes.

Ky: And what would you say was your first impression of the students of the faculty of the college itself when you first came to Mason?

Robert [00:16:00] They were all, for the most part, quite young. There were a couple of - Tony Palmieri was a retired Air Force officer who was teaching on the department. Bob Carlson was an old man in his 30s and the rest of us were in our 20s, mid-20s. I was 27 at the time, so. It was all white. Of course. I only had one Black student the whole time I was at Madison. So. It was it was it was an interesting demographic, because at the time it was - as you know, you have read: I'm sure the report that was issued by the Civil Rights Commission in '71 and those conditions pertained also in '68. There were no dorms. Mason was seen as serving the suburbs of Northern Virginia, which are almost all white. There was no effort made to engage students outside there. There were no dorms, so it had to be a commuter college. So those are the impressions. I sort of quickly fell in with others of my generation who were very much products of the 1960s in terms of our political leanings.

Ky [00:17:57] So –

Robert [00:18:01] In fact, here, let me show you this. I just - I've been going through some things. Have you seen this? "Whites against white violence."

Ky [00:18:13] Is that from the around that time?

Robert [00:18:16] Yes, absolutely. It was from a demonstration I went to while I was at Mason. So, you see this this whole "defund from the police" [today]; it's sort of a rerun of the 60s.

Ky [00:18:33] Yeah. So I'm really glad you brought up the investigation by the Civil Rights Commission because I love to talk some more about that with you. So, do you recall being around for any of the investigations that were the early on portions of this that were happening in 1969 when you were still around?

Robert [00:18:55] No, they weren't happening then.

Ky [00:18:57] OK, well, at your time at Mason. Do you recall anyone vocalizing concerns about racial discrimination?

Robert [00:19:06] Oh yes. In fact, since we first were in touch, I've been going through some documents and I found a letter written by an organization at Mason called Spectrum protesting a

member of the Board of Visitors, named Weatherby asking that he resign because of his quote "segregationist views." They were, as there were known, "segregationist." There weren't necessarily known as "racist." And so, yes, there was activity there. But, you know, as I said, the students, there was no critical mass of Black students on campus to organize large protests. I mean, if you look at it, it's a circular thing because the white suburbs provided most of the students almost all of the students as a matter of fact. Okay? So there are a few Black students. The fact that there are few Black students meant that there was not much of a sense of Black solidarity or protest. So it was, you know, a circle that fed on itself.

Ky [00:20:37] Yeah. So this this organization that you mentioned, Spectrum, do you have any further knowledge or anecdotes about it?

Robert [00:20:50] I've been trying to remember what Spectrum was. I did run across a letter from a member of the House of Delegates in Virginia. I'll send you all the stuff if you send a physical address, a "snail mail,"

Ky [00:21:10] Okay.

Robert [00:21:14] [The letter was] from a representative in the House of Delegates, saying: your job as faculty and the students is to carry out the wishes of the Board of Visitors. You should have absolutely no say in what the curriculum is and how the schools are governed. If you do try, it means you have too much time on your hands and your workload should be increased. [chuckles] So the state of Virginia was very much a southern state at that time, very conservative. So it was quite a, quite a battle. And especially since we were part of Mr. Jefferson's university [UVA] at the time, which did not go into that sort of thing, it was beginning to. In fact, it was actually instituting Black Studies programs and so forth when George Mason wasn't. But traditionally, it [UVA] had been a school for white gentlemen and ladies, and George Mason was seen as potentially the sort of Berkley of the North. You know, feeding off all these terrible radicals in Washington, D.C. I think they were quite terrified of that.

Ky [00:22:44] So why do you think George Mason ended up being a college that was predominantly white? Whites only even?

Robert [00:22:52] Well, as I said, it was a commuter college and students were drawn from the Northern Virginia white suburbs. If you look at the demographic numbers in that report that we're discussing from the Civil Rights Commission, I think, what, about five percent of the population was Black and almost no Latino at all.

Ky [00:23:23] Hmm.

Robert: So that was the population for your group. And the Civil Rights Commission said, "Well, no, you should be out...[recruiting more Black students?]" Affirmative action was a new thing. So [it was] a period of transition, and transition is hard because it sort of feeling your way, and George Mason wasn't terribly interested in feeling its way. It saw itself as serving that predominantly white Northern Virginia suburban demographic.

Ky [00:24:05] So in your time at Mason, do you remember any particular incidents of racial discrimination?

Robert [00:24:17] Not overt. Not overt. Just as the Civil Rights Commission report pointed out, institutional racism doesn't have to be overt. It can be the sin of omission as well as permission. So this is a sin of omission.

Ky [00:24:40] So I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about your involvement in many forms of protest while at George Mason and in Northern Virginia. So what's the origin point of your campus activism? Where and with whom does it all began?

Robert [00:25:04] It begins with my privilege, you know, coming from a liberal northern school, Syracuse, and from my time and the very radical Lower East Side, or East Village, as it was becoming known as the in the mid-sixties. And also from the Vietnam War. I, as I say, I had been in the Air Force and I had enlisted before Vietnam, actually in 1961 [when] we were not really involved. But by the time I came out in '65, Vietnam is front and center, and it was a bad war. It was an unnecessary war. It was a colonial war. It was a war that was being fought against the will of the majority of the Vietnamese people. So yes, I mean that all factored in. But when I got to Mason I met Jim Shea, who was, who had been involved and was considered the devil incarnate by the administration, and [by] the Legislature in Virginia at the time, and probably the Board of Visitors also. And though we didn't agree on everything, we agreed on the war, agreed on civil rights, we agreed on most things. He was much more committed to pacifism in general. I thought there were just wars, and Vietnam was a bad war. And Jim would have said no, all wars are bad. Anyway. And we started making common cause with Larry Leftoff, who was a math instructor. He was, if you'll pardon the pun, he was a math instructor, but he was a polymath too, because Larry could recite from memory the whole book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which was unusual for a math instructor. He had written a math text book that he asked me to read, and I understood none of. So we became friends, the three of us and all that. But at one point Jim Shea organized a student strike for a campus-wide strike against the war and for student rights, we're all for student rights or faculty rights, of which there are basically none. At the time. And I think Jim, Larry and I were the only three who actually canceled classes for the strike that day, it was the one day strike. And I think that got all of us in deep "s" word with the administration. That was the final straw. And so Jim was the leader and Larry, and I, I guess what would be known as his lieutenants.

Ky [00:29:06] So would you say that you, Larry and Jim, were sort of the three, at least in your group, those were the three key figures for you?

Robert [00:29:16] We were the three malefactors, yeah. I mean, there is a lot of sympathy. You know, and the faculty, as I say, it was fairly it was a young liberal faculty and they were very supportive. But not really on the front lines.

Ky [00:29:41] So can you take me back to the strike that you mentioned being the last straw? What was the sort of atmosphere of the strike?

Robert [00:29:56] Oh, okay. Well, we were asked to cancel classes, all the faculty, as I say, I think the three of us actually complied. And there was a gathering on the Quad and signs, blackboards, and teach-ins which were quite popular in the '60s. Do you know what those were?

Ky [00:30:27] Vaguely, vaguely. But if you want to help me out?

Robert [00:30:31] [chuckles] They were these impromptu classes in which you were taught things that you didn't know from your normal university classes. For example, I remember one when I

was at Syracuse, taught by history professor who was making several points about Vietnam that you wouldn't have found out otherwise, for example, that Ho-Chi-Min, the leader of the Viet Cong of the actual president of North Korea, had initially come to the US and asked for an alliance to help get rid of the French, and we turned him down. And so then he turned to the communist Chinese. So those were the kinds of counter-histories that you learned in teach-ins.

Ky [00:31:42] Hmm. Do you recall participating in the teach-ins that were at the protests, or what were some of the topics that were covered?

Robert [00:31:53] [inaudible] They covered some of the usual topics. We saw institutional racism at George Mason. We weren't privy to a lot that was going on between the administration and the Board of Regents in Charlottesville and the Legislature. So we saw on the ground that there were there was no Black faculty and there were very few Black students, but we saw this as part of the larger picture that was going on in the country, not as it was particularized George Mason. So the protests were against the law for student and faculty rights against racism. And the subjects would have been racism, as it is manifest, or institutional racism as it was manifest, at George Mason. But not the George Mason was singular in that regard. So, you know, this is the time of the counter inauguration in Washington, which I went to for Nixon. You may not be familiar with that, are you?

Ky [00:33:37] No, no. If you want to talk about your time at the counter inauguration, that would be great.

Robert [00:33:41] Oh okay. The counter inauguration was a huge demonstration on the day of the inauguration of Richard Nixon. As a protest, folks in the [inaudible] were there, and the mall was just absolutely full of speeches, music, all of the all of the good '60s kinds of protest activities, as a protest against the inauguration of Richard Nixon as president. Not that anyone - unlike a recent former president - no one doubted that he had been elected and duly inaugurated. But we wanted to have a thousand from those that have a what was called a counter inauguration against the Vietnam War, against Nixon's policies, against conservatism in the Republican Party and so forth. So that was a quite a big event. You should look into that, too.

Ky [00:35:08] So you were definitely involved with, you know, both a lot of activism on and off campus. Did you see or experience any sort of pushback from the administration saying, "Hey, maybe, maybe don't be spending your time doing all of these demonstrations and protesting." Was there any pushback against what you did?

Robert [00:35:31] Mainly silence. One thing that I've been digging through is my own difficulties and eventual lawsuit against George Mason. And one thing that was cited in those was statements I have made at faculty meetings. So I don't remember what those were, but I'm sure they were sort of a bit too radical...for the administration at that time. There was a very conservative dean, whose name you've run across, with a very appropriate name of Krug, Dean Krug. Which is associated with a number of things. Who was inimical to, shall I say, to our point of view. And Jim and I and Larry were less than reticent, we were quite vocal at faculty meetings about our opposition to the administration and to Charlottesville's control.

Ky [00:37:09] Were there any particular scuffles or interactions you had with Krug alongside Shea?

Robert: Krug! [corrects Ky's pronunciation].

Ky: Krug.

Robert [00:37:29] No, not directly. You know, he was dean of the faculty and sort of in the shadows, the river. It all came to a head later and you mentioned Joel talked about this, and so what will if you'd like. When I have been granted a leave of absence and he denied that. And that led to our direct confrontation. I have a note from him on that that I'll send to yo.

Ky [00:38:07] So, yeah, let's let's dive into your non-renewal. This was, you know, hotly contested alongside the non-renewal of Shea and Leftoff. So can you just, I guess, speak to some of the circumstances behind your non-renewal? Why do you think the administration decided to let you go?

Robert [00:38:33] Well, as I said, they didn't decide to let me go. We were on a one year contract. I had arranged, and we were under pressure to finish our doctorates -

Ky [00:38:51] Mm-Hmm.

Robert: And I have a letter explaining from Krug why he let Larry Leftoff to go because Larry was not making progress fast enough on his doctorate. So anyway, Jim Jackson, the English Department chair, called me and we had a talk and he suggested that I had to keep working on my doctorate because, as I say, the Masters was not considered a terminal degree. It is now in creative writing and not expected to go on for a doctorate, but those early days and that was not established yet. And he said, well, you know, you could drive into American University, it's not all that far. And I said, well, you know, I've got all this credit already toward my doctorate from Syracuse, extra credits. Why don't I just take a leave of absence and go back there and finish all my coursework in a year, and then I'll come back and resume my teaching and finish the dissertation here? And he said, fine, sure, take the leave of absence. I don't think either he was quite new at this coming from the military into academia. I don't think either of us realized the leave of absence was something that apparently had to be formalized by contract then. So we shook hands on it, and I was expecting to come back at the end of the year.

During that year, Krug with the support of the rest of the administration, made it clear that they didn't want me back. And Jim Johnson wrote me saying that it was because of my association with Shea, who was really a hot issue at the time. The English Department unanimously wrote, requesting that I be allowed to come back and that I actually become not only a creative writing teacher but director freshman composition. That was turned down, and Jim was all in favor of it. So I contacted the NEA, and they put me in touch with people. One of the faculty members in English was a woman named Janice Delaney and her husband, Art, was a young upcoming DC attorney, and he got involved. We were all friends. And [he] was able to guide me, and the case progressed, it was slow. In the meantime, I had divorced in the fall of '68 and in 1970 I remarried and took a job as director of theater and creative writing at the University of the Americas in Mexico, in Puebla, Mexico. In Cholula, actually. And while I was there, it was very difficult to communicate. It was a new campus. We had no telephones, mail took a couple of weeks, at least, sometimes more. It was very difficult to communicate on the case. In the meantime, Krug and perhaps others, had found a former student who claimed that I had smoked marijuana with her. Which was evil at the time, terribly evil. Marijuana was a drug that was a great road sign on the road to Perdition. And. And since I was already in another position, I lost interest in the case. The NEA lost interest in the case and it just sort of went away.

Ky [00:44:02] So the lawsuit just stalled, it never went through?

Robert [00:44:06] never went through. It got muddled by the marijuana thing and the impossibility of communication and the fact that I knew I wasn't coming back. I was living in Mexico, loving it.

Ky [00:44:26] So part of our research entailed reviewing meeting minutes from the advisory committee at George Mason, and so while I was looking at some from nineteen sixty-nine, I found a passage where Dr. Loren Thompson, the chancellor at the time, was lamenting the fact that two or three George Mason people had gone to the University of Virginia to join demonstrations there against alleged racial discrimination. He said, quote, demonstrators represent a coalition between wilder, younger faculty members and the students. At George Mason, said the ringleaders are faculty members, not students. He cited as an example Robert Houston, a new English instructor who had gone to Charlottesville, adding that Houston would not be back next year. What do you think of this?

Robert [00:45:18] Yeah, yeah. In fact, I just found some papers up on the map of the campus in 1969 that we had come up with so know where to go.

Ky [00:45:32] So what do you think that both the circumstances behind your non-renewal, these anecdotes that you've shared - the letter from the director of the English department mentioning that they were not interested in rehiring you because of your affiliation with Shea? What do you think -

Robert [00:45:54] He said he regretted that very much because he wanted me back, as did the rest of the faculty, so it was directly contradictory to faculty rights. Nowadays, the faculty is in charge of hiring.

Ky [00:46:15] So what do you think all of this says about George Mason at the time? And what does it mean?

Robert [00:46:22] I think I think it says that to go back to what I said in the beginning, and you know, to understand is not to excuse. So I'm not excusing George Mason, but trying to understand I've done that over the years, great deal. I think it was a period of shock and transition for the older members of the administration. They were coming from a quite different world. And if you think about it, as I said before, transitions are very hard in that my feminist friends referred to something called the "pipeline problem." Have you run across that? [silence] In order to increase the number of female faculty members in any given discipline, you couldn't just immediately do that. There's a pipeline start early on that you have to put them into and then have to go through that in their high school years, their college years, their graduate school years and so forth. There were very few African-American[s] and Latino[s], and in fact, women were more in the pipeline. There were several female instructors. But it takes a while to produce PhDs, you know. There was a there was a period in which it was sort of a frantic effort to recruit African-American or as they were called, Black students in those days, into disciplines that could lead them into being college professors. They been discouraged, obviously, from going to state universities and many and also private universities all around the country. I went to a totally segregated Methodist University, College as an undergraduate. So to understand it, I think, there was great pressure to do something now. But on the other hand, the transition demanded that, "Okay, where do you find the candidates for that?" And that's a larger problem. We have to get them into the pipeline, and at the time we found more of your more of your Black students going into fields like sociology

than into English because that was more relevant to their struggles and their lives. And also, I was looking at some of my old syllabi from – is that gin? You're drinking? I hope so. [chuckles] No?

Ky [00:50:12] Oh no, water. [chuckles]

Robert [00:50:15] Oh, never touch the stuff. I agree with W.C. Fields on that. If you look at the syllabi at both Syracuse and George Mason in English, they were all European and English writers. There was no James Wright there was there were no I mean, Richard Wright, James Wright's a poet, Richard Wright, there were no African-American writers. It was all Eurocentric. And that had to be changed. There were no African-American studies programs in most universities and that have to be changed. So it was this period of great turmoil and change that had to be worked through. And I think, the older academicians didn't quite know how to do this, and we the younger, more radical ones, knew it had to be done. But we don't quite know how to do it, either. You know, I mean, we knew that we had to have African-American Studies departments. We knew we had to have Latino Studies departments. God knows LGBT was just not even mentioned at the time. We knew we had to have Black student unions. All these were, were, were necessary. But then you had to have Black students for that, and that meant recruitment. And the university wasn't doing any recruitment. So it was it was just a whole knot that had to be untangled at the time. And I think. Everybody had a different notion of how it was to be done. And those of us who were identified as campus radicals were for fear going full speed is doing it now. Whatever it took.

Ky [00:52:52] So I'm really compelled by what you just said, and I want to ask a little bit more about that. And I want to think about this a little bit in relationship, maybe to the button you showed a second or earlier on in the interview, "whites against white violence" [button]. It seems that you have this sense of urgency at the time that something needs to be done, but there's also a sense of uncertainty that you don't know what exactly is the solution, I guess. So how do you navigate the fact that, you know, you knew that something had to be done. You don't know exactly what it is to be done, but you still sort of need to take action. What, what, what gets you through this uncertainty? The fact that it is difficult to come up with solutions when you don't know necessarily what the best solution is, but that you know - what drives you to overcome all of those?

Robert [00:53:48] I think we knew what the ultimate solution was, but it was the how to get there, you know, and certainly the administration wasn't interested in doing the things that were necessary to start the process, such as recruiting, such as affirmative action. Affirmative action was a very new concept at the time. The administration wasn't interested in doing the things necessary to get the process going. Okay? And that's what we were interested in. Don't forget, the Black Panthers were also active at that time, and Black Power was very much in discussion. I recall being in favor of the Black Power movement. And taking part in demonstrations in the East Village for that, so... Yeah, it was a question of, we knew what the outcome was, and we knew that there were steps that could and should be taken that the administration was not interested in taking.

But... as I mentioned, there were all these background problems such as: how did you how did you, how were you able to build a critical mass of Black students when you were operating in a white suburban environment without dormitories? Unless there was an affirmative action recruitment program, how did you get the Black students on campus so that there could be a Black student union? Or, or courses in African-American Studies? So it was it was a process that we were unclear on, I think, as I look back on it.

Ky [00:56:11] So in essence -

Robert [00:56:12] It was the process...

Ky: [00:56:14] The process?

Robert: I'm just thinking out loud right now, as you are.

Ky [00:56:22] Mm hmm. So you mentioned, you know, the administration is not interested in affirmative action at the time. When we were reading some of the committee minutes and some of the publications that the administration released after the Civil Rights Commission report comes out, their response to requests for affirmative action is basically that we think that that is racism in reverse and that we think that affirmative action is discriminatory against whites is essentially what their response was. Do you remember or recall any of that sort of narrative being supported by the administration when you were protesting for affirmative action? Or do you -

Robert [00:57:05] I remember it's being very much a counter to affirmative action. And some, of some of the recommendations for affirmative action, such as creating special scholarships for African-American students that were state funded, were later ruled as unconstitutional. You couldn't do that. You could do that through private funds, for example. But no, that was a general argument. I don't remember any of those [other arguments]. I'm surprised that you mentioned Lorin Thompson mentioning my name, I wouldn't have known him if I'd seen him on the street. I had no real interaction with him.

Ky [00:57:58] I guess it shows how controversial you were. He mentions you by name as the example of what he described as "ringleader faculty" on campus that are agitating protests.

Robert [00:58:12] Oh well, I'm quite flattered, even at this late date, 50 odd years later.

Ky [00:58:19] Yeah, I mean, definitely. So this is, this question is a little bit a little bit related to the discussion of teach-ins earlier and, you know, sort of outlets for learning outside of the traditional classroom space. Do you recall any publications like, for example, the student newspaper or other pamphlets, educational materials where....Was publication used as an outlet for protest?

Robert [00:58:55] Well, I actually have a copy of the *Gunston Ledger* that I came across from that period. It was talking about a reading series that - I had started bringing in writers to read from their works. And a couple of them were rather radical. San Francisco poets, not necessarily very good ones, but of the right political persuasion.

Oh, the literary magazine was called *Apostrophe*. You have copies of that?

Ky [00:59:43] No, we don't.

Robert: No?

Ky: Mmm-mm.

Robert [00:59:47] Yeah, that was edited by Charlie Phillips. Who, last I heard Charlie was a couple of years ago, he was living in Rochester, New York. He later went on to Syracuse to get his Masters

in Creative Writing. Ah, no, well, you should [find some copies of *Apostrophe*]. I don't have any copies of *Apostrophe*. But Charlie might, and I can look and see if I've still got his e-mail address and I will send that to you. I know you're on a deadline on express purpose. Yes, you would find that in *Apostrophe* and you would find it in a number of the student essays that I got in my class. They were talking about world hunger overpopulation. Racism. Issues that are still being discussed today, I, as I said, just found some of those senior papers and was pleasantly surprised that social responses all these white suburban kids were at the time, from the Washington suburbs. Their parents weren't, but they were. They were the Sixties and the political movements that we're getting to.

Robert [01:01:28] There are two Sixties. The Sixties up to 1965, and that was an extension of the fifties, but around 1965 it all hit the fan and that's when what we think of now as the Sixties really begins. And these were kids of the post '65 era.

Ky [01:01:56] So, do you do you see the post '65 era, this sort of being a crucial, you know, instance of transformation, do you see this as being related to, you know, why there were, you know, maybe so many socially conscious white students from the suburbs that were writing about things like racism? Do you see this transformation, this transformative era, as related to this emergence of a social conscience?

Robert [01:02:25] I do. Yeah, so certainly I'm sure there were some, you know, who all along has been in favor of it. But this explosion was the post '65. And you know, it goes back initially to poets like Allen Ginsberg, who were breaking barriers, to *On the Road*, that novel and the whole beat generation. The beat generation came to fruition in the national consciousness in the latter half of the 1960s and into the '70s.

Ky [01:03:14] So did you use this cultural moment, or were there were there other sort of value systems or ethics that you drew on, to try and convince, you know, white students when you're doing these protests, these teach-ins, these you know, these various demonstrations that you're involved with, you're trying to convince white students of the necessity to take action against or speak up about racism about the war in Vietnam-

Robert [01:03:47] Yes. Yes. There was a great deal of reading of Thoreau, or "thorough," as he pronounced it. Of Billy Bud and, you know, the more radical works of Melville. And you, you, you found it in theater in Washington. The Great White Hope, for example, started out there. I just ran across a poster from a reading I attended with Robert Bly, who was a radical poet, and Eugene McCarthy was presidential candidate in '68. McCarthy-ites were the radical wing. They were the Bernie Sanders, if you will, of the Democratic Party. And you have a presidential candidate reading poetry, his own poetry, which was not great, but not bad at all. Along with, you know, well-known radical poets. So all of this was transforming the student's sense of connectedness. And probably, you know, LSD had a little to do with that and which is quite big and quite legal, as a matter of fact. I just ran across a Day of Mourning for the day, the day became illegal. You could walk into the East Village, doctor's office and just buy blotters from the receptionist before. So anyway, with all of that, the whole hallucinogenic drug culture, the fact that pot was everywhere. It was, it was just a cultural explosion in so many ways, and not all of the students stuck with it. I mean, there was Woodstock. There was a huge Woodstock-like concert in the baseball stadium in DC, that I went to. There were plays, like *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well in Paris* that were very popular and contained a real anti-Vietnam message. And I think the war was, as I mentioned to you in an email, the war was a really overriding concern at the time because the students were the ones who were

of draft age and could be caught up in a war they didn't support. Now. There is some hypocrisy in that, too. Because the majority of people who were being drafted were poor Black kids of color couldn't afford to be in college and didn't really have a welcoming college. And didn't feel at home in college because, as I said, you just studied basically European and English language in college and all of us on the faculty, that's basically what we have studied, all we knew. So we weren't prepared for them, and they're the ones who get left behind, they're the ones that got sent to Vietnam. But it was still among even our white middle class students from the Virginia suburbs were primarily concerned with the war and in student rights and faculty rights. We were concerned with faculty rights, they were concerned with student rights, and we supported them in that. And that drove the conservatives in the administration at George Mason and [inaudible] they just couldn't get their hands around it.

Ky [01:09:00] Yeah. That's that's a lot of really valuable introspection there. So, I want to ask about a group –

Robert: What's your major, Ky?

Ky: I'm a sociology major.

Robert [01:09:20] OK. Yeah. I would have guessed. Alright. [laughter] It's okay, It's fine.

Ky [01:09:22] [laughter] I'm an English minor. If that, if that helps.

Robert [01:09:28] Oh, that helps enormously. Yes. Good.

Ky [01:09:30] I was a double major at one point, but it was too much for me to be taking that many courses that I'm on the debate team as well and working and so, had to drop English down to a minor. But yeah, I'm I do study a little bit of English.

Robert [01:09:48] Oh, okay. Well, I appreciate that. I was a triple major.

Ky [01:09:54] Really?

Robert [01:09:55] English, Theatre, and Russian.

Ky: Wow.

Speaker 2 [01:09:59] So, I get it [inaudible] and Technical Theater also. Anyway, go ahead. I get it.

Ky [01:10:10] So I was just I was just interested in asking if you recall the Northern Virginia Free College, so this was -

Robert [01:10:18] Yes, in fact I have a paper from them. A prospectus which I'll send you.

Ky [01:10:25] Yeah, that that would be awesome. So I was just going to ask if you could talk a bit about the organization, what you all did and why, why it was important.

Robert [01:10:35] I wasn't directly involved in that. I knew about it. I have a friend here who founded the Free College in Arizona, so he has told me a great deal about what they were doing

there. Now, I did teach – I didn't get paid very much. My salary at the time was seventy-five hundred dollars a year. So I did teach at Northern Virginia Community College, is that what it's called? Part-time, also, and in the summer. But no, not at the Free University.

Ky [01:11:24] Do you do you recall anything about the Free University that you think was notable or do you recall Shea or Leftoff's involvement with them?

Robert [01:11:36] No, I don't. I know that it was very valuable and as I say, I've got the sort of recruiting poster prospectus that I will send you which will give you an idea of what their mission statement was.

Ky [01:11:57] OK. Yeah,

Robert [01:12:05] They, they were quite valuable. And they were later co-opted. The one here was co-opted by the community college system and turned into a huge community of college system. I It started as a free university and an old aircraft hangar. So what do you know of the Free University from your research?

Ky [01:12:34] So from what I understand, the Free University was a free instructional class. Classes on Saturday, where they would round up some local youth in particular, they would try to reach out to like students of color and do educational sessions. And in the oral history interview that the George Mason Archives has with James Shea, actually, he talks about his involvement in the in the Free University and mentions that it was mostly like fun reading material for the kids. It wasn't about political education, it was like stories and fables and that sort of thing just to give them, just to give them an educational experience that they had been deprived of. Yeah, that's that's about the extent of my knowledge is that this is what they did and I'm looking more into it to try and see, and I'm hoping that when I get a chance to talk to Lawrence Leftoff, that we'll be able to speak at length about it.

Robert [01:13:53] Give him my best.

Ky [01:13:54] I will. I will.

Robert [01:13:57] And tell him I'm still sorry about his cat.

Ky [01:13:59] Sorry about his cat, okay I will write that down.

Robert [01:14:02] He had gone away and that this cat would be on the farm and it had been bitten by a snake. I felt so awful about that. In fact, Jim Shea wanted to rent the farm after I left, and he was so notorious that the realtor from whom I was renting it refused to rent to him.

Ky [01:14:29] Hmm. So what's your fondest memory with Lawrence Leftoff and Jim Shea, or one or the other?

Robert [01:14:43] Memories in various ways, good discussions, Larry, reciting is Milton. Our planning, the demonstrations and the strike. Going to the – Jim, have you been able Jim Shea? No?

Ky: Mm-mmm.

Robert [01:15:13] It was a terrible story, you know, that he went on the run in Tennessee. And one of his daughters, a lovely little girl, was killed in Tennessee. She was run over. I think he was working in a car wash or something at the time. And that just finished him. And that's when he came back and went to jail. I think, the whole stolen car thing - I don't remember the details, but Larry might. Because he stayed there until he was fired for not progressing fast enough toward his doctorate. So that that's what happened to Jim and after he got out of jail, I don't know. But that was just tragic because he had to lose his daughter, you know, because of....I think Jim was probably the most pure and dedicated one of us all.

I recall coming down to Mason from Syracuse after going back and staying over on Jim's couch. And listening to the roaches run up and down in the walls all night, because Jim refused to use any kind of pesticides in the house. So he was quite early on a protester against the use of pesticides, and besides, he didn't want to hurt things, even roaches. And that was a kind of purity that none of the rest of us ever obtain. As I said, I thought there were just wars. Jim would've said no, no war is just. And I would remember Hitler and think, yeah, some wars are just....And just good conversations. Jim was a philosopher, a philosophy teacher as you know. And the discussions in the cafeteria about things such as that, but Jim was the one who provided the unflagging energy. for the rest of us. So. If Larry knows how to find him. Good luck, you need to talk to Jim.

Ky [01:18:24] Yeah, yeah, I think I think he would be really good to talk to. I'll probably try and look more into it today. So. Can you talk a little bit just about what you did after leaving Mason, where you went and what your career looked like afterwards?

Robert [01:18:48] Well, as I say, for two years, I lived in Mexico as director of theater and creative writing on the new campus there, at the University of the Americas, which is a very good private school. Brand-new campus. I had great fun designing the theater and equipping and producing some original plays and some Shakespearean plays that no one had produced...[inaudible]... And then realized that it was the writing that I was doing was just almost impossible to do from this little village in Mexico to be in touch with publishers in New York, given the state of the mails and so forth and no telephone. And I realized that I needed English as a living language around me because I was speaking Spanish most of the time by then. And, so I applied for the doctoral program in creative writing at Iowa. You know about the Iowa writers' workshop, probably.

Robert [01:20:30] And I finished it up at the end of the year because of the credits I had from Syracuse. And it was hired here at Arizona, where I helped found a little tour of the Americas program and became interested in Latin American literature to a great extent with Spanish language, because that was all new to me and my wife was a Spanish professor, so she was able to guide me on that. And then I do a stint a Fulbright professor to Lima, Peru to the Catholic university there, and did a stint at the University of the Andes in Bogota. And in Argentina, then somewhere – anyway. And I published 10 novels and wrote regularly for the *New York Times* book reviews and op eds, and for the *Times* and *the Nation* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, various publications. *Mother Jones*, I wrote several articles for *Mother Jones* magazine. So. That's it, it was a writing career, and I got to the point that I became director of the creative writing program here. And I retired. And here I am talking to you, on a cloudy day in Tucson in the monsoon season.

Ky [01:22:36] So how do you think your experiences and your time at Mason impacted both your professional and personal life?

Robert [01:22:44] It gave me a sense of cynicism about the administrations at universities, for one thing, which I carried with me. I had [it] before, and I have [it] now. And it gave me a sharpened sense of hypocrisy. It hastened me that I learned that sometimes making brave and grandiloquent statements and faculty meetings isn't the best way to accomplish what you need to accomplish. That there are more subtle ways to do it. Yeah, and as I say, hypocrisy is something that I learned at Mason from the administration.

Ky [01:23:42] Did any of your time at Mason or participation in protests, demonstrations, while at Mason, but off campus maybe, come to influence any of your publications?

Robert [01:24:01] It's not necessarily at Mason, as I mentioned in the essay, my participation at Selma had a great deal to do with a transformation in that period over to Mason, but not as Mason itself, Mason was a continuation.

Ky [01:24:31] So can you describe what a day in your life is like now?

Robert [01:24:36] Right now?

Ky [01:24:38] Yeah. What's it like to be Robert Houston in twenty twenty-one?

Robert [01:24:45] [laughter] Well, you don't want to know all of the quotidian details, I'm sure. Like the dog walks in the morning and so forth. Still doing some writing, short pieces mainly. Piddling with a novel set in Vera Cruz, Mexico, I've set several of my books and novels in Latin America. And...a couple of them had to do with American history and interventionism and so forth. Anyway. And right now? Today? I'm going out to dinner this evening, I just got a new vacuum cleaner from Amazon that I'm going to try out this afternoon. I'm going to answer many e-mails. I'm going to have some political arguments with different people, online. Poets and a friend of mine who's very much in the environmentalist movement. And lives off the grid in Cochise County, Arizona in the middle of nowhere. So, yeah, it's a fairly full life. But it's not as active as it once was. Your energy flags when you hit a certain age, you'll find that out, later rather than sooner, I hope.

Ky [01:26:40] Yeah, I hope so as well.

Robert [01:26:42] And how's the state of this project? Is it going to be published?

Ky [01:26:46] It will. Yes, it will be published. And so I also wanted to ask if there's anything we can do for you to be a good partner in this relationship. So if there's I mean, of course, we'll send you a copy of the interview. We can send you links to the digital exhibits that we're going to be producing at the conclusion of this project. But if there's anything else you can think of, ways that -

Robert [01:27:13] I imagine, Spectrum as something that I've tried to remember more about *Apostrophe* the literary magazine you need to try to find. I don't have a copy of it but Charlie Phillips might. And ah, no, I just like to keep up with the project. I'd find it very interesting to be involved as a reader or an adviser, whatever.

Ky [01:27:49] Of course. So we're actually in the process of putting together exhibits right now. So in probably two to four weeks is when we'll probably have stuff online. We're looking I think early August is when we're going to try and have stuff ready to go.

Robert [01:28:08] You'll have a link to that?

Ky: Yes, we will

Robert [01:28:13] Today is Friday, I will get all of these materials I've got for you in the mail as quickly as possible. So don't you forget to send me your best mailing address.

Ky [01:28:26] Yes, of course. I'm going to send out an email to the faculty leaders on our team to see where it would be best to be sent. And we totally appreciate that so much because I'm sure I mean, even just having a picture of, you know, the pin you showed earlier, the Spectrum paper you mentioned the Northern Virginia Free College advertisement, all of that is just invaluable to what we're doing. So I really appreciate you taking time to dig it up and then your willingness to share it with us. It's - it's really meaningful.

Robert [01:29:03] Oh, I hope so. It will wind up in the archives at Mason?

Ky [01:29:10] They might, I don't know what the procedure is for this. That's why I'm going to reach out. But I think they might.

Robert [01:29:17] Yeah, because I would hate to see it just thrown away. Otherwise, I could put it in the archives here in the Arizona library -

Ky [01:29:29] We are working in close collaboration with the archivists at Mason. So I'm sure, I'm sure we can. I just I personally don't know what the process is.

Robert [01:29:39] Okay, okay. Make sure that they don't just get chucked, alright?

Ky [01:29:43] Of course.

Robert [01:29:45] [Those papers are an] important part of the history. Who would have ever thought that this little college is maybe a thousand students in four buildings, then, would turn into what you've got now?

Ky [01:30:01] It's huge, it's huge.

Robert [01:30:03] Yeah, and the creative writing program is one of the best. At the time, I was the only and first creative writing teacher, so I was, I guess, the founder of George Mason's creative writing program. Followed by Larry McMurtry. You know Larry's work? *Lonesome Dove*. All of them just wonderful novels. OK, I've kept you long enough.

Ky [01:30:32] So just as the last question. I'd like to ask is there anything that we have not talked about that you would like to add?

Robert [01:30:45] No, just that it was a very turbulent time. It was a very exciting time. It was a very sad time in many ways in my personal life, and to see what had - was happening in the country. It was a great time to be young at George Mason. So you make the most of it. Okay?

Ky [01:31:24] OK. Well, Dr. Houston, thank you so much,

Robert [01:31:26] I wish you had been in one of my classes then.

Ky [01:31:30] I wish I could have taken one.

Robert [01:31:32] We would have had fun. Okay, Ky. Thank you.

Ky [01:31:35] Thank you. Thank you so much.

Robert [01:31:38] Okay. And we'll be in touch. Don't hesitate to write if you need more.

Ky [01:31:43] OK, thank you so much. Take care. Have a good dinner.

Robert [01:31:47] Thank you. Bye bye.

Ky: Bye.