

DENNY CHRISTIAN

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota



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TRANSCRIPT—DENNY CHRISTIAN

Interviewee: Denny Christian
Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
Interview Date: January 26, 2026
Location: Saint Paul, Minnesota
Length: 01:40:46

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Monday, January 26, 2026. And I'm here with Dennis, or Denny Christian. I'm going to call him Denny, and we'll understand why here in a minute. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I'll be talking to Denny about his involvement and his family's involvement, perhaps as well, at Oxford. So thank you so much, Denny, for agreeing to participate.

Denny Christian: No problem.

KH: I'm so, so happy to have somebody from the Christian family.

DC: I'm glad to be here.

KH: Good. Okay, so if you could just start and just tell me a little bit about yourself, like where you grew up.

DC: Okay. I grew up in the Selby-Dale area. I was born here in St. Paul. I grew up on Marshall, between Lexington and Oxford, right behind Oxford playground, 1063 Marshall. And Oxford was my second home.

KH: Yeah, well, because you were so close.

DC: Exactly.

KH: And is that the house that you grew up in for all of your young life, or did

you move?

DC: No, no, before that, we lived on Fuller Avenue. But I think I was four years old when we moved over to Marshall Street.

KH: So most of your memory would be from Marshall?

DC: Exactly, from Marshall. Exactly.

KH: And so, this is why I said we'll learn more about why I'm going to call you Denny. Tell me a little bit about your family and who else is in your family.

DC: I have an older brother—well, I had an older brother named Robert. There's seven of us Christians, and he has a different father. My mother had one child when she met my father in Missouri years ago.

[00:02:00]

DC: After him is my brother, his name is Kenneth, but his nickname is Kenny. And then I have a sister, Janet, and I have another sister, who is deceased, named Denise. And then my brother Leonard, his nickname is Lenny. And then it's me, my nickname Denny. Then it's my younger brother Benjamin. His nickname is Benny. And then my baby brother Quentin. And his nickname was Quinny. So, we're known as Kenny, Lenny, Denny, Benny and Quinny.

KH: It's quite a mouthful. But I mean, so your family, partly because it was a large family, was just part of the Rondo community at that end of Rondo?

DC: Correct. Yeah, we were pretty popular in my neighborhood. And me and all my brothers, Oxford, like I said, was our second home.

KH: And what year were you born?

DC: In 1960.

KH: So you were born just as Oxford was kind of becoming a formal playground. You may not remember some of the early years because you were pretty little. What's

your earliest memory of Oxford?

[00:04:00]

DC: Well, my earliest memory was when we still lived over on Fuller. I think I was six or seven years old. Wait a minute. We couldn't have moved over on Marshall when I was four because I remember my brothers Kenny and Lenny basically bringing me and Benny over to Oxford before 94 was there, while they were working on making 94 highway. So we used to walk across all the dirt and the tractors. We used to actually play on the tractors because you could press a button that said start and it would make noise like it was starting, but you also needed the key. So we would play on the big tractors. We weren't supposed to, but we did.

KH: So Fuller then was on the other side of 94? But you remember going to Oxford even while you were living—

DC: Even when I was there. Right.

KH: And so, yeah, you're growing up, whether on Fuller and then later on Marshall, as 94 is being built and as Oxford is kind of developing a more formal playground.

DC: Exactly. Yeah, Oxford used to be nothing but trees and woods. While they were building Oxford, we used to play in the ditches and things that were there as they were making Oxford.

KH: Okay, so you remember actually the before and after and seeing them kind of formalize it, more or less. So, obviously, we'll come back to Oxford, but I want to ask you about 94. This may seem a silly question with an obvious answer, but I'll ask. How did the construction of the highway affect you and your family?

DC: Well, I'm pretty sure it affected my older siblings and my parents, but you know, I was a kid. It was fun going across all that dirt and everything. So it didn't affect

me at all, but I can't speak for how it affected my parents.

[00:06:00]

KH: Do you remember them talking about it?

DC: I don't.

KH: Because again, you were a little kid doing what little kids do.

DC: Right.

KH: And what did your Mom and Dad do?

DC: Well, my mother was a cook. And my earliest memory, she was the head cook at St. Paul Academy.

KH: A school?

DC: Yeah. And my father, at the time, when I was growing up, he had basically three jobs. He worked at Whirlpool on Arcade, and then he would come home from Whirlpool and start his own painting company. A lot of my friends and my brother's friends have worked for my father. A lot of people in our community have worked for my father's paint company.

KH: What was it called?

DC: It was called Part Time Painters. Because he, like I said, worked at Whirlpool. Then he would come home at 3:30 and we'd sit down and have family dinner and then he'd go upstairs and come down in his paint clothes. He had a contract with McAllister College for years. But when he had passed, he left it to my sister. When it ended, I think we had that contract for like 52 years. So we all learned how to paint out at McAlester College. Then we'd come home from there around ten o'clock and he'd go down to the old Savoy Pizza and he was the night janitor cleaned up after they closed up. He'd come home around, I don't know, one o'clock in the morning, go to sleep and back up at 5:30 going out to Whirlpool.

[00:08:00]

KH: Holy cow. That's a busy schedule.

DC: Yeah, a lot of people in the neighborhood would say he was a heck of a man.

He employed a lot of people that me and my brother grew up with.

KH: Yeah, and that's quite a thing to be able to say.

DC: A lot of them went on to start their own painting companies.

KH: That's pretty impressive. And your Mom was working also?

DC: Yeah, as his painting company grew, my Mom quit working, just became a stay at home mom.

KH: Was that because just financially they could afford to do it?

DC: I believe so, yeah.

KH: That's a lot. So, tell me a little bit about yourself as a kid. Like what'd you like to do?

DC: Sports.

KH: No hesitation. Sports.

DC: No hesitation. Sports basically was my whole childhood life.

KH: What sports did you play?

DC: I played basketball, football, baseball; seasonally every single year. Then in the wintertime when I wasn't playing basketball, we were ice skating. We used to have makeup hockey games, but we used to play a game called Pump and Pull Away. See, that's why when I was coming up, we used to kind of look at people, because Blacks weren't known to ice skate. But when I was a kid, the whole Rondo community, the whole Selby-Dale community, everybody ice skated. All my friends, my brother's friends, my sister's friends, they ice skate. Everybody, all the Blacks in that area ice skated.

[00:10:00]

KH: That's so interesting. I think maybe I mentioned this to you when we spoke on the phone, but that's one thing that I've learned and found really interesting in this project is because so many people have said, "Oh, yeah, we ice skated all the time," whether it was figure skating or hockey or speed skating.

DC: All the time. Every day. We'd leave basketball practice and go put on our skates and go play make up hockey.

KH: And was this all then at Oxford?

DC: At Oxford, yeah.

KH: So, even when you were on Fuller, you were on the kind of western side of Rondo?

DC: I was on Fuller and Victoria.

KH: Oh, so you had a ways to go from Fuller to Oxford.

DC: No, not really, because I lived on Fuller and Oxford, between Oxford and Chatsworth, so we just had to go across 94.

KH: So, by that time, then, you were kind of on the west end.

DC: I lived almost in the same place on Marshall as I did on Fuller, just except for about a half a block.

KH: So was the Hollow around when you were a kid? It was a playground further east, and I think on the north side of what now is 94. And I don't think there was a building there.

DC: The Hollow?

KH: Yeah, the Hollow.

DC: I don't remember.

KH: How about, were you at Hallie Q. Brown or Martin Luther King eventually?

DC: Yeah. Well, we went up there to play ball sometimes and everything. Our

home was Oxford. But I remember when I was younger, we had a coach at Oxford named Johnny Cotton, and he ended up leaving Oxford and going to Hallie Q. Brown. A couple of my teammates followed him over there, so I went. These are my teammates that I've been used to playing for since I can remember. One named John Withers and one named Jerry Allen and Allen Reed. We were used to each other.

[00:12:00]

DC: So I attempted to go over there. I came home one day from practice at Hallie Q. Brown, and Bill Peterson told my mother, if I don't come back to Oxford, I can't ever come to Oxford again. So I came back to play for Oxford.

KH: That took care of that, I guess.

DC: Just took care of that right away.

KH: And so, when John Cotton and some of your teammates and you went over to Halle, were you playing basketball at the time, or what?

DC: Basketball.

KH: And how old were you about at that time?

DC: About 12.

KH: So you'd already been at Oxford for quite a while before you went to Hallie, before Bill said, "Uh-uh, get back here."

DC: Oh yeah. And then eventually, I think the very next year, they came back to Oxford.

KH: Oh, they did. And do you know what made John Cotton move to Hallie?

DC: I don't. I might have even been 10 years old at the time.

KH: Did you have a favorite sport of the many that you did?

DC: I'd say it's a toss-up between basketball and baseball.

KH: And what positions did you play in those sports?

DC: Well, I started out playing pitcher, but I liked shortstop better in baseball. And basketball, I was a point guard. And football, I was quarterback and wide receiver.

KH: And you said earlier that you kind of followed your older brothers. So all of you in the Christian family were in sports? Including your sisters?

[00:14:00]

DC: Well, no, not my sisters, but my sisters did participate in skating. They used to have contests, speed skating and things like that, at McMurray Field, by Como Park. Bill Peterson and Stevie Winfield would load up our bus. We had a big blue bus called the Big O. Big O was written on the side of it. He would load us up, boys and girls, and we'd go up there to the speed skating contest. We'd show up and naturally, we're the only Blacks, and everybody else has, the first time we ever seen them, long speed skates because we all had hockey skates. But when we got done and came back to Oxford, boys and girls, everybody had a first place medallion.

KH: Even though you were skating on hockey skates?

DC: With blue jeans on. And winter coats.

KH: So you're talking about being this group of African American kids going to these predominantly white speed skating races. Did anybody give you a hard time about that?

DC: No, they didn't. Not that I remember.

KH: Or maybe if they did?

DC: They kept it to themselves.

KH: Until you won everything.

DC: Yeah. Well, I don't ever remember having any problems. No.

KH: So you were skating in these races also?

DC: Oh yeah.

KH: With your hockey skates?

DC: Exactly. Me and my brother Benny.

KH: Did you ever get speed skates?

[00:16:00]

DC: No. Never wanted them. See, my mother and father—and I'll add that we were pretty fortunate. We were very fortunate. But every Christmas, my Mom would get us a new hockey stick, hockey puck, a new football, a new basketball, a new pair of hockey skates. So what we used to do is, we would give our year-old hockey skates to one of our friends.

KH: So you were kind of spreading the opportunities and the equipment for people to play?

DC: Yeah. I mean, my parents, they were about community. There's people, to this day, they talk about my mother's cookies. Because my mother kept one of them trays that they use for hotel room service. And 24-7-365, there would be a ham, a roast, or a turkey on the top with two homemade cakes beside them, and seven Folgers cookie jars at the bottom with different types of homemade cookies in it.

KH: Because she was a cook professionally as well as what she did at home?

DC: Correct. My friends used to love to come to our house.

KH: Oh I bet. And I just want to make sure we get this on the record. What were your Mom and Dad's names?

DC: My Mom's name was Josephine and my Dad's name was Kenneth.

KH: So tell me a little bit more about how they were involved and were part of the Rondo community.

DC: Well, my Mom, she always came to our games. And, like I said, if you were a friend of mine, or my brothers, or my sisters, and you came to pick one of us up or

something, my Mom would let them leave until they had a sandwich and some cookies.

And my Dad, he was well respected and his friends were also well respected.

[00:18:00]

DC: There's certain families and, we all grew up together, our dads were hard working men. My Dad, Mr. Lindsay, Mr. Smaller, Frank White's dad, they all worked hard and they provided for us. But I used to go to paint jobs and started out just cleaning up. And, like I said, my Dad employed many of my friends, all my brother's friends, so they were just supportive of all the kids in the community.

KH: And it sounds like you must have had kids going in and out of your house all the time.

DC: Yeah, exactly. All the time. Because there were a lot of us and we all had friends. And, back then, the Rondo community was really close.

KH: So say a little bit more about that. How would you describe the community as a whole?

DC: As family. There's no other way I can explain it but as a family. Because, I mean, it was a perfect, what do you call it? An analogy of it takes a village. Because if one of our neighbors, mothers or fathers, saw us doing something we weren't supposed to do, oh, they would contact your parents, or they would stop you. So, yeah, our community was really tight. And, I mean, even now. We've all had problems with each other, but if somebody from our Rondo community needed help or was in a situation, you would have no problem getting help from your people you grew up with in the Rondo area.

[00:20:00]

KH: Which is like a family, right? There can be conflict maybe sometimes, but ultimately—

DC: Sometimes, yeah. But no outsider can come in and cause no problems.

KH: Right, right. And so, when you were growing up in Rondo, was it primarily African American? Were there white folks or other folks?

DC: No.

KH: So an African American community for you?

DC: Correct.

KH: And so, the businesses that were there?

DC: When I was a kid growing up in the Rondo area, I only remember, I think, three white kids that used to come in the area. One of them was Paul Molitor, my brother Lenny's teammate. Paul Molitor used to manage the Twins, and in the Hall of Fame. And there was another white guy, who was a friend of my brother Lenny, named Tim Willie [ph]. Then there used to be a band called Purple Haze, and they were pretty familiar with everybody. They were pretty well known. They had a white guy that played, I think, keyboards for them. I think his last name was Stay [ph]. So, yeah, when I was a kid, they were the only three whites I can remember.

KH: I asked this because we know the history, but also because others who I've interviewed for this project have talked about how they didn't always feel safe, or comfortable, let's put it that way, going outside of Rondo. Is that true for you as well?
[00:22:00]

DC: Correct. For me, it was that you better not. I know of situations where some Blacks went across, say, University, and then something bad would happen to them, or whites coming on our side of University. And so, as far as I can remember, besides getting on that bus and going to games, I think it was University to Selby and then Western to, I'm going to say, Hamline. That was what I remember being our restricted area.

KH: When I asked this question, you said, yeah, it was more like, you better not. Did your parents say, "Hey, you should stay within our neighborhood?"

DC: Sometimes, yeah. My parents have told me that. My Dad has told me that.

KH: Where did your dad grow up?

DC: My Dad's from Missouri.

KH: And you said your Mom and Dad met in Missouri?

DC: In Missouri. My mother's from Detroit. My grandfather, or our grandfather, my mother's father, owned a circus.

KH: Really?

DC: Yeah, he literally owned a circus. My mother had two brothers. They're not around anymore. One of them just passed a few years ago, but they both died in their eighties, nineties, late eighties, nineties. And they still had scars. My grandfather used to train the lions. They still had scars on them that they'd been scratched by the lion. My mother was, I guess, the girl that rode on the elephant, the real pretty woman.

KH: Really? And that was in Detroit?

DC: That was not just Detroit. They traveled all over.

KH: So it was a traveling one.

[00:24:00]

DC: From what I understand, they ended up in Missouri and that's where my mother met my father. My father ended up coming to Minnesota with my mother's family. I guess from what I know, from what I've heard, they came here and they painted church steeples.

KH: So that was their first job?

DC: That's where my Dad learned how to paint. My grandfather and his family, my mother's father and my two uncles taught my Dad how to paint, I guess.

KH: And so, that would have been your Mom's dad, the guy who bought the circus. So he gave that up eventually and then started painting?

DC: Exactly.

KH: And do you know why they chose to move to Minnesota?

DC: No. I don't have a clue.

KH: Okay. What an interesting story, though, about that circus. That seems like somebody should tell that story. That must be really interesting. So do you remember from when you were a young person—I mean, you've kind of alluded to it, but any kind of racial tension? Any specific conflicts that you recall?

DC: Oh, yeah, I've had my share. Just because they said, "Don't go to the other side of University or Selby," doesn't mean we didn't do it. So me and my friends definitely were spotted somewhere we weren't supposed to be, and some guys came after us and we were well aware if we'd seen one of them in our neighborhood, they're not supposed to be here. So, yeah, I've had fisticuffs, me and my friends, with whites.

KH: And that was, like, when you were a teenager?

DC: Yeah.

[00:26:00]

KH: So, a little bit older, probably '70s, '80s.

DC: Yeah, when I was 15, 16, 17. Well, when I was about 14, 15. It might even be probably before that. Because when I got up into 16, 17, that stuff was getting old, and people were going where they wanted to go.

KH: Just because things were changing culturally?

DC: Yeah, yeah.

KH: I know we're kind of, on these big questions, circling around Oxford. I'm going to get back to Oxford specifically. But it's always interesting to kind of get a picture of the wider picture, the context, whatever we're talking about was happening. What schools did you go to?

DC: I went to J.J. Hill. I started at Maxfield because I lived over on Fuller and think I only went there one year. Then my elementary years were spent at J.J. Hill.

KH: And then what about junior high?

DC: Ramsey Junior High.

KH: And then Central?

DC: Then Central.

KH: Now, a number of people I've talked to for this project also went to J.J. Hill, and they really talked very fondly about the staff there. What was your experience at J.J. Hill?

DC: It was great. Great. Mrs. Miller, her name is Mrs. Stroud now, was my fifth grade teacher. She was great. Then we had a gentleman, there were four portables. They called them portables, and Mr. Helm, he had one. I was in Mrs. Stroud's, Mrs. Miller's class. They were no nonsense. They'd pat you on the back when you did right, but they'd get on you when you did wrong. And it was just a ball.

[00:28:00]

KH: So you enjoyed school?

DC: I loved it. Then I did.

KH: At that age.

DC: Yeah.

KH: And what about Ramsey? So Ramsey is a little bit out of the neighborhood. How was that different than J.J. Hill? Or was it?

DC: Well, yeah, it was different because at J.J. Hill, you had all your friends. Everybody from the neighborhood went to J.J. Hill. But now when I got to Ramsey, a lot of my friends went to Wilson, Highland, so we were kind of separated during school hours.

KH: And then Central. What year did you graduate?

DC: Well, I graduated from alternative school in '79. I went to Central and played B-squad basketball for most of the year. Then I got kicked out of that school for doing stupid things.

KH: And then you went from there, then, to the alternative school.

DC: Yeah, but my diploma says Central.

KH: And that was '79?

DC: Yes.

KH: So now circling back to Oxford, the main reason that we're here. You said that you did three main sports, plus skating. I mean, I guess that's four sports, really. If you can remember, tell me what an average day for you at Oxford was.

[00:30:00]

DC: An average day was, let me see, we'd go down there early, and we always had practice. Whatever time of the year it was, we always had practice. But if we had basketball practice, before that, we would go and play maybe a makeup game of half-court basketball. And it being the wintertime, we might go ice skating, play make up hockey games before practice, and then after practice, we'll do the same thing. Then they had a lady that worked there that everybody just loved. Her name was Pat Gaustad, and she ran the rec room. We did pottery and things like that. She was a sweetheart.

KH: And she was white. Is that right?

DC: Yeah, she was white. We used to do little things that would kind of tick her off, because we wanted to hear her say—her saying was, what was it again? "You keep it up, I'm going to send you to Fargo." We always grew up. So when I got older and I realized that there was a place really called Fargo, I thought of Pat.

KH: Oh, that's funny.

DC: Yeah. She would tell you, “You keep it up, I’m going to send you to Fargo.”

So we’d tap each other and say, “Do this, do this so Pat can notice.” Then we loved to hear her say that. “You keep it up, I’m going to send you to Fargo.”

KH: But you all, at that time, didn’t know what Fargo was?

DC: We didn’t. We had no idea Fargo was a real place.

KH: Oh, that’s funny.

DC: Yeah, and she had a daughter. I can’t remember her daughter’s name and she was a sweetheart. They treated us just like we were their kids.

KH: And did they live in that area?

[00:32:00]

DC: No. You know what? They didn’t live in the Selby-Dale area. I never did know where Pat lived.

KH: I’m trying to think if it was her.

DC: You know what? I think Pat did, if I can recollect right. No, she wouldn’t live there. There was a house a couple doors from Oxford, and I want to say Pat lived there, but I don’t remember. I don’t think so.

KH: Because was she at different rec centers also, do you know?

DC: Not that I know of.

KH: So, for you, you saw her regularly at Oxford?

DC: Every day. So then we’d go and we’d just play ball and whatever else that they had going on. We’d come to Oxford at, well, in the summertime, nine o’clock in the morning. We wouldn’t leave until nine o’clock at night, till close. We might leave and go to the store, but we were always playing some type of ball. If it was football season, we’d go to football practice and then go inside with our football pants still on and we’d play basketball. We were always doing something.

When I first started going to Oxford, there was no gym. There was just a basket outside the building. That's another thing we did a lot of. Oxford was just an ice skating rink. We called it the warming house because we'd go back inside once we got cold, tired of skating, and we got our toes hot. Our feet might have gotten cold, and we'd go inside. They had a trampoline in the garage. So we were all pretty good at doing tricks on the trampoline.

[00:34:00]

DC: We used to play this game that, say if I'm first, I do a double back flip. So then the five people behind me, they've got to do a double backflip. If they can't complete it, they're out.

KH: So, it's like horse on the trampoline.

DC: Yeah, there you go. Exactly.

KH: So, I mean, it sounds like you were just at Oxford in all your free time. Is that fair to say?

DC: Yeah, that's fair to say.

KH: And during the school year, you would go after school and hang out there?

DC: Until it closed.

KH: And you would do your formal practice, but you'd hang out before and after that?

DC: Yeah, and play other sports. Then after a while, after they built the new building, that's all we did was skate. I'm trying to remember. Before the new gym, before the new building, of course, we didn't have any home basketball games because we didn't have a basketball court. So we didn't get home games until they built the new building.

KH: So, until then, before the new building—

DC: We used to go on the bus and go to other places.

KH: But at home you would practice outside, is that right? Where would you practice? Because basketball is a winter sport, usually.

DC: You know what? I'm having trouble remembering that.

KH: There was an outdoor court, right? But in the winter?

DC: But it was only one rim. It wasn't like a full court. So I don't remember how we practiced. I really don't.

KH: Yeah, but you did play even before there was the big building?

DC: Yeah, we played like Linwood, Edgumbe, the Ober Boys Club.

[00:36:00]

KH: I have also heard other people that I've talked with about this project, including Bill and Frank, talk about how teams from outside of Rondo in more white communities didn't always want to come into Oxford to play. Was that true for when you were playing also?

DC: Oh yeah, many times, we'd be sitting out there preparing for a game and Steve Winfield or somebody might be lining the field, and they'll come and tell us, "We're not going to be playing today." And they didn't have to tell us why. We knew why, because they didn't feel comfortable coming in our neighborhood playing us.

KH: And why do you think that was?

DC: Because we were Black. Because they were scared. Because there was a lot going on back then. It was designated pretty much that if a team came, whoever came to play us, you don't bother them. You don't bother them, but, you know.

KH: Yeah, so you just said there was a lot going on at that time. So this is late '60s, early '70s. There's a lot going on here, nationally.

DC: Late '60s, early '70s, yeah.

KH: So, yeah, tell me a little bit about that context. Were you aware of the Civil

Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, all that stuff?

DC: Oh, yeah, we were aware of it. As far as we were concerned, we understood why they didn't want to come into our neighborhood and play us. But I can't ever remember us being scared to go anywhere to play. I can never remember that. See, Bill Peterson and them, they didn't teach us that. You know what I mean? And neither did our parents, let me make that clear. Neither did our parents.

[00:38:00]

DC: My Dad might tell us not to go this far, or that far, just for our own safety. It was, like I said, just because of our own safety. Because Bill and them, we went everywhere and played. We went everywhere and played, and we weren't worried about nobody doing anything to us. For one, we just weren't scared. And, two, Bill and them taught us that what's going on is wrong. It's not right. The whites should be able to have no fear coming in to play us. We should have no fear of going anywhere to play. And that's just how it was. We understood why things are. We understood it, but we didn't understand it. We knew this is how things are around the world, but we couldn't grasp it because we weren't taught that. None of us.

I'll say you had your prejudices against situations, not people. That's the way we were raised by our mentors and our parents. Because I'm Black, you're white, we're both capable of the same things. So I can know these people for myself, and I know the friends I ran with. We weren't prejudiced against somebody for what color they were. We might have a prejudice when it comes to something you've done. That's the situation.

KH: Behavior.

[00:40:00]

DC: Yeah, exactly. Like they say, a-holes come in all colors and we were taught that when we were young.

KH: Which is interesting because, especially given that time period where, good grief, much of the country was still segregated, or coming out of that, and the policies and practices were biased extremely against African Americans. So it seems like you could have had good reason to have negative impressions of white people. And yet it sounds like what you're saying is that your parents weren't teaching you that.

DC: No, not at all. Not at all. Not at all. I mean, we might have found ourselves sometimes falling into that. But, for the most part, if you treat me with respect, I'm going to treat you with respect. Like the whites that we grew up playing against, we loved to play against them, and they loved to play against us. I can't ever remember us fighting with a white team we played against.

KH: Oh interesting. And do you think that was just like the mutual respect of being athletic competitors?

DC: And I think it's our mentors. Our mentors were great. They were great. I don't know how to put it, but, like I said, we had respect for the whites we played against, and they had respect. We looked forward, and especially if they were pretty good, because we all were good. You know, all our teams at Oxford were good.

[00:42:00]

DC: And so, who better than to play against? If we play a team that hangs in there with us, then yeah, we want to play them again. And then we would complement them. There was one time, and that was because of something that happened, we were playing for Oxford for the Little Rose. And we'd always lose to Hazel Park. Me and my teams, the only thing we used to lose at is the championship game against Hazel Park.

KH: In multiple sports?

DC: No, just football. It was always us and them in the championship. So, one year, we were going up by three touchdowns. We had put a pretty good team together. We

had some of the younger guys, the year that they play with us and they were pretty good. A friend of mine, Najee Mitchell [ph], was running for a touchdown. We were playing them at McMurray Field in Como Park, and one of the parents for the other team for Hazel Park stuck his foot out and tripped Najee. There was a big brawl after that. That's the only time that we've ever had any problems with any teams we played.

We used to go to what was called the Jewish Center. It was over there by West 7th. Yeah, the Jewish Center. When we used to go play them, we used to bring our swim trunks and things.

KH: Because they had a pool.

[00:44:00]

DC: Because they had a pool. And they had no problem with us sharing the pool and eating popcorn with them after the games. And we beat them up pretty bad. But still, after the games, we swam with them, ate popcorn with them.

KH: So who are some of the mentors you have referred to?

DC: Bill Peterson. Stevie Winfield. Stevie Scroggins. Gayle Anderson. Bruce Benecke [ph]. He's a white guy. My coach, Ray Brown.

KH: What did he coach?

DC: Basketball. He had some pretty good teams but could never win the championship. So when we got old enough to play for him, me and two of my teammates that are deceased now, Clarence Coker [ph], we called him Alabama, because he was from Alabama, came up here when he was young. And then John Withers, and then myself, and Jeffrey Tillman and Tony Walker. Tony Walker's dad is the one that owns the music business. Then we had a sixth man named Richard Lewis. We called him Lulu. We won the championship with five people because Lu had a cast on his leg and I had taken my cast off so I could play in the playoffs.

KH: What was casted on you?

[00:46:00]

DC: My leg. We all had a cast at different times for the same thing. It's a bone that grows right below your knee, out. It's called Osgood-Schlatter. And that's why Lu had his on. I had my cast on, but I got in the bathtub, and I took the cast off so I could play. So I was limping, but I was still pretty good handling the ball. So, we won Mr. Brown his only championship. We played, I forget what suburban team it was. We played them at Martin Luther King Center for the championship, and we won. Then my brother Benny's team played right after us and they won the championship.

KH: So this was a team that was Oxford based, not a school team? This was Oxford?

DC: Oxford. So, after that, we're known for the Iron Five Men, because Ray Brown had us coats made with our last name on the back, and it said Iron Five Men.

KH: And so, how old would you have been at that time?

DC: Fifteen. Fourteen, fifteen.

KH: When you're at Ramsey, are you playing sports through school also?

DC: You know, it's funny because the only sport they had where you played other schools was basketball. So, yeah, we did play other schools in basketball. Like the five I mentioned, me, John Withers and Tony Walker. John went to Highland. So, that was a big thing when we played Highland, because they knew that me and John were basically the best on each team. But outside of playing Ramsey versus Highland, we were teammates at Oxford.

KH: I know some of the women I've interviewed have talked about the same thing. They were teammates at Oxford, and then one went to Ramsey, and one went to Highland or Central and Highland.

[00:48:00]

DC: Yeah. So me and John went through that. But, see, I'm younger than them. But because of my athletic ability, I played up. I didn't play with the people my age. Only at a certain point, like when we graduated from Oxford and went to Central. See, then I didn't play with John and Alabama and Jeffrey. I had to back up and play with my age group. When I was kicked out of Central, that's who I was playing with. I was playing in the B squad.

KH: Just because you were younger?

DC: Yeah.

KH: And you're a freshman?

DC: Well, 10th grade. It wasn't ninth grade back then. Because I was in the 10th grade. And back then, they didn't do too much. I don't even know if you were allowed to. Like, if I was in the 10th grade nowadays, I would have been playing with the varsity.

KH: Right, but maybe you couldn't do that then.

DC: Like I did down at Oxford. But I think back then, you couldn't play with the 11th and 12th graders, if you were in the 10th grade, you had to play with your age.

KH: With the JV squad.

DC: Yeah. But, at the same time, the people that were younger than me were good, I played with them all the time. I played with them down at Oxford all the time.

KH: So, it was really school, that kind of age thing.

DC: Yeah. Actually, when we first started out, that's who I played with. Then I'd do so good in all the games, and so then when we started getting a couple years older, that's when they started putting me on the older team.

KH: Because they saw what you could do.

DC: But I started out playing with these guys. Because of my older brothers, they

knew my family history of us playing ball. And so, then they put me up at a higher level.

KH: Did you play with your brothers then? Your older brothers ever?

[00:50:00]

DC: Well, there's a picture down in the showcase now at Jimmy Lee. My little brother, Benny. We won the city championship. And we had a girl for the center fielder.

KH: Weller.

DC: Weller Johnson. She was our center fielder, starting center fielder. We were in the fifth grade, and my brother Benny was in the second grade, and he was our starting second baseman.

KH: Wow. He played up.

DC: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was in the second grade, and the glove was bigger than his head, but he was hell of a ball player.

KH: And who was coaching that team? Do you remember?

DC: Bill and Stevie.

KH: Yeah, I've seen that picture with Weller.

DC: Yeah. I'm the guy that's got his head down, holding the glove up. For years, that picture said, "Lenny and Benny Christian." Until one day, actually, we were at Stacy Robinson's repast down at Jimmy Lee. Bill said, "Come here, you guys." And he showed us the picture and he said, "You guys remember that?" I said, "Not only do I remember, Bill, look what you got down there." And he's looking and he's looking. I said, "You got me as Lenny. You've got Lenny and Benny instead of Denny and Benny." So I'd seen him again down there for something and he said, "Come here, let me show you something." Went back and looked, now it says Denny and Benny.

[00:52:00]

KH: Now it's correct.

DC: He corrected it. Yeah. So I played with Benny that year.

KH: And so, how long were you at Central before you—

DC: Not even a full year.

KH: So it was your sophomore year, and then you went directly to the alternative school thereafter? And were there any sports opportunities at the other school?

DC: No. They had a little basketball team, but there's nothing to write home about.

KH: And not part of any kind of conference play or anything like that?

DC: Correct, yeah.

KH: There's another question I was going to ask you about. I can't remember.

DC: And there's many stories about Bill and them, like my sister when I told her I was going to do this interview. They used to do a lot of this. My sister had a friend named Sharon Johnson. They used to love ice skating. We all used to love ice skating. One time her feet got real cold, and I guess she went into the warming house and was crying or something. Bill took her skates off and rubbed her feet until they got warm. We used to like being there because of how we'd get treated.

KH: By Bill and everybody?

DC: Exactly. Bill, Pat, all of them. I mean, it's like, now that I'm older, I can appreciate it and I know what situations mean now. They let us have a voice, you know? When you were down at Oxford, it wasn't, "So-and-so did this and this and that and this is how it is," right? It was, "Okay, you tell me what happened and you tell me what happened, and here's how we're going to deal with it."

[00:54:00]

DC: Oxford is a big part of the way I am, the way I treat people. Naturally, my parents. But what my parents taught me at home, at Oxford, it was just confirmed, you

know what I mean? It was the same way. The way my parents raised me, like I tell people when I do something I ain't supposed to be doing or I get in trouble or something, it has nothing to do with my upbringing because I knew better. It was just my choice. At Oxford, Stevie and Bill, Stevie Scroggins was a big part of who I am now, too.

KH: And he was at Oxford?

DC: Yeah, he was a heck of a basketball player. He played for Augsburg College. He had a couple pro tryouts, and he was my coach. When did he coach us? It was me, John Withers. Yeah, the same team I played with. But Oxford taught you. They got on you when you needed to be. They chastised you when you needed to be and they let you know when you did something right. Because there were many, I mean, many instances where I felt I was treated wrong or something, and I'd go home and tell my Mom or my Dad, "You know what Bill did today?" or "You know what Stevie did today, Dad, Mom?" They'd look at me like, "What did you do? You're coming home telling me what they did to you. What did you do?" Then I had to kind of like, stop talking, you know?

[00:56:00]

KH: That leads me to an interesting question. What was the relationship between your parents and the mentors and coaches at Oxford?

DC: Just respect. My Dad was a ball player. I was probably not born, and Benny was probably not born, but we've heard stories of our father. So my sister has a jersey from the Twins. One year, I think I was in my thirties, and at the Twins game there, they took the break at the seventh inning, and they honored my Dad and Frank White's dad, and gave them a Twins' jersey with their name on the back. So, my Dad was a heck of a ball player. Baseball. Loved his baseball.

KH: So he played with Frank's dad?

DC: Yeah.

KH: And so, is he in Frank's book then about African American baseball?

DC: I don't know about Frank's book. But if Dad's in there playing ball, I'm sure he might have my Dad in there, too.

KH: Probably.

DC: Yeah. My Dad and his dad were really tight.

KH: And what position did your Dad play?

DC: I think my Dad played, was it shortstop, I think? My Dad was kind of famous for the drag bunt. Yeah, he was known because of his drag bunt. I remember one time, I was probably about 16, 15, 14, and my brother Lenny was reading the newspaper. Up at the fast pitch field up there next to St. Paul Central's football field, they were having an Old Timers game.

[00:58:00]

DC: My brother Lenny, he's a baseball nut, too, and he's the one who played with Paul Molitor. He was reading the paper. And he said, "Daddy, look at this." It said it was my Dad and a couple other people, "If anybody knows how to contact Kenny Christian, please ask them to give so-and-so a call." They wanted him to participate in this game. Because our garage was full of sports equipment, I got spikes and stuff I'd had 10 years ago still in the garage. So he said, "Can you go out there and get me a pair of them spikes out in the back?" He actually went up there and put on his famous drag bunt. I'll never forget it.

KH: Explain what a drag bunt is.

DC: It's when you take off and you hold your bat behind you, so you're basically already running before the ball hits your bat. It gives you a head start to first base. My Dad was famous for that.

KH: Questions come and go. Are there any other particular stories or memories

about a mentor, about a particular game, a particular moment that really is important to you?

DC: There's one that I frown on and I'll never forget, because the St. Paul City Conference, I think they contacted Bill, I think it was Bill, because Bill was the head man, and basically told him that our team needs to not be in the St. Paul City Conference because it's not doing anybody any good, because we were terrorizing them.

[01:00:00]

DC: We played a team called Savage, and the playground was Savage Playground. And the first time we played them, we beat them 122 to 2.

KH: And this was basketball?

DC: Basketball, 122 to 2. So the next time we played them, because you played everybody twice a year, we beat them 125 to 25. But we told them, "You all got better, because you got more than two." So, anyway, they basically put us out of the St. Paul City League. We agreed because we weren't having any fun. So they put us in the Suburban League. And now this time, at this point, Stevie Scroggins is our coach. So we got out to, I'll never forget it, our first game was Blaine, and we walked in the gym out in Blaine and their guards were like six-three. Their center was like six-seven. We'd never seen anything like it because our center was not even six feet, five-ten. So, long story short, we blew through the whole division and beat everybody by at least 20 points.

So the thing was, Anoka, Ramsey at the time, their coach, used to win it every year like we used to win it in the St. Paul City. So Anoka's coach had a brother that lived in Texas and he had a basketball team that his son played for. Now, the guy that coached the local Ramsey here, his son played for him, but he had a brother that lived in Texas, and he had a team with his son playing on it.

[01:02:00]

DC: So, what they would do is, when Anoka wins here, one year, they would fly to Texas and play his brother's team who won that division. Then the next year, the team in Texas would fly here and play the brother's team. Well, they didn't have a playoff. So whoever had the best record at the end of the season are the champs. We beat them by 20 points. So we took the bus out there, carloads of people, and we took our own fans. So now we're preparing to go to Texas and play the team in Texas. So our mom's buying us new underwear, new socks, we were all going to Texas to play this team.

Well, one day I came home from school and my Mom said, "Stevie Scroggins wants you all down at Oxford at six o'clock." We think we're going to hear some news about us going to Texas. Well, he had one of them *Newsweek* papers, community papers, and in it, it said, "Best team from Minnesota," like 14, 15 year olds, "loses to the best team in Texas." They sent Anoka anyway. Bill Peterson was on fire. They sent Anoka, anyway, saying that they were the best team in their division when we beat them by 20 points. Now that one I'll never forget. That was hard. We were crushed.

KH: And why do you think they didn't send Oxford?

DC: Because we were all Black. There's no doubt in my mind why they did it.

[01:04:00]

KH: And so, this was, you said 14, 15 year old team?

DC: Yes. I'm sure his brother in Texas knew that his brother's team got beat by an all-Black team that was undersized, but we could all jump really high. But I doubt if they let other teams in Texas know that the team from Minnesota got beat by all Black teams.

KH: Right, because they want to make it sound like they beat the legitimate winner.

DC: Like they had been every year. Every year, they'd been going to Texas playing this brother's team or this brother's team from Texas has been coming here,

playing the brother's team from here at Anoka.

KH: So, your coaches and mentors, Steve Scroggins, Bill Peterson, how did they help all of you guys who are on this winning team manage this really significant disappointment?

DC: Well, it started way before that. Like I said, they were like second parents. They've always taught us that a lot of things ain't going to be fair. It even starts with calls on the football field or calls on the basketball court. We were young. If I didn't commit a foul and I know I didn't commit the foul, I'd get upset and maybe get ready to act out until they'll reel you in and say, "Okay, Denny, look, we know you didn't commit the foul. But the way you take care of that, you go back out there, you do this and you do that." In other words, don't let nothing stop you. Life ain't going to be all fair. You're not going to be treated right all the time so the way you deal with it is you rise above it.

[01:06:00]

KH: Was that ever hard to do, to rise above and rise above and rise above again?

DC: Oh yeah, oh yeah. But I don't know, I just give them, and not just me, I know a lot of people that would just give them kudos because it would have been pretty easy to, like there's been some situations in my life that haven't been great, but I sit here with you today that I've overcome, and it's not just because of my parents. When they used to sit us down and explain to us why this team, because the first thing we think when they say, "This team's not going to be playing, you're not going to be playing today." First thing we think, "Tell them come on, we ain't going to beat them too bad, we're too good for them," right?

Then they'll sit us down and explain why they didn't want to come here to play us. They don't know that you guys ain't going to do nothing wrong to them, that you guys just want to play ball. They don't know that. So then we look at it differently. They put a

lot of things into perspective for us. There were a lot of times we wanted to fight, and they know we didn't get treated right, but that's a part of life. That's what they instilled in us.

[01:08:00]

KH: And that's quite a thing, especially when you haven't been treated right. Repeatedly. And to kind of help contain young men's sometimes natural inclination to go at it hard. I mean, I would imagine, a hard but important lesson.

DC: Exactly. There's been times where we would go somewhere to play and after we win, we could hear some mumbo jumbo, and then Bill and them would tell us, "That's not what we came here for. That's not what we came here for. We've taken care of what we came here for. Don't pay any attention to that other stuff."

KH: Take the high ground.

DC: Yeah, don't pay no attention to the other stuff. They were truly like second parents.

KH: Was there ever a time, whether in sports or otherwise, where you just couldn't take the moral high ground?

DC: Except for that one situation at McMurray Field. And I can honestly say, besides that one incident, no. We never did. I can't remember having a game and then fighting the other team afterwards, other than that.

KH: When the parent—a parent.

DC: Exactly. I'm sure there's times we wanted to, but I can't ever remember being with Bill or Stevie Scroggins, or Mr. Brown, and fighting the other team after we win or lose. I could say fighting the other team after we win, because from the oldest age that you could play for Oxford to the youngest age, basically nobody lost.

[01:10:00]

KH: What do you think it was about Oxford that made it so unique?

DC: I have to say it was a mixture between Bill and them and how gifted the community was. Boys and girls. I can't explain it, but we were gifted. We took pride in seeing Oxford—it was across the hall in the old gym, from the office, there was a corner where Bill made a big trophy case loaded with trophies. They made it fun to play for them and we respected them. We had a lot of respect for them.

The same thing that our parents, we're not going to argue with our parents. Mom might tell you, don't do something, and you do it. Dad tells you don't do it; you don't do it. It's just like when Bill and them spoke, we listened. And we backed each other up. We loved each other. We loved each other from the oldest team to the youngest team. We loved representing Oxford.

KH: In asking what made Oxford unique, I kind of assumed it, but do you think that Oxford was unique among other rec centers?

[01:12:00]

DC: Oh yeah. Oxford was, I'm going to say, like New England with Tom Brady [quarterback for New England Patriots]. Oxford was Duke with Mike Krzyzewski [coach of Duke University's men basketball team]. I put Oxford up there like that.

KH: And, again, I think if I heard you right, you said it was a combination of the coaching and mentoring as well as just an amazingly gifted community of parents and kids who also had some really natural athletic gifts that were then developed.

DC: A tight community. Exactly, exactly.

KH: I was going to ask you this earlier, I forgot it. Were there kids in the neighborhood that you remember that weren't at Oxford?

DC: No.

KH: So Oxford was just the place that everybody was going?

DC: Yeah. Well, they had the Ober Boys Club. But see, a lot of them didn't live in

the Selby-Dale area. Everybody in the Selby-Dale area? Oxford. A lot of them lived like in the Monterey Projects, the other projects. They went to Ober Boys Club and Hallie Q. Brown. But everybody I grew up with, or my brothers grew up with that lived in the Selby-Dale area went to Oxford.

KH: And so, even if a kid in your part of town maybe wasn't super athletic, there was enough for them to do at Oxford with Pat.

DC: Oh yeah.

KH: So it was just where the kids in that part of Selby-Dale Rondo went.

[01:14:00]

DC: That's right. Yeah. Of course, there were kids that weren't as talented as a lot of us, but they were still our teammates. So when we'd be winning by so much, they still got to play.

KH: So that was part of the coaching philosophy, everybody plays?

DC: Everybody plays.

KH: What other lessons do you think you've taken from your time at Oxford that have carried throughout your life?

DC: I mean, I can't think of any more important lessons than the ones I mentioned. They instilled in me that, like my parents did, you treat people the way you want to be treated. But the most important thing is that everything is not going to go your way. Everything's not going to go your way. And, I mean, in games that were hard, and you have to overcome things to win it, it's something that I give Bill and them a lot of credit for because I've done some battling in life that I've, to this point, overcome. I attribute it to having to make this play on the court or the field at this time, or else I'm not going to get the gratification I want. So I tied them together because in my life, you've got to do this, or you got to do that to get back where you know you're supposed to be.

[01:16:00]

DC: So, if you want to win this game called life, you better change something. So I put that in the same way as my ball playing. We don't like to lose. I don't like to lose. So I better make this play when I need to so we can win this game.

KH: I've interviewed a lot of athletes for this project and for a previous project, a lot of athletes, a lot of people who played competitive sports, and almost all of them have said something along those lines. Do you think that there's something unique about sports and participating in sports that allows those lessons to happen versus—and this is no disrespect to them—the kids who went to Oxford, and they didn't really play sports, but they were in the arts and crafts room? Like, is there something unique about sports that lends itself to life lessons?

DC: Well, I think there is, because this is the way I look at it. Sports, you need other people. You need other people. I can't win a basketball game by myself. I have to have these other four people on the court with me to help me achieve that. I might hear one of my kids say, "I don't need anybody." Oh, yeah? You'll find out soon enough that you do.

[01:18:00]

DC: So I think sports have taught me that you can't do things by yourself. No matter how tough you think you are, you're going to need help. I think sports helped me realize that. And you have to be disciplined I mean, the games we used to lose to Hazel Park playing football, they are the games I remember more than a lot of the championships I won, because no matter what I did, no matter what we did, we couldn't beat them in football in the championship game for nothing. We might beat them earlier in the season, but when the championship game comes? That sticks with me. That and the negative thing about when we were supposed to go to Texas. These are the things that I

wish turned out different.

KH: And so, we've talked already about life lessons from the Texas situation and how your coaches kind of helped you through that. What about those losses to Hazel Park? What lessons, if any, do you take from those losses?

DC: That's where acceptance comes in. That's where the same way you get mad at somebody for doing something, you have to tip your hat to Hazel Park. I can hear Bill, Stevie Winfield, or a couple other names I didn't mention, Bill Carter, David Goodlow, Turner, I can't remember Turner's first name, but they would tell us.

[01:20:00]

DC: We'd be upset. "They were just a better team than you guys today. You're not always going to win." They'd sit us down. They'd see us crying and everything. They'd sit us down, say, "You guys, you played, you gave each other your best." Because we weren't used to that. We're winners. We're winners in everything we do. And, I mean, all age groups win. We win, we win, we win. And that was hard to deal with, but they would sit us down and they would tell us they were the better team today.

KH: And that's a life lesson.

DC: Yes, and all you can do is give them credit for it.

KH: And there's something, I think, really important about that, that sports, even if you are the winning team and maybe even more if you're a winning team, who then loses, that can teach you humility.

DC: There you go. Exactly.

KH: And that's something that we could use more of.

DC: Exactly. There was a guy, we called him Taco, and he was a mean son of a gun. If I was to see him somewhere else other than on the ball field, "Hey, man, great game. You all got us. You all got us, man. You all deserve it." Like, even when we beat up

on teams, we didn't kick them because they were down. We're like, "We you all tried, man. We just got a better team. Better luck next game."

[01:22:00]

KH: And there's something, I think, and, well, definitely not all teams or athletes have that humility when they're on top, either. There's a lot of back patting and bravado, and that's okay to some degree. But there's also something, I think, really valuable about a winning team not kind of lording it over the team that was just killed on the court or the field, or whatever.

DC: Right, exactly. We weren't taught that way.

KH: A different kind of humility.

DC: We might get to ourselves and be like, "Man, we kicked their butt." But we're not going to say that to them because along with your parents and them at Oxford, it's like, you wouldn't want to be. If they beat you 200 and something to 10, how would you feel if they told you how, "Ha, we kicked you all's butts?"

KH: Obviously. Look at the score. There's no need.

DC: Right. That's one thing that we did at Oxford. I don't know how you want to say it, we were respectful to other programs. Going into the game, we know what we're getting ready to do to them. And, like I said, to be labeled as a ball player from Oxford, that goes a long way. We know what we're about, but we're not going to rub it in your face. We're not going to. We'll just put it up on the scoreboard.

KH: Right. Let it speak for itself.

DC: Yeah, and that's that.

[01:24:00]

KH: So you just said being labeled as an athlete from Oxford meant something. Obviously, those of you who grew up playing sports or being involved at Oxford know,

but—what am I trying to ask? Do you think that the legacy of Oxford is well known in the St. Paul community, in a wider community?

DC: Oh yeah, oh yeah. No doubt about it. One of the things that was that I loved to do is watch our girls play. Man, our girls teams were—I mean, we had Lisa Lissimore, Candace Robinson, the little sisters, Valerie and Angel, and I think one year, Valerie, Angel, and Linda, all played on the same team. Rosie Burch, Rita Burch. We had some. Weller Johnson. There was a girl named Phyllis Vaughn [ph]. I used to love watching them play, because they used to go. They played like we played.

KH: Basketball, specifically?

DC: Yeah, they played like we played, and I used to enjoy it.

KH: Did you practice together, boys and girls ever?

[01:26:00]

DC: No, no. But a lot of times we'd have makeup games, playing half-court basketball. And Weller Johnson, she had no problem getting picked. Her or Phyllis. Weller's like a year older than me. Phyllis was like a year older than her. That's back when they had made it to where the girls had to have two rovers that could go across half court and the other people on offense, they had to stay over here, and the other people—yeah. So Phyllis and Weller would be the rovers that could go the whole court.

But you had the teams with the little sisters on it, Candace Robinson and Rosie Burch, and I used to enjoy watching them because they were the female version of us. They didn't take any shortcuts. They're going to do what they came to do.

KH: And so, it sounds like the girls team then had also a lot of support, as well, from the community.

DC: All our teams did. We used to, before the games, "You all go get them." After the games, "Good job," you know? Oxford was a family.

KH: Are you connected to Oxford Jimmy Lee at all now?

DC: No.

KH: You said you have kids.

DC: Yeah.

KH: How many kids?

DC: I have seven kids.

KH: What's their age range?

DC: My oldest is 43, and my youngest is 30.

KH: Did they grow up playing sports?

DC: Oh yeah. Well, they grew up playing sports. My junior, Dennis Junior, was really good. In his freshman year, he played for Central. And, I mean, he couldn't be stopped, but he ran into some problems and his mother passed away and he ran into some problems. Then I got another son named Vincent Lindsey, and he was really, really, really good on the basketball court. But he also, just like myself, made some bad decisions.

[01:28:00]

DC: You remember the school that they had? What's the name of it? It's in Pennsylvania. All their sports teams are really high league. What was the name of that place? Like a boarding school. What's the name of it? I can't remember the name of it. I think it closed down now, but they sent him there versus going to jail. But all their programs are mentored by ex-athletes, stuff like that.

So, my son, they played a tournament in Michigan. And Michigan State, Tom Izzo, the coach, had a scout there. I was not around at the time, but I had called my son's grandmother, and she said, "Well, these people from Michigan State want to talk to Vinny." That's what we call him, Vinny. "And they wanted to possibly give him a shot." Because when he went to Michigan, he scored like 27 points, 10 rebounds. He was really,

really good. And so, he had a chance to play for Michigan State with Tom Izzo. Things didn't quite work out. What's the name of that school? It's in Pennsylvania. I can't remember the name of it.

KH: If it comes to you later, let me know and we can add it in.

[01:30:00]

DC: And then my daughter, my baby daughter. I've got a couple daughters that didn't play ball and then all my sons did, except for my son, Andrew. He didn't play organized ball. But my baby daughter, she went to South St. Paul. She started for South St. Paul, then she went to Northland Community College, Thief River Falls. Her and a girl named Danielle that played for Humboldt. They made a pact with each other to play AAU ball on the same team. So they both went up to Northland, and as freshmen, won the national title. Every seven years, D3 has their nationals in Rochester and this happened to be the year they were in Rochester.

KH: So you got to see her play?

DC: Yeah, a lot of us went and got rooms in Rochester. They beat a team from Chicago for the D3 national championship.

KH: That's awesome. What's your daughter's name?

DC: Shammara Christian. S-H-A-M-M-A-R-A. Okay. But her mother, my wife, was a heck of a ball player.

KH: Where did your wife grow up?

DC: She was from Chicago, but moved here when she was 14. She was a heck of a basketball player, too.

KH: So, your kids just had it coming at them from both directions?

DC: Yeah. Well, I can't think of the name of their school for nothing.

KH: Denny, is there anything else that we should talk about with regard to Oxford

and its impact on your life?

[01:32:00]

DC: Well, no, I give them a lot of credit. To this day, you see Stevie Winfield, Bill Peterson, they're like gods. They really are.

KH: And you're still in touch with them?

DC: Oh somewhat. Yeah, I still do. Stevie still lives in a house over there that he grew up in. He still has that.

KH: And that's really close to Oxford, also.

DC: Yeah, about half a block.

KH: So you guys grew up close?

DC: Yeah, yeah. His mother used to come sit on the bench and watch our games. When Dave Winfield played for the University of Minnesota, he used to come down to our practices, and Stevie would pitch him batting practice. And the field is closer to 94, and you know where the building is, our whole team used to stand way back by the building and catch Dave Winfield's balls. [laughter] But, yeah. I'd just seen Bill Peterson at a friend's funeral, and Gwen told him, "You know who they are, Bill?" And me and my brother Benny were there, "Denny and Benny Christian." He said, "Oh, my God." He's the one that called me and told me about this. Then I just, not long ago, was at a funeral with Lisa Lissimore.

KH: Yeah, the older we get.

DC: And that's another thing in our community, even now. Somebody from the community passes, the whole community's there.

KH: Yeah, that's amazing.

DC: We've got a lot of respect for each other.

KH: Yeah. That's quite amazing. I don't think that's true of all neighborhoods, or

communities.

[01:34:00]

DC: You know what? We take pride in that. The Rondo community takes pride in that. Well, we've got Facebook now. At my age, you post positive things, you don't do anything stupid on Facebook. So I used to say St. Paul, until I paid attention to somebody when they maybe put something on there, and it said Rondo. Because when I say St. Paul, that goes to all of St. Paul, but I'm from Rondo.

KH: So that's your identity?

DC: That's what I do. Yeah, that's my identity now. It's my Rondo community. Everybody knows exactly who I'm talking to. But, yeah, we take pride in that. We take pride in that. Like I said, I come from the time when you might fight with somebody, but you're friends the next day. And we're friends to this day. All the people that I've had beef with, they were my friends before the beef, and they're my friends now, you know?

KH: So, last question, and then I'll let you get back to your day. What would you like people to know about Oxford and its place in Rondo, whether it's people inside the Rondo community, or people who are from outside the Rondo community might not know anything about it. What do you want people to know about Oxford?

[01:36:00]

DC: If I was to say something about Oxford to somebody that didn't know about it, I would tell them that as far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't want to have been a part of anything more than being a part of Oxford playground. I can't even dream that other playgrounds that take to heart like people from Oxford take to heart. We still talk about Oxford. I'm 65 years old. I still find myself talking about Bill Peterson, Stevie Winfield, Frank White, Stevie Scroggins, Dave Goodlow, Bill Carter. And yeah, somebody that doesn't know anything about Oxford, there's not a better place that I could have grown up

that I can think of.

I don't care if it's a place that had a whole lot of money. When I was a kid, there's not a better place in the world that I'd have wanted to be a part of like Oxford. You had no worries when you were at Oxford. You didn't have to worry about harm coming to you. You didn't have to worry about being hungry. You had no worries. You had one job. Have fun. You had one job when you were at Oxford. You had no worries and one job. Have fun.

KH: So the one job wasn't even winning. It was have fun.

[01:38:00]

DC: Just have fun. Because somewhere along the line, they're going to tell you, you're not going to win all the time in life. So just have fun and respect the next person. So that's the only job you have. You could be yourself at Oxford. You could make mistakes. You can do whatever you want to do. If it was wrong, they would sit you down and let you know it was wrong. Don't do it again. If it was right, they'd give you the pat on the back. And they'll tell you.

That's what I'm talking about. When I was talking to you yesterday about this, that's what I mean. Proud of you that you paid attention and you did it right this time. You'd go home from Oxford, couldn't wait to get out of school so you'd get back down to Oxford. It was your second home. There's many times our parents had to come find us, "Get home." We didn't want to go home. We wanted to stay down at Oxford.

KH: But they knew where you were.

DC: Oh yeah. They knew right where you were. I can't even count the number of times. Stevie or Bill, "Denny, Benny, Mama said it's time to come home now." All they had to do was call Oxford, "Stevie, Bill. Tell them boys I said come home." Didn't have to tell them who you were talking about. They knew your parents' voice when they called.

When they'd say, "Hello?" "Tell them boys to come home." They didn't have to say, "Is this Mrs. Christian?" They didn't have to say, "Who?" They just said, "Okay, I'll tell them right now. Benny and Denny, your mama wants you to get home."

KH: So Oxford was also a great thing for parents because they knew all the things you just said. Their kids were okay.

DC: That's right. They knew it. They knew we're going to Oxford. I imagine if we didn't show up down to Oxford one day, they would probably call up my Mom and them. "Anybody coming down here today? Because they're not here yet. It's 4:30. School got out at 3:30." That's how it was.

[01:40:00]

DC: You went down to Oxford; they didn't worry about you. They knew where you were. They knew you were taken care of. Yeah, it was a blast. I wouldn't give it up for nothing in the world.

KH: Sounds like truly a community treasure.

DC: It was. I'm sure it still is, but not to the extent it was when I was growing up. But then again, nothing is.

KH: Well, Denny, maybe that's a good place to end it.

DC: All right. Thank you for having me.

KH: You had such nice thoughts. Thank you. I am so glad you did this.

DC: No problem. I am, too. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]