

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Rick Wright:

Dr. King, he loved good food too. And of course you got to realize in the African American community, especially in the South especially, I go back to Elizabeth City on Sundays and special dinners. My late mother, Ms. Lily, May Wright, she could cook man. Of course, going over to Dr. King's dinner, Dr. Edith Scott could also cook, his sister-in-Law. But we were sitting there at a really a beautiful meal around the table. And the one thing that Dr. King impressed on me was education. And then of course, one thing he told me, he said, Roosevelt, one of the problems, one of the things that has happened here in America is that we as African Americans were brought to this country as slaves to basically work all of the fields and the agriculture of the South. And technically our families built this country. We did for free as slaves.

The one problem he said that America has got to wake it up to is this thing of superiority. He was saying that basically ... he told me that basically in the white community, they are immediately taught at birth that these African-Americans, they use other words, were inferior, they were dumb, they were stupid. You'll always remember, you are better than them. So basically Dr. King said that it was basically laid out that their worst was better than our very best. He said, how we got to basically get by this is education, schooling. Get smart. And of course, also to be humble in our presentation, because Dr. King was a very humble person. You also got to realize, he basically put together the nonviolent approach, which came from who? Gandhi in India was his role model and mentor for the nonviolent movement. We basically were Dr. King and the NAACP, SCLC and everybody, basically were training sessions that we had in the basement of those buildings on HBCUs and also the classroom.

Let me just get out of the basement. We held in the auditoriums and everything else too, John. But basically how to handle incredible challenges of conflict. Those sit-in movements while we were sitting at those counters, man, the kids of the other hue came in. They called us every name in the world. They threw hot water on us, hot sauce in our faces and everything. And basically we just sat there and took it.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, he is a living legend on the Syracuse University campus. I'm going to humble him a little bit with this introduction. He's a man who needs no introduction, but I'm going to do it anyway. His name is Rick Wright, professor emeritus of television, radio, and film in the SI Newhouse School of Public Communications. Rick is the definition of major market. The first faculty advisor for the student run radio station, WJPZ. He's also advised with WAER and any student who's had a radio aspiration has come through Syracuse's campus has probably come in contact with Rick during his tenure as a faculty member that started in 1975 here at Syracuse.

In fact, Rick was the first African American faculty member at the Newhouse School. We'll get to Rick's influential career in professional broadcasting, but the real reason we wanted to have Rick on to start off is his influential ties to another man of history who used radio as a powerful medium, the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On this episode of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we're going to hear from Rick on the powerful impact that Dr. King made on him, how he grew up having meals with Dr. King and hearing valuable life lessons and how he helped broadcast along with George Kilpatrick, the Syracuse University annual MLK celebration. Rick, it's going to be an action packed episode. Thanks for joining us.

Rick Wright:

Oh, this is indeed a pleasure and a wonderful opportunity. My God, I thought y'all forgot all about me at Syracuse, but here I am. I retired 11 years ago from the famous SI Newhouse School of Public Communications, but my trip to Syracuse has been really a wonderful dream come true. It's been absolutely incredible and I can't say enough. Thank you so much for giving me this wonderful opportunity to talk about my reflections of meeting and eating and getting to know the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr many years ago in Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

John Boccacino:

It's a great place to start, Rick, because where you grew up really was the heart of the segregated south. There were two citizens, there were the whites, and then there were African-Americans who were unfortunately treated as second class citizens with all sorts of segregated policies in place. You kind of grow up during this cauldron of American history, and I know you're a history aficionado yourself. I want you to paint the picture of your first connections. You get to go to Sunday school and Dr. Edith Scott Bagley, a talented opera singer, go YouTube her, go Google her, find out some incredible videos and audio performances of Dr. Edith Scott Bagley, but she was your Sunday school teacher. She was also Coretta Scott King's sister. So connect the dots for us. What was that experience like and how did you come to meet Dr. King?

Rick Wright:

Yes, John, let's go back in history to roughly, let me say, let's go with 1959, the year in which Syracuse University won the national championship in football.

John Boccacino:

Cotton Bowl champions with Jim Brown down there.

Rick Wright:

Yeah. And then later of course, Ernie Davis wins the Heisman Trophy here at Syracuse making him the first African-American to win a Heisman trophy. Now, what am I bringing this particular perspective up? Well, for me, as a young man growing up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina in 1959, I was a senior in high school at PW Moore High School in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Of course, Syracuse being a powerhouse in football was a really national and internationally known entity. Of course, in the south that I grew up in, segregation was everywhere. There was white and colored water fountains. If African-Americans would go to the movies, they would've had to go through a side entrance called the colored entrance and sit in the balcony. All the restaurants were completely shut down to us. Colleges, you think about schools like Duke, university of North Carolina in the state of North Carolina, North Carolina State, those schools were all closed to African-Americans like myself.

Well, that was environment I grew up in, but it was a pretty interesting environment as I look at it again. But we were kind of sheltered really by our mentors. Well, roughly about 1958, a couple came to Elizabeth City, North Carolina to be on faculty at what was then known as Elizabeth City State Teachers College. Today in the year 2023, it is the Elizabeth City State University, which is also my alma mater. Well, at that time, this couple came to Elizabeth City to be on faculty at Elizabeth City State University. They were the Bagleys. Dr. Arthur Bagley came to become head of the Industrial Arts Education Technology Program at Elizabeth City State University. And along with him was this beautiful, incredible lady. In fact, the first time I saw her, I thought she was a movie star like Lena Hall.

It was at that time Dr. Edith Scott Bagley, and of course, Dr. Edith joined Mount Lebanon, AME Zion Church, which is my church of baptism and church birth. She used to sing in the choir and then she started teaching Sunday school. Now I'm in high school, by the way, at PW Moore High School. Sunday School was an important entity, especially among African American kids in the South. We had to go to church every Sunday, Sunday school first, and then the main service would be at 11 o'clock. But Sunday school was always roughly about 9:30 on a Sunday morning. Every Sunday there was Dr. Edith Scott Bagley telling us historical stories of the church. She told us about the development of the AME Zion Church being the Freedom Church, the Church of Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, and of course here in Syracuse, Bishop Germaine, Wesley Logan.

I learned all these names from Dr. Edith Scott Bagley. Now I go off to college in my hometown, Elizabeth City State University. Of course I was an industrial arts major, and Dr. Arthur Bagley was the chairman of the industrial arts program. In my hometown, there was a family, Mr. Purvis Williams and his wife, and they had a daughter named Odessa Williams. Mr. Purvis Williams came to Elizabeth City and became a businessman there in the city. He owned a number of houses. What he would do is that to new faculty coming to Elizabeth City State University at that time who needed housing, he would give a faculty of members a free house to live there. So the Bagleys lived in this wonderful complex that Mr. Purvis Williams had put up and Odessa their daughter and I became very close. Odessa and I are about the same age, and she was in love with the same feel I was crazy about, audiovisual communication. Odessa's father used to buy her movie projectors and everything.

Of course, my family was kicking too. My father was an electrician and I grew up in the Virginia Carolina Amusement company, which was a motion picture company that owned a couple of radio stations and all the motion picture theaters in northeastern North Carolina. Well, as a freshman at Elizabeth City State University, we're talking 1960, 1961 for African American students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University at Greensboro decided one day to, Hey, let's test the American Constitution. The American Constitution said with the home of the brave and the freedom and all of that good stuff. But we as African Americans were treated as second class citizens. So we said, let's test this whole world of racism and segregation in the south.

The sit-in movement started, the lunch counters at Greensboro and that whole situation spread like wildfire throughout the whole south and all of your HBCU universities. Students and student leaders and their governmental student government organizations on campus, all the fraternities and sororities, my fraternity, which is Omega Sci-Fi, all got together and we started organizing and of course going and demonstrating to try and boycotting and sitting in on lunch counters, and trying to open up movie theaters, restaurants, hotels and everything.

Now, the leader of the movement was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and his president was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, this young minister in Atlanta, Georgia. O course you mentioned radio a few minutes ago. I'll bring up the radio story real quick. If you look at, there's a classic historic picture that you can find, I think on Peachtree Street there in Atlanta, Georgia, showing the SELC headquarter logo marquee out front. Also right above that is the call letters of WERD radio, which was the first African American owned radio station in the United States of America. The radio station was on 860 on the AM radio dial, and it was in the same building that Dr. King's headquarters of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was located. Dr. King used to told me, in fact, we'll get to this. In fact, to have dinner with him. I want to get this radio story out because it was incredible.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, this is a great one of how I think people today take for granted the real time of social media to get the word out if they've got a cause they want to spread. That wasn't the case. So tell us how Dr. King used radio and especially WERD, how that kind of relationship was symbiotic.

Rick Wright:

Well, Dr. King, when I used to sit down and eat dinner with him and Odessa at his house there in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, he knew I was crazy about radio and audiovisual. He said, "Roosevelt, let me tell you about radio broadcasting. Basically, radio was our savior with regards to getting the word out on meetings and what we're going to do and plans and also a motivational tool too." And of course as a minister, powerful, incredible voice that he had. But he said, WERD studios were up on the second floor of the building and SELC studios were down below. Dr. King told me he had a broom. I should have brought a broom handle in here. Well, a broom handle right next to his desk. And every time that he felt it was time to make a speech or a presentation or talk about the movement that was going on, which was nonviolent, it's what Dr. King was preaching to all of us, he would take the broom and boom, boom, boom, boom bang on the ceiling and the disc jockeys.

In fact, one of America's first African American superstar disc jockeys was a guy called Jack Derapper, Jolly Jack. Of course he was a program director, and he would be on air on WERD and here's the floor, boom, boom, boom. Oh, he said, oh, Dr. King wants to talk. Now, of course, in those days, I think the station, Dr. King only had two microphones, the microphone in the control room, and there was another mic in another studio. Like a performance studio where you have guests and news the news broadcasters would broadcast from. So they had a mic in there. So what they would do is take the mic off the stand and then put it out the window. They didn't want Dr. King to walk upstairs and just want him to keep at his desk.

So they brought the microphone down and one of the guys would reach out the window, grab the mic, bring the mic over to the desk where Dr. King was sitting, and then he would go on air and give a sermon and talk about what was happening with the movement. Well, Dr. King told me that when I was having dinner with him a number of times in Elizabeth City in North Carolina. Now the dinner, now here is a fascinating part. With the movement going, we're young. I'm roughly what, 18, 19 years old, a young African-American male, there in Elizabeth City and trying to learn the world, not knowing that my Sunday school teacher, who was also a very dear friend of my aunt, my father's sister, Ms. Edna Wright Few, my father's sister and Dr. Edith Scott Bagley, were like best of friends. She used to come over to the house.

But then once the movement got going, then I come to find out that Dr. King was Dr. Edith Scott Bagley's sister, and Dr. King was her brother-in-law. That's because the movement, we're talking at the early 1960, now 1960, '61. Then of course at that time with the movement, Dr. King would move all throughout the south. You've seen all the videos, the marches, and then of course the water hose of Bull Connor coming out, shooting us down. Similarly was happening all over the south. Of course then one time, Odessa Williams, who was Mr. Purvis Williams's daughter and I were close. Here's a word for everybody to finally learn. In fact, my mom died. In fact, we buried her 44 years ago on the night a couple of days ago here in December of 1979. My nickname was Sonny. Odessa would call me and say, "Sonny, Dr. King is coming and I'll let you know when he gets here, but he's going to hit the city. The city already knows about it, and he is going to go around to all the churches and preach."

Of course, I never forget that day because the chief of police, Chief Owens, who was our chief of police, he was out directing. I'd never seen him in the streets of Elizabeth City with his uniform on directing all the traffic and trying to keep things under control as Dr. King moved all over Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Dr. King would come to Elizabeth City to visit and to get some rest to visit his sister-in-law and

the Bagleys, Dr. Arthur Bagley and Dr. Edith Scott Bagley, who was the sister of Coretta Scott King. Dr. King's sister-in-law was my Sunday school teacher. Man, I'm telling she could sing in the choir loft of the Mount Lebanon, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Reverend Felton was the pastor during that time, and he was also a big close friend also of Dr. Edith Scott Bagley. But that was the tone.

Then of course, sitting down to talk to him with dinner. And of course he was always incredible. I will say this, I know you got probably other questions for me there, John, but I never forget the first time that I shook hands with Dr. King with this hand, my right hand. To our great audience who's listening to us all over the country, I want everybody to know that when I shook the hand of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, I still feel it to this day. You know how you feel some people that their hands are rough or warm or whatever? The softness and the smoothness of Dr. King's hands, I can still feel it today. It had to be, it was godly. It was like something entirely different. Then I'll never forget, I pulled out my NAACP card and we had a big student chapter there at Elizabeth City State University, and I gave him my card and he signed it. I have it somewhere in a box in my possessions.

John Boccacino:

Oh, that is such a cool ... and that's one of the reasons we wanted to have Rick on, is unfortunately due to the passage of time. There's fewer and fewer people that have had these impactful encounters with one of the greatest motivational speakers, mobilization forces, who got people to believe in the nonviolent protest movement. Just hearing you share that story, Rick, I get goosebumps hearing you talk about this.

Rick Wright:

Dr. King was special. He had to have been said, as a minister also, well-trained Ph.D. from Boston University. Then of course his undergraduate degree was from Morehouse. There is the connection with Syracuse and our first African American professor who was a giant on campus, Dr. Charles V. Willie. Oh, I love him so much. Many times I talked to Dr. Willie and he and Dr. King were classmates at Morehouse in Atlanta, Georgia, which is a powerful university that has produced a lot of great leaders, of course, especially the African-American community. But Dr. King, to my audience, here it is. Today is the 21st of December in the year 2023. I'm talking about 1961 and my first time of meeting Dr. King there in front of the Bagley's house there on Southern Avenue in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, right next to my adopted sister Odessa Williams, who I love by the way,

Odessa ended up becoming a super librarian, got her undergrad in Gregory from North Carolina Central University of Durham, where I got my master's degree in educational media. Of course, Odessa used to go down to Atlanta and work with Mrs. King, Coretta during the summers. They were putting together the big complex they have in Atlanta in those early days. So Odessa, she's in heaven, and I hope she's smiling today as her little brother, Sonny Wright from Elizabeth City, talked about her and her wonderful marketing of me having a chance to meet Dr. King.

John Boccacino:

Yeah, I think you're doing a great job of keeping alive the memories of all these names that were clearly important figures in the local community, but maybe people have forgotten about or not heard about, at least up this way as time passes. Again, we have a tendency to forget what happened in the past, but I want you to, if you could, for our audience ... It's been such a treat, hearing you reminisce. Tell us a little more about your encounters with Dr. King. What other advice did he give you? What other conversation points did you talk about during those dinners?

Rick Wright:

Well, the dinners. Dr. King, he loves good food too. Of course, you got to realize in the African-American community, especially in the south especially, I go back to Elizabeth City on Sundays and special dinners. My late mother, Ms. Lily May Wright, Ruben Wright II's, grandmother, she could cook, man. Of course, going over to Dr. King's dinner, Dr. Edith Scott could also cook, his sister-in-law. The dinner was ... let me give you an expression of the dinners, collard greens, candid yams. Oh my God. The potato salad was incredible. Fried chicken, ham, snap beans where you snap beans, the beans, snap beans. Then of course it was always iced tea was also his other drink.

John Boccacino:

You are making me so hungry right now, Rick, as we're recording. It sounds delicious.

Rick Wright:

Yeah, and the cornbread that was being cooked by my mother's generation was off the scale is what I'm getting at it. I should have those recipes there. But we were sitting there and a really a beautiful meal around the table. The one thing that Dr. King impressed on me was education. Then of course, one thing he told me, he said, "Roosevelt, one of the things that has happened here in America is that we as African-Americans were brought to this country as slaves, as slaves to basically work all of the fields and the agriculture of the South. And technically our families built this country. We did for free as slaves." The one problem he said that America has got to wake it up to is this thing of superiority. He was saying that basically ... he told me that basically in the white community, they are immediately taught at birth that these African Americans, they use other words, were inferior, they were dumb, they were stupid.

You'll always remember you are better than them. So basically Dr. King said that it was basically laid out that their worse was better than our very best. He said, how we got to basically get by this is education, schooling, get smart. Of course, also to be humble in our presentation, because Dr. King was a very humble person. You also got to realize, he basically put together the nonviolent approach, which came from who? Gandhi in India was his role model and mentor for the nonviolent movement. We basically were, Dr. King and the NAACP, SCC, and everybody basically were training sessions that we had in the basement of those buildings on HBCUs and also the classroom. Let me just get out of the basement.

We also did in the auditoriums and everything else too, John, but basically how to handle incredible challenges of conflict. Those sit-in movements, while we were sitting at those counters, man, the kids of the other hue came in, they call us every name in the world. They threw water on the hot water on us, hot sauce in our faces and everything. And basically we just sat there and took it.

John Boccacino:

Just how terrifying was it to be someone who you're trying to sit in at a Woolworths or you're trying to participate in these nonviolent protests. How scary was it for you as an adolescent trying to face this?

Rick Wright:

It was big time scary for us, but I think the leadership of Dr. King basically indicated God works in mysterious ways. This wasn't planned. It was basically the African American students in the late fifties and the early 1960s who were going to the HBCUs. Of course, yes, we were scared to death. But I tell you who really was frightened for us, our parents, our parents. African American parents of that era, my parents and my colleagues' parents, they were really frightened for it because we were jailed also, by the way. Here's some America's finest young people who happened to be African American kids who

were in college, man. Of course we went down in the demonstrations. If you look at the videos, we weren't looking like scumbags. We were dressed suit, tie, the whole shot, man. Yes.

John Boccacino:

Well, you presented a massive challenge. The whole protest movement of Dr. King represented a challenge to the establishment, to the status quo that had been ringing true and terrorizing the South since civil war, since the reconstruction under Andrew Johnson. There was so much that was done to inflict ... people love to say the fact that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. Really he did, but then he didn't because they were returned to these hostile environments where they said, okay, come and enforce the amendment that gives blacks the right to vote. It's horrifying what you all had to go through. I think what Dr. King, what's so commendable is again, the nonviolence in the face of violence. That's such a lesson that really resonated with you it seemed like.

Rick Wright:

That was the key that Dr. King said the only way it's going to work. Because if we had turned ourselves into violence, the other folk had guns. They were basically pulling shot us dead. Man, I'm going to tell you what would've happened. Of course from that standpoint, Dr. King's teachings of me and not just me, but this was his teachings to all of my generation of young African American students at that time who were members of the NAACP and of course Dr. King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Everybody was on board with the movement, which basically ends up in what? The march on Washington. I'll never forget the day of watching the march on Washington when Dr. King given that speech. I said, oh my God, Jesus, the emotionality of the moment for me. Every time I seen that speech today, I have a dream, man. Having met the person, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who gives that speech, it's still today in American history, probably the greatest speech ever given. I don't care what politicians would say. That is the speech.

John Boccacino:

When you talk about Dr. King, he was such a well-known orator. He had such a way with words, but not only with the words, but the cadence, the delivery, the way he deliberately would deliver words in a manner that would hit home and have a powerful impact. How did that influence you hearing his powerful oratorical style? Because you launched a great radio career yourself, what impact did that have on you?

Rick Wright:

Oh, your question is magnificent. Your question is magnificent. In fact, I've thought of this, but now I get back to it. I taught a course called Television Radio Announcing and Performance at the famous Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. I taught the class for close to 38 years. I think today of all of the students, hundreds, thousands of students who took that course who are now major, here comes a word, major market broadcasters. A lot of what I was teaching in my class on performance and announcing techniques, use of inflection, pronunciation, enunciation techniques, timing and rate controls. When you make an analysis of your copy, how to present materials, that's all Dr. King. Basically he was a teacher of me at that dinner table in Elizabeth City, North Carolina back in the early 1960s. And now I'm teaching a class at Syracuse in 1975, which I taught for years.

As I think of Mike Tirico, I think of Scotty McFarlane, who's there to CBS, all the students I've had. Melissa Entwistle, Emmy who went to People Magazine called The Most Beautiful Lady in America. These all my students at the Newhouse School. Neon Dion Sanders, who's the now head of Sirius XM

Satellite Radio. Dave Gorab, who runs all the talk programming for Sirius Satellite Radio. I'm going to get in trouble because just so many students I've taught who have really hit the big time, and I never get my intro class TR 135. We used to walk in the first about 120 students in the old 254 before we built Newhouse three, the intro course for all the students who were a major in radio, television, and film.

I must mention today my two great mentors, Dr. Larry Meyers, who was chair of the radio television film program. And the person who was really most responsible for me getting to Syracuse and getting to the doctoral program was Dr. Donald P. Eley. But getting back to Dr. King, his delivery techniques, a lot of that is what I was teaching my students on how to present broadcast copy. Because you have to give, especially the radio, you're creating the theater of the mind and the manipulation of sound effects music. Of course the human voice is incredible when you use it right. And of course, again, yes, John, yes, you brought ... oh my.

John Boccacino:

You taught me well. For the audience listening too, Rick, I had two of his classes at Newhouse and it's such an honor to get to tell this story, but I do kind of want to pivoting off of Dr. King's orator prowess and the radio career. How did you decide that radio and professional broadcasting ... what was that moment that got you hooked and said, I'm going to make a living doing this?

Rick Wright:

Okay, we got in my hometown, a station that was touted with the company was WCNC 1240 on the Dow in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. I'm roughly now what I would say in the eighth grade and had an eighth grade teacher who was incredible. Name was Ms. Doris Perry. She started taking us on field trips and she took us on a field trip to Norfolk, Virginia to see WTAR TV. That was the first television station in Norfolk, pretty much in Virginia, WTAR TV goes on the air in 1952, first television station on the air. They were on channel four WTAR, which is not WTKR. Is WTAR radio television. They built this big beautiful complex on Bush Street in Norfolk, Virginia, 732 Bush Street. So Ms. Doris Perry is a new teacher, my eighth grade teacher, and she was different. She took us on one of the first fields.

We're going on a field trip, we're going to take y'all to Norfolk, Virginia, and we're going to do a field trip. We're going to see WTAR TV. I had never seen this kind of complex before. In fact, the stations back home, which I'll talk about WCNC in a few minutes here. But anyhow, okay, John, we pull up to WTAR TV on a Sunday afternoon, all African American students. Now schools are segregated. We get off this bus and there was a young lady, I'll never forget, she had the uniform. Well, TV at that time was big, man, which was big now. But we get off the bus, man and here, all these little young African-American eighth graders from PW Moore High School getting off the bus, going into this TV radio complex. I was almost in tears because basically young African-American kids couldn't we go to a place.

We get run from the door. But Ms. Perry had already set up to talk to the general manager. We walked into the TV station and went into the conference room and all of this. I think in my class there had to have been probably about 28 of us. Man, there was a Bell and Hall movie projector sitting up on the stand in this conference room and, boy, to see some of my classmates just sitting up there like they own the place, man. We're going through. And then finally we walked through all the radio complex, the TV facilities, man. That just solidified it. I said, man, this is something I got to get into. But what happened before that trip? I mentioned WCNC radio. All right, a disc jockey by the name of Frankie Drake. Drake had worked at WGH in Norfolk, Virginia, WGH World, Greatest Harbor, 1310 on the dial.

All right, big jock. He got fired up in Norfolk. You know the story, the Ziggy came down, I [inaudible 00:34:49] class. So he comes down to Elizabeth City at WCNC Radio and he is a real major market kid. He



was out of Pennsylvania somewhere. So he comes to WCNC and just lit up the town. He was doing a nightly show called the Night Train and had the theme song, Hey baby, this is Frankie Drake here, WCNC, Elizabeth City, all you high school kids. And of course the town was segregated, but he would be requesting letters from the white school, the black school. Send your cards and letters in and, if you got a dedication to the person you love, I'll do all that kind. Frankie Drake. I used to listen to him.

So one day I was in class at PW Moore. I said, man, I got to meet this guy, Frankie Drake. After school, I jumped on my bicycle at PW Moore, went home, freshened up, and the station was out on West Main Street in Elizabeth City across the railroad tracks. I got him a bicycle, rode out, never been there before. Come down the road and there was the call letters, WCNC pointed down this dirt road with gravel pine trees on both side. My heart is beating. I'm scared. I didn't know if I was going to get runaway, whatever from the station. So I got to the station and that was an MG with Pennsylvania tags on it. This guy, disk jockey man, parked in front of the station and I got off my bicycle, went up and rang the doorbell, and I said, God, I hope I don't get run over. Being a black kid, man, we were always just scared to go to places.

Life just goes. Here comes a guy company, real good-looking cat with a little slim cigar in his mouth, man. He looked at me and he said, "Hey, what's your name?" I said, "My name is Roosevelt Wright. I'm from PW Moore High School. I really love your radio show." "So you like radio, don't you? Yeah, come on in." So we came in the studio and they were a mutual radio broadcasting affiliate. For a lot of you, mutual is going out of ... but it was one of the big radio networks of that era. That was a name. Gabriel Hether was a journalist. Had a long form news of the afternoon thing on the network on the air. Frankie Drake was there. I came into the control room and Frankie said, "I got to do a break here. Sonny, just stand by man."

Put the headphones on, hit the mic, switch the on-air light comes on. And he says, "Hi, this is Frankie Drake WC in say, Elizabeth, sunny North Carolina, temperature 85 degrees. And later tonight it'll be the night trade. So check me out." Said, "By the way, in the studio, I got a young man from PW Moore High School named the Sunny Wright is in here." Man, that was at ... okay, John, all of my students of Newhouse. You know what, that was the moment, man. That was the moment. Then of course he's on an old college board. And of course the station was, I think only had 250 watts in those and then eventually got a thousand watts. I thought I was in those days like a WABC, New York or WLS Chicago, LAC WREP Norfolk. It's in the big stations. But that's what did it. Then he basically did the show. Then later that night I went home, he was mentioning my name on the air and all, and that was it.

Realizing the power of radio. Here you are on a studio or television. Of course, even today, man, as I go around the city of Syracuse, I run to people all the time talking, "Hey Rick. Man, I remember you were Rick all through the night, man, back in the seventies." [inaudible 00:38:23] radio. But again, all of that, the foundation for me is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And meeting him and knowing that as a little poor African-American kid, maybe I can make it in this country with all of the areas of racism that we had. Hopefully our efforts would try to break down those barriers so we could at least make it. That was how I look at it from this standpoint today, John.

John Boccacino:

You really were a pioneering faculty member at Newhouse serving as the first African American professor in our communication school. What was that process and that journey like for you to be that trailblazer and what did you want to bring to our students to help further them with their educations?

Rick Wright:

I tell you, my trip to Syracuse is really a dream come true. I first learned of Syracuse and its media program in the library of PW Moore High School. I never forget Ms. Lillian Perry, our librarian one day called me and said, "Roosevelt, come to the library. I got something to show you." The National Education Association, NEA, had a division at that time called Audio Visual Instruction was a magazine. Of course they had a magazine that was dedicated completely to the whole field of audiovisual education. Ms. Perry gave me this magazine, NEA National Education Association, when it was dedicated to audiovisual. I read through the book, and guess what I found in the book? There were articles about Syracuse University and there were all these students setting up microphones and micro doing the games pictures of all the stuff we are doing today.

That was back in the 1950s, man. I said, wow. Then she said ... So I read the book, but in the book there's always that cartoon caption, have a cartoon. There was a cartoon that day of a graduation exercise at a university. There were the trees and all the families around everybody's academic regalia. There was one gentleman, your headgear, your mortarboard that you wear, he was wearing a real emotion picture film. Off the film was about maybe what 12 inches of film and the tassel, and the caption for that cartoon and that NEA magazine that day was, oh, he must have majored in audiovisual education. I said, wow. That was Syracuse. Then later, Mrs. Majet, who was the librarian at Elizabeth City State University, when I was a freshman, came to me one day and said, "Roosevelt, you know this field that you like doing audiovisual and everything? There is a school way up north called Syracuse," but she did her master's of library science here at Syracuse, Mrs. Majet.

Lord, I never believed in my wildest imagination when she was telling me about this school that I would end up at the same school in their media audiovisual radio, television, film as a professor and also getting a doctoral degree from the school in instructional technology. I did my dissertation on radio, by the way, and how radio can be used as a tool of instruction for teaching kids. Of course, there it is, Syracuse. The trip has been just absolutely fantastic. John, you've been my student, and of course I sure got a lot of the old students. I love all of you on the air and your old professor who's 80 years old now. I just try to be an authentic Rick Wright. I mean just myself. I didn't know the teachings and the mentors that I had from the Dr. Kings or Dr. Walter and Ripleys of the world, Mr. CR Page, Mr. Jones, all my teachers, man.

I think of my first grade teacher, Mrs. Moton, I think of Mrs. Anderson, Mrs. Branch Newell, who had to write with fountain pens, Mrs. Alice Mogan, my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Pendegrass, my sixth grade teacher who looked like, by the way, Dr. Edith Scott. Then of course my seventh grade teacher, Mrs. Butcher, and Ms. Perry was my eighth grade teacher, and my 9th and 10th grade teacher has a Syracuse connection. In fact, her niece was the principal of Nottingham High School here in Syracuse. Mrs. Helen Saunders was the teacher I'm talking about. Of course, Jean Phillips, Jean Phillips, everybody. Syracuse was Mrs. Helen Saunders's niece, who was my ninth and 10th grade teacher at PW Moore High School. She headed up the speech and drama department and all. Mr. Anderson, who was principal, got money from the school board to install a communications intercom system for the whole school with the speakers.

We had to have in the morning what? A radio broadcast telling us what the lunch menu would be and what was happening around the school. I was selected to do that. Mrs. Saunders had me doing that. But then Dr. Donald P Eley is what happened. How I got Syracuse, I was finishing up a certificate for advanced graduate studies at Virginia State University in Petersburg [inaudible 00:43:29], Virginia, and it was a one-year program. The summer of 1969, we spent the whole summer on campus doing the coursework, and everybody in this program were mid career professionals, John, and everybody was in a leadership role. I had just accepted a position at Delaware State University as director of their

educational media center, and of course Dr. El Milford Codwell, another great mentor of mine who was at Elizabeth City State, was now the head of chair of the Department of Education at Delaware State.

He called me on the phone and said, "Ro, what you doing back home, man?" I had just did a tour in the Army, by the way, and a year and a half on faculty in Elizabeth City State, then at Virginia State. So I'm handed to Delaware State, and then Dr. Harry Johnson, who's my advisor and head of the program, Virginia, said, "Roosevelt, you're going to go up to Delaware State? What are you going to do with the program?" I said, "That's going to be my research project for this program." Then of course, the spring of 1970, when I was finished up the Virginia State Program and also director of the Educational Media Center at Delaware State, I got a phone call from Dr. Harry Johnson who says, "Roosevelt, everybody in our institute has got to have an onsite visitation and have one of the top leaders in your area of specialization to come down to be your person and sign off on your research project and all."

He said, "I'm going to send you Dr. Donald P. Eley from Syracuse University." I tell you, I've thought, what Syracuse Dr. Don Eley? He came down, spent three days with me and Delaware State teaching my classes. Delaware was finally putting money in Delaware State, which was an HBCU for new buildings, and there was a new building that the education and humanities building. I laid out the plans for the Communications Center that is at Delaware State today, back during this time. So after three days with Dr. Don Eley and Dr. Eley looked at me and said, "Roosevelt." I said, "Yes, Dr. Ely." "Boy, I really hate to take you away from here, but you only been here a year and of course you got to get back in school and got to get you into the doctoral program, get your PhD. That was what Dr. Eley told me. He said, "I want you to come to Syracuse." I said, "Well, doc, I'm on [inaudible 00:45:55] but it's no problem." I came on a full doctoral ride doctoral fellowship, part of the NDEA Times of efforts that were going then to come to Syracuse. That's how I got to Syracuse.

John Boccacino:

The last question, Rick, I've got for you. I want to tie in Syracuse and another passion of yours, service to your country. You mentioned doing time serving the Army. You also are a very proud US Navy veteran, and I think it's so cool to let our audience know that on January 23rd you'll be honored as the hometown hero during the men's basketball home game versus Florida State in the JMA dome. What can you say about your military service and what that means to you? Why it was so important to give back to your country?

Rick Wright:

Well, to Dr. Haney and Dwayne Murray and all the folk over at ... I'm just honored with that honor. I was blown away. I've never looked for honors or anything, but I will say I went to Europe with the 32nd Air Defense Command and had a great time. Worked for Armed Forces Radio, all in Europe, got back home safe and sound right at this time of the year. I got back home on December the 27th, 1967 from Europe. Great tour, and I got home and started college teaching in 1968. I think I'm bringing this into focus because it was the 4th of April, 1968 when I was on faculty at Elizabeth City State University. When I turned on the radio, I was listening to our R&B radio station, WREP, Norfolk, and they broke in and said that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had just been shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee.

I tell you, I got in the car in front of the house that night and just sat there stunned. Tears were flowing out of my eyes, man. I said, oh my God, what else can we do like this? All to myself. I'm just sharing this with ... I never shared this with many folk, but this podcast in radio here, I'm 80 years old. Let me tell you, I rather just tell you how I felt. I was the lowest you could ever go, John. A person I sat down and ate with gave me role modeling, just an incredible leader. Great I have a dream speech. He had gone to

Memphis, Tennessee to help the sanitation workers there. One guy had gotten crushed in a truck in Memphis.

John Boccacino:

I feel like our audience has learned a lot about both you, but also about the career of Dr. King and the Syracuse University connections and ties that really bond us all. It's honestly been an honor to get to tell your story here and have you on, and I just want to thank you so much for being so open and candid. You really are the major market that got all of us into TV, radio, film, got our passion started for more than 38 years as a faculty member. You've earned that Professor Emeritus title. Thank you so much for making the time today.

Rick Wright:

John, thank you so very much for being your guest. Also as we get ready for the annual Dr. Martin Luther King birthday celebrations in the world. Famous JMA dome now where George Kilpatrick and I broadcast for many years and it has become the largest on-campus celebration, the life and birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King of any college or university in the entire United States of America. A blessing. Of course, John, love you. You're major market, John. A plus.

John Boccacino:

That'll be January 21st. Again, in the JMA Dome will be our 39th annual celebration. It's the largest of its kind on any college campus. For my guest, Rick Wright, I am John Boccacino, signing off for this week's episode of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.