

Interviewee: Joseph W. (P-Nut) Johnson

Place of interview: Residence, 50 Simons Street

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Interviewer: C.J. Lotz for Historic Charleston Foundation

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Length of interview: 50:34

BEGIN INTERVIEW

C.J. Lotz: This is C.J. Lotz conducting the interview with P-Nut at his home at 50 Simons Street. The date is October 18th, 2017. And could you say your full name?

William Johnson: William J. Johnson. William J. Johnson.

CJL: And what is your nickname?

WJ: P-Nut.

CJL: How do you spell that?

WJ: P hyphen N-u-t.

CJL: And when and where were you born?

WJ: Charleston, South Carolina, 1955, July 18th, at number nine Alexander Street.

CJL: You were born at home?

WJ: No. I was born at the County hospital in 1955. I was born drunk because my mother was drinking, so now I'm crazy and I'm having fun.

CJL: Was that hospital downtown?

WJ: Yeah, it was one – oldest hospital. Back in those days was the only hospital, well, in town at that time was County. It was small and busy. All the patients was black people and poor white folks.

CJL: How did you hear that story about you being drunk?

WJ: My mother told me.

CJL: How old were you when she told you that?

WJ: About six, was a true story.

CJL: What was your reaction when she told you that?

WJ: I loved it. See, I'm telling you right now, right, so it must be fun, right.

CJL: Tell me a little bit about how you got that nickname P-Nut.

WJ: Well, back in the day I was the youngest guy. I was the oldest guy in the group really, and a bunch of guys hang out with me. I was the oldest, but I was the smallest guy. They thought I wouldn't grow no more, so they called me P-Nut because I was a small guy, but I was the oldest. So, that's why I got the name P-Nut.

CJL: Is that the only story?

WJ: Well, I got one I did in Manhattan years ago, and I was in front of a audience. And I said, good evening, my name is P-Nut. And they asked me how I got my name P-Nut. I tell them when I went to elementary school, I had a weak bladder. So, they thought, see, I would always pee at myself. So, they called me a nut. That's how I got the name P-Nut.

CJL: Is one of those true?

WJ: The first one. The second one's just a joke.

CJL: How long have you lived in the Charleston area?

WJ: All my life.

CJL: And where all have you lived throughout Charleston?

WJ: Ooh, east side, west side, downtown, North Charleston for a little while, West Ashley for a little while, but now I'm back on the West side, but downtown Charleston, east side is where I was born. That's home.

CJL: And what street did you live on when you were born?

WJ: Number 9 Alexander Street. That's where the Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. Know where that's at? Know that sits at right now? I was born right there. It was because of them that we had to move. When they came in there, we had to move [out of?] Alexander Street. I was born right there.

CJL: How long did you live there?

WJ: 'Til I was about five, six. Then we moved. I lived on 313 Street, 313 East Bay Street 'til I was about 14. Then we moved down to Beaufain Street, which you know where that's at. And I been there 'til I was 18. No, about 30.

CJL: What do you remember of your early childhood downtown? Like around age five, do you remember anything?

WJ: I remember a lot of stuff. What you want to hear?

CJL: What was – 9 Alexander, was that like a single house? What kind of house was that?

WJ: Well, it was a single house, but it was like – back in those days, it was like being in the country even though you was in the city. Because – and that was like a community with all black folks living in one – well, this was like across the street, and the houses was small like – they were like old slave houses. They wasn't well built back in the days, but the people that had the money live in better houses. So, the people that had money live in big houses. The people that didn't have the money live in small houses. We had one. We had what you call a outhouse in the middle of the yard that everybody had to share. Then we had – the lady's name was Josephine, and this is a true story whether you believe it or not. She came from New York many, many years ago. We were just kids, and she was living in our same neighborhood, and she used to play an accordion. She used to say, oh. She had like a candy shop. She would sell candy and donuts and ice cream. She'd sit out there all day. She was out there all day, and she would play this accordion. And she had this little dog named Fuzzy, and she would actually send Fuzzy to the store. See, Fuzzy walked to the store every day, to the drugstore or to the grocery store, whatever. And when she didn't want to go, she would write a note, and she would stick it in the dog's mouth and point in which direction. If she pointed that way, the dog know he had to go to the drugstore. The dog would actually come back with the medicine in his mouth, because they put it in a little bag. And if the dog takes too long, Miss Josephine would grab her shotgun, and she would go down the street to meet that dog. But most of the time, the dog would come back. And if she wanted something from the grocery store, like something like a egg or a donut or something like that, she'll put the note in the dog's mouth and point toward the store. And the dog would go in the store because he had the money in the bag that she would give. The dog would come back with that package. So, she would take the note and the money, put it in a bag. The dog would go to the store, and the store owner would put whatever they want in the bag. The dog would bring it back.

CJL: Oh, how old were you when this was happening?

WJ: About, ooh, five, six. I remember all that because we moved around that then. I think we moved I was like six years old. We move. So, I had to have been like five or six when I saw all that.

CJL: Okay. So, when you were born, tell me about who was in your family and who lived there on Alexander Street.

WJ: Oh, man, it was – well, it was me, my brother, my sister, my mother, and we had a man named Mr. Josie. He was a bootlegger. Then we had what we call Monkey. He was a moonshine runner. Then we had my mother who was like a madam. She ran everything. You come. You want to get married. You go to her house. They want to hide moonshine, hide at her house. She was a very smart lady. She isn't very well educated but she had street smarts. And we had just

like a regular neighborhood. We survive. You got in trouble, we'd throw a rent party. She can pay her rent. Anybody get in trouble, we'd pitch in and help them out. And I never started writing or doing poetry until I was about maybe 19. Well, earlier than that. I think I was about 16. When I started doing poetry, it happened by accident. Well, I used to do after – every year, I couldn't afford birthday cards, right, with the words in it. So, I'd buy the blank birthday cards with no words in it. Not birthday cards, but Christmas cards. And I would fill it out and put it in my [00:07:15 unintelligible phrase] I worked for a lot of people downtown on the Battery. Every year I would take down them cards, and they would give me money. Some give me \$20. Some give me \$10. One lady, she would only give me a cookie every year. She never give you no money. So, she would only give me a cookie every year. Every year I would take those cards to the people house, right. Like sometime 150 bucks. Every year I would do that. And that went on for a while, so people started requesting it. Every year they wanted me to -- because my cards was so pretty. It wasn't Hallmark. It was just a P-Nut card. I would write what I feel in it, and they loved it better than Hallmark. So, every year they would look forward to that card. Every year I look forward to the money. So, I started doing that, and later on down the line as I got older, I collected all those cards and all the stuff I wrote, like I showed you, all the old poetry, the old poems. And I got – you want to know how I started doing poetry? You want to get to that?

CJL: We will definitely get to that. You want to –

WJ: Know more about my history.

CJL: What was your mother's name?

WJ: Miss Alberta Johnson.

CJL: And was she from Charleston?

WJ: No, she was originally born – well, they was originally from Daniel Island.

CJL: Okay.

WJ: And Mr. Daniel was a slave owner, but he owned free slaves. If you got on this island, you become a free slave. You get to run the island, do what you want. He didn't chain you down or whip you or nothing. He was a good slave owner, and he would give you part of his property to live on. It was your property. And as my mother got old, she migrated from Daniel Island to Mount Pleasant, and from Mount Pleasant, which is Snowden – from Mount Pleasant to Charleston. But she's originally from Daniel Island.

CJL: And did she keep some of that family land that she had?

WJ: No. Back in those days, people wasn't well educated. So, white folks was coming in and make them sign some paper saying it's for insurance. All the time it's a paper under it giving them the rights to your land, and you don't know it because they got to copy that blue paper they copy on. You sign that top paper, but the bottom paper you giving away all your rights to your land everything, but they wasn't educated enough to know that. I found out that later on in life.

So, they lost it all. They wasn't well educated back in those days. So, they got screwed for their land.

CJL: Did your mother value education when she was raising her kids?

WJ: Well, my mother worked hard. She never learned, or she taught herself how to read and write. She never went to school. My mother worked for like 35 cents. They got maybe \$1.00, \$2.00 a day. You know what I mean?

CJL: What was she doing?

WJ: Picking tomato and cucumbers. And she made 50 bucks a week, maybe 30 bucks a week she was lucky, and she worked five days a week for that.

CJL: Where was that?

WJ: This was – she started on Alexander Street. Then we moved to East Bay Street. She was still doing it. But I think by the time we grew up, I think she might have been making 30, 40 bucks a week by then working on the farm.

CJL: What farm was that?

WJ: Whatever one they – they go to James Island, Johns Island, anyone that wants them at the time. This one man would pick them up like 6:00 in the morning. They come back 7:00 at night, tired, sweaty, and work all day for 10 bucks maybe.

CJL: What would you and your siblings do while your mom was at work?

WJ: We was in school. And I was too young to go to school. We had to go to the babysitter.

CJL: What school was that?

WJ: Buist Elementary, which is now Buist Academy that they won't let me in because I'm black, and I went there before the white kids, and I don't like that. They won't even let me in. I went there. They wouldn't let me in, not even through the door.

CJL: When was that?

WJ: Less than a year ago. I wanted to go there to introduce myself, tell them I went to school [00:11:04 unintelligible]. They wouldn't even let me through the front door, won't even hit the buzzer, and I hate that. Buist Elementary.

CJL: Where is that located?

WJ: It's on Calhoun. It's Buist Academy now, but back then it was Buist Elementary. I graduated from that school. You can still find my nickel and dimes in the dirt if you look. So, that hurt me. I didn't like that at all.

CJL: What years did you go to school there?

WJ: Oh, man, that was, '61 until I was 12. Then I went to C. A. Brown. I went there for six years.

CJL: Do you have memories of being in school?

WJ: Oh, yeah, lots of good memories. I remember being so smart one year, they skipped me.

CJL: They moved you up a grade?

WJ: Yeah, one year up.

CJL: And is that when you started to get interested in writing and poetry?

WJ: No, I was still too young. I didn't start getting interested in writing the poetry 'til I was about 16, something, taking it serious. Yeah.

CJL: Any important school memories that come to mind?

WJ: Yeah. The day my teacher asked everybody in the class a question, they said they want an initial for something with abbreviation, right. And they would give you a word like K-A. What would that mean? They can answer it. And they give me one like G-R. They say, what would that mean? I said something like, just run. And she'd tell me, get out of the class. I was too smart. Because nobody else could understand initials, but every one she gave me I would just see this, tell me what it could mean. Not what it mean, but what it could mean. And I did it three times in a row. She'd tell me, get out of the class and walk the hallway. You're too smart. So, I walked the hallway for the rest of the day.

CJL: You were in trouble?

WJ: No, I was proud. She didn't want me in the class with nobody. She said, you sit and you [00:12:56 unintelligible]. You got to get out. She said, you go in the hallway. See, what I used to do in school, right. Yeah, but it was so simple. When your teacher give you a project, right, say tonight I want you to do page four, five, six, and seven, I did that three days ago. So, I never had to do no homework. I was – I was – but you know if you do page one today, you know you can do three, four tomorrow. So, I do all mine three, four days ahead. So, when I go to school, teacher everybody had their homework, everybody doing their work, I just pass mine up. I did it three days ago.

CJL: That's why they bumped you up?

WJ: Yeah, they bumped me up.

CJL: And then when you moved from Alexander Street because of the Gaillard, how did your mom feel about having to move the family?

WJ: The whole neighborhood was upset, because some people couldn't – some people had to move clear uptown. Some people had to move out of the neighborhood completely. So, nobody was happy about that. Then we had to sell – we was actually making money in the neighborhood. Everybody was making money. Know [what] I mean?

CJL: With what? Moonshine?

WJ: Moonshine, people had jobs working at the Battery cleaning floors. Know [what] I mean? They had janitor work, working for the white folks, selling moonshine, gam[bling]. We had fun. It was just like – it was just pure fun. Nobody wanted to leave. So, nobody liked that.

CJL: How did you get the information that you had to leave? What was –

WJ: They got – they're dropping something in the – well, I can't explain all that, but the truth is all politics. If you read my movie, it could tell you more, but I don't want to get into all that. But you know how that works. Either you move, or we will make you move. Well, for one, they want you to move out of your house. You got a beautiful house, right. They jack your taxes up. You can't pay the taxes. And if you can't pay the taxes, they'll arrest your son, put him in jail. You can't pay the bond, so now you got to put your house up to pay the bond. If they want your nightclub, they'll send the DHEC in there and they'll say, oh, your bar or your nightclub is dirty. You got to close it down. And that's what they use politics to take everything, and they're still doing it today. So, that's how they get what they want through politics.

CJL: Where did you move from there?

WJ: From where?

CJL: Alexander Street.

WJ: Down to Logan Street. No, I moved on East Bay Street.

CJL: How many siblings at that point all moved with you?

WJ: The same three. It was still the three of us.

CJL: Tell me about your dad.

WJ: My dad died when I was six years old. He was a preacher. He had his own church, though.

CJL: Where was his church?

WJ: On President Street years ago. I was so young, that's about all I can remember. I don't exactly remember where on President Street, but I know it was on President Street, because my grandma just lived like a block down from the church. So, that was a long time ago.

CJL: So, you moved to East Bay Street.

WJ: Uh-huh.

CJL: And how long were you there?

WJ: 'Til I was about 13.

CJL: Do you remember, what did you used to do with your friends around there? Ride your bikes or –

WJ: Well, we used to ride bikes, and we used to make our own. Well, we couldn't afford toys back in those days, so we used to make our own toy. We would make skateboard. Before they had the skateboard they got now, we used to make our own out of skates, and we'd put it on the board. We'd make the one with the handlebar. We used two two by fours, put it together, put the handle on it, and we'd make our own. Kite, we used to make flying. We make it out of newspaper. We made our own kites. My kids, the girls that wanted a doll baby couldn't afford it, they would take a Coca-Cola bottle, put a stick in it, take some horse hair or something to tie around the stick [00:16:39 unintelligible]. That was their doll baby. So, we actually made our own toys.

CJL: You told me before about biking around, and there was a character, Mr. Solomon.

WJ: Oh, yeah.

CJL: Tell us a little bit about that.

WJ: Mr. Solomon, he was a character. We used to come from school every day, right. This man named Mr. Solomon would be right down there. It was right near where Waterfront Park is now. And we would go down there every day after school, and Mr. Solomon used to wear those diving suits, this diving gear. Every day we'd go under that – you know what I'm talking about – that little shed he had, tin shed. His name was on the side, Solomon. He would go down there every day in the afternoon. He'd be down there, keep coming back out. And we were just watching. He'd come out there like every other, give us coins, half-dollars, silver pieces. Every day he gave us some coins. He says, keep it to yourself, kids. I won't give it to everybody. But he'll keep giving it to us. And we go there every day. He give us half a dollar, silver dollars and Liberty head dimes and all that stuff. We'd get like \$5, \$6 change every day when we could afford to go down there. And as we got older, and he finally move, then I realized that at one time where he was at, there used to be a bank right there. The bank went down during the storm, one of the old storms back in the '40s or something, that went down, '30s, when it was a bank, and it tore the bank down. So, Mr. Solomon knew that. So, he built this little shed right there,

and he would go down in that spot every day and dig up coins, because there actually was a bank in that spot.

CJL: Do you think he was keeping them for himself, or was he giving you all the good stuff?

WJ: No, he was giving out change, probably even get millions of dollars in coins, but he was giving like \$3 or \$4. But I knew he was getting a lot of stuff out there.

CJL: Do you still have any of that?

WJ: No. No, we'd take it, and our mother would take it from us. She'd take the silver coins and give us trash coins. She would give – she'd grab a couple coins. She'd take the silver, all the silver away from us, and give us like nickels and dimes. We'd take it before. Take silver, she take it. Just basically half a dollars and stuff. She might let us keep the nickel, a dime, but the half a dollars and the full dollars, she would keep.

CJL: Maybe she thought she had mouths to feed.

WJ: Well, that's good.

CJL: Did your mom do much of the cooking at home?

WJ: Yeah.

CJL: Did you ever cook?

WJ: I learned to cook since I was about ten years old. I learned to cook.

CJL: What were some of the first things that you learned to cook?

WJ: Everything. I learned to cook like pork and beans and fish, leg bone, things we eat right now, pork chops, things we eat right now.

CJL: What was your favorite food when you were growing up?

WJ: I can say my mother had so much good food. We would have chicken. We would have pork chops. [00:19:37 unintelligible] my mother give my favorite, so I didn't have a favorite. Except when we get a chicken leg, we'd run outside and show it off to everybody. Everybody – all the kids liked that chicken leg. They'd run outside with that chicken leg and be happy. Mama, can we go outside and play? Give me that chicken leg. You'd run outside with that chicken leg. You're happy. She'd smile, what's going on? Tell [[us it's] a good day for a smile.

CJL: She can't believe all the good stories you're telling. Just to jump ahead a little bit in the timeline, you have a good story about chicken when you traveled one time and the different – I think you were in Ohio.

WJ: Uh-huh.

CJL: Do you remember that story?

WJ: Which one?

CJL: You walked by the restaurant.

WJ: And this girl started arguing?

CJL: I don't know if I know that one. There's one about they were selling chicken, but they weren't selling the wings.

WJ: Oh, yeah, this was a place that was called – I forget. It was in Ohio. [00:20:32 Silicaville]? I think that's the name, but I don't remember. I was on there on tour, me and my manager, and they had this little shop, little country shop out there. And I went in there, and I was like, me, I want some chicken wings. Everybody look at me like I was crazy. They don't know what the hell I'm talking about. What you talking about chicken wing? Said, we don't sell. I said, yes, you do sell chicken wing. He said, we sell chicken – what you call it?

CJL: Drumsticks.

WJ: Yeah, we sell Buffalo wings. That's what he said. He said, we sell Buffalo wings. I said, well, it said Buffalo wing come from a chicken wing. He said, oh, you talking about probably the part with the toothpick on it. So, that's the old way. Yeah. So, he said, sure, you could have that for free. He gave me a whole bag full, didn't charge me nothing.

CJL: Of the skinny part of the wing?

WJ: No, the whole wing. They gave me a bag of the whole wing. The whole wing, he gave me a whole bag full of it. Because they threw – what they do, they just cut the little part of it and throw the rest of it away. So, I got them before they did that. They give you a whole bag. And the fun part was, when I went home like cooking them next, I ran into the white kids. And they was like curious. Like they never seen a black person before. Only thing black in that town was me and the dog. Everything else was white. I'm serious. So, what happened is that those kids got hanging around, and they came in one day, and they said, ooh, that chicken sure smell good. I said, you want some? You can't tell my parents. I won't tell your parents. You all come here all you want, right. So, they sitting there, eat more, and their stomach got full, and they was so happy. Then the next morning, I woke up with a black dog out there, and that dog was by my house every day. That was the only black friend I had out there. Me and that dog got along real fine. Yeah, really come see me. Oh, yeah, the UPS man was black. That was the other black guy, the UPS man. That was the only black people out there. But I had a good time because these people were so wealthy. They had their own gas tanks on their property. They didn't have to go to the service station to get gas. They had a big lake in the middle. They live around the lake. On both sides of the lake, they had a gas tank. So, people would actually bring the gas and fill up the tank. These people had so much money, they had yachts all over the place. And my birthday fell

in July, right, and they celebrate Christmas in July out there, Christmas in July. And my birthday fell that day. I was driving a yacht, riding jet ski. And they cooked me two big – first time I had fried turkey. They fried me two big old turkey and brought it for me. They give me all kind of jewelry and money. I had a great time out there. I just had pure fun. But they were all hillbillies. They work at the mines. But they were some of the nicest people you ever want to meet, very nice people.

CJL: What were you on tour for?

WJ: I was doing poetry, reading poetry and things like that.

CJL: Tell us now how you first got into poetry.

WJ: Well, I would just write – I used to go in the nightclub and just write poems, and people liked it.

CJL: What'd you write them on?

WJ: Huh?

CJL: What did you write your poems on?

WJ: I write it on napkins. I used to give them away. So, people started liking it, so they started buying it. So, I started selling them for like \$5 apiece. You know what I mean? And I'd make up to \$300 a night just selling \$5 napkins.

CJL: Which bars?

WJ: I went to all the bars, AC's, AC's mainly and a few other bars I went to. But basically it was mainly these places at the time. Well, actually I went to all the bars. I'll stay at this bar a while. I'll go to the next bar, because I become famous. So, when I walk through the door, people see me. They say, come on in, P-Nut. Everywhere I go, the crowd follow. So, the bar made money, too. They would just see me there because the crowds were coming to get a napkin. So, the bar made money. I made money. Everybody was happy. And I started selling at \$5 a napkin. Some night I made \$200, \$300, 'til I'm tired. Yeah, but that was going on for every night. I was saving my money. And this guy came along one day and asked me to really write him a poem, so I wrote him a poem. He actually went by the pool table and started crying. I said, man, why you crying? He said, man, your poem is so good. It hit me to the heart. He said, I never read a poem so beautiful. He introduced himself and he said, now I'm going to make you real famous. I said, how you going to do? He said, I'll help you get your book. I said, sure. His name was Brian Murray. I thought he was kidding, right. Said, where do you live? At that time I was living down on Beaufain Street, I believe. Yeah, Beaufain Street, something like that. And he came down. He said, give me all your poems. So, I give him a stack of poems. Yeah, a stack of poems. And he said, I'm going to take these, and I'll be back. I trusted him. So, he took them all and he came back, but he give it all right back to me. And about a month later, he came and showed me this book. That was the first P-Nut book came out. He put up the money, and he had

it all made up. Then that's when I started touring with him. We started touring. But then it fell apart after that. But everything then I feel good now because I can do it all on my own. So, you learn from experience.

CJL: Where did you tour?

WJ: I went to Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, places like that.

CJL: So, you were reading the poetry, or what were you doing on the tour?

WJ: You got to see me live. You got to see the thing. I just don't read poetry. I act it out. It ain't like what you see out there, all that boring crap. People get on stage. They don't know what the hell they're saying. They're loud. They're using profanity. That's not me. When I'm on stage, it's like Vaudeville. That's why I say you got to a P-Nut show together, so people can see it. That's why I didn't do that poetry jam the other day, because I want to be me when I'm on stage. I want to act a fool. I want to do what I want to do. I want my fans to have fun. I don't want to be boring. I like to put on a show. When you leave my show, you won't forget it. That's the way I perform.

CJL: And you had some characters that you would –

WJ: I have a lot of characters on stage.

CJL: Is there an example you could give? What's one of the characters?

WJ: Well, I do Dr. Love. I did the James Br-- I came on as James Brown my last show. And I also do P-Nut, and I got a thing I call [00:26:41 unintelligible] old man. I disguise my voice, now talking as a old man. Yeah, so it was like – I'm like four different characters when I'm on stage. But you got to see it to believe it.

CJL: And when you were doing the poetry on the napkins, was that around the same time that you did those cards for people?

WJ: No, that was way after.

CJL: Okay.

WJ: That was after I did the cards for people.

CJL: And so have you always been able to make money on your poetry?

WJ: Until now.

CJL: What other jobs have you had?

WJ: Well, I paint all my life, painting since I was 16. I paint all – I still paint. So, I worked all my life. My first job, I work at a drugstore delivering medicine after school, making at \$35 a week. That was my first job.

CJL: Was that on bicycle?

WJ: Riding a bicycle from here nearly to North Charleston, all around the city. From 3:00 until about 8:00 at night, that's what I did. I delivered medicine for Henry Drugstore, Henry Cartwright Drugstore, which was a drugstore. I did about \$35 a week doing that, but I made like \$125 with tips.

CJL: So, you'd drop off the drugs, and people would pay you for the prescriptions?

WJ: I'd go to their house. I'd knock on the door. They'll come to the door. I'll give it to them. They didn't want me to put it in the mailbox. They wanted me to make sure the people was home. They didn't want me to drop it in the mailbox. So, he would make sure everybody – that's why I did it after hours. You do it in the daytime when people are home, and then after people get off at work, I do it 'til about 7:00. But they didn't want me to do it if the people wasn't home. He would call and make sure everybody's home at a certain time, so we can get the medicine, get the medicine. He didn't want me leaving it on the doorstep and the mailbox.

CJL: And when did you start painting houses?

WJ: I started painting, I was about 15, 16, something like that.

CJL: And some of the people that you know in Charleston, you know –

WJ: Through painting.

CJL: Through painting, right. There's a group of guys that you've always painted with?

WJ: Yeah, a bunch. I painted for everybody in town. I painted for all the famous. All the rich folks in Charleston, I painted for them. Put it like that.

CJL: You talking exterior paint or interior?

WJ: Interior, exterior, old and new, I did it all.

CJL: How did you move to – they call this neighborhood North Central. When did you move up here?

WJ: About 20 years ago. I just came off tour. That was the last time working with a manager. I was living in a condo over on Meeting Street, and I met Inez years ago. So, me and her hooked up. And my manager started acting crazy, so I said, well, time for me to move on. So, I move over here. He called me several times, but I wasn't interested.

CJL: Who is Inez?

WJ: My girl. That's Miss P-Nut.

CJL: How do you spell Inez's name?

WJ: I-n-e-z.

CJL: And how did you meet her?

WJ: I met her, I was getting ready to have a banquet or something somewhere, and I give her tickets to come to the banquet. And she says, I'm going to bring my sister. I said, hell no, you taking me. I'm taking you. You ain't bringing your damn sister, not with my tickets. So, you got to tell the lady to smile. You got to tell the lady to smile. But anyway, she said, I can't bring my sister? I said, no, I give you the tickets for me and you, and she showed up. And so we've been together ever since.

CJL: Were you performing at that?

WJ: No, it was my brother's banquet. He invited us. I invited her.

CJL: Had you known her before you started dating her?

WJ: Yeah, I'd known her for years when she used to work down on the [00:30:12 unintelligible] to the place called Crispy's] Chicken, yeah.

CJL: And when you got together, is that when you moved here?

WJ: Twenty-something years ago. It wasn't yesterday.

CJL: What do you think about the community in this neighborhood?

WJ: It's pretty good, getting better.

CJL: How have you seen it change over the 20 years you've been here?

WJ: It changed a lot. It was much worse. But it changed a lot.

CJL: When you first moved here, what was bad about it?

WJ: Drugs, crime, but it's pretty good now. Just like any other neighborhood, you go from bad to gets better. Every neighborhood have it once in a while.

CJL: What was the neighborhood hangout spot?

WJ: The whole neighborhood.

CJL: Is the Ellen Bright Dance Hall a place where people would go?

WJ: Yeah, pretty much.

CJL: What would they do there?

WJ: Dance. That's what you do at a dance hall, dance and drink. That's about it. That was about the only spot really around here to hang out was Ellen Bright and the little store that was next door. That was about it.

CJL: What kind of store was it?

WJ: Just a regular grocery store. And the barber shop, that was it. There ain't too many other places around here back – well, there used to be years ago, but the rich folks come out and buy everything. We used to have a lot of bars and nightclubs. They ain't here no more. People buy them out and build hotels and all kind of crap, so all the good stuff gone.

CJL: So, a normal weekend here would be Ellen Bright Hall was open?

WJ: When it was there. A normal weekend now is what you see right now, sitting down talking to good people. This is my weekend right here. No more Ellen Bright, so this is it. You come here tomorrow, I'll be doing the same thing, except I'll be talking to somebody different.

CJL: Tell me about your front stoop and people hanging out there. Do you like to hang out there a lot?

WJ: We don't do that much. Once in a while I hang out on the stoop, if the weather's nice. [00:32:02 Unintelligible] your business, so I don't do a lot of hanging out. I might go out one night and get drunk. I'm sober for the next five days. So, that's about it. I don't get to do much of anything. I'm trying to do all this work [00:32:13 unintelligible], so you guys can buy all my painting and retire.

CJL: How did you get into painting?

WJ: Painting what?

CJL: Pictures, art.

WJ: Art, that was accident. Yeah, a friend of mine just brought me some – said, P-Nut, you got all this poetry going on. Well, you ever try painting art? I said, no, not really. So, he brought me a few brushes and a few little stuff like that. I was just standing in the door one day, and I started painting, and you saw my first piece of artwork. But I did that and I was hooked. I was painting ever since.

CJL: What's the one behind you?

WJ: That's my house. That's like my second or third painting.

CJL: What about some of the other ones?

WJ: Oh, this one right here, that's Dead Man Curve. You ever heard of that? You ever heard about Dead Man Curve?

CJL: Where is that?

WJ: It's on Bohicket Road on James Island. That's the road you take to go to Mosquito Beach. They got a tree that hangs out in the road, and they got a sign before you get to it say slow down. If you don't slow down, you hit that tree and you die. If you can look at the painting, you could see more.

CJL: Do you ever go to Mosquito Beach?

WJ: I used to go there a lot when I was young.

CJL: Tell us about Mosquito Beach.

WJ: It was family owned. It was a lot of fun. You get all the good food. You meet the girls. You party. Some of the best artists played there, like James Brown, Temptations. Way back in the days, you could find them out on the beach, the Drifters. Back in the days when I was young, they all came there. But I remember that as a kid. As you got older, they got old, we got old, so it changed. But Mosquito Beach was very famous.

CJL: What else would you do –

[00:33:57 Leigh Moring suggests more questions about the paintings.]

CJL: Yeah. Do you want to tell us a little bit more about some of these paintings?

WJ: Well, this painting right here, you're going to like this one. It's called Corporate. Know why? See this painting right here? If you – I got – see, if you look at that painting, you'll see a barrel. See the brown barrel? Okay. If you look down here, you see a dollar bill, right? See that barrel is full of chemical. So, they throw that barrel on your property, right, which is full of chemical, and you make money, right. That's a dollar bill. Then when you make money, you get big, you climb that ladder. See what I'm saying? And once you climb the ladder and make that money, then you see that apple. That meant you could eat well. So, now you eating well, so now you see everything. And now you're doing so good, your hand is out there. You're reaching for even more, while all the time you're killing us. See the black grave? So, it's Corporate. You understand what I'm saying?

CJL: Mmm-hmm.

WJ: That's the rich killing the poor or anybody, not only the poor, but they'll throw it. They don't care what they do with the chemical. They throw it on your property, and it's poisonous, and they been doing that for years, throwing it in the ocean, throwing it in the water. But when it come to money, who cares? So, this is why it's called Corporate. That one is just of Charleston Harbor right there with the whale, I mean the dolphin. That's Charleston Harbor. That one is my favorite right there.

[00:35:24 Unintelligible].

WJ: You can see that one? She can't get back on that one.

Katherine Pemberton: We'll see it later.

CJL: When you mentioned the Corporate one and then Charleston, do you feel like Charleston has that corporate feel to it?

WJ: No. Well, it probably do, but they ain't going to talk about that Charleston has that. Charleston didn't have that much – well, we did years ago. You had the paper mills and all that crap, so I think it's everywhere, not only Charleston. I think every big state got that problem somewhere, people dumping stuff on your land and bad water, things like that.

CJL: When you were living here, was that when – how old were you when Hurricane Hugo hit?

WJ: Hugo, that was – it had to have been like 52, 49, 52, something like that. Hugo was 20-something years ago.

CJL: '89.

WJ: '89, yeah.

CJL: Where were you living when it hit?

WJ: I was living in Ansonborough.

CJL: Did you stay for the storm? Were you there?

WJ: No, we move out like a day before it hit. You know Ansonborough that where the Aquarium's at, right, which is the projects then. You remember they had projects? I was living in those projects. We had seven-foot of water, so I lost everything. I saved nothing but this peanut and a few other things. I left out there with the clothes on my back. I had to start all over again. I had a mental breakdown. I lost my mother, my best friend, and my wife all in three months' time.

CJL: Because of Hugo?

WJ: Because of Hugo. Well, my mother was elderly, but Hugo played a big part in her dying. And my wife died. She was sickly. My best friend got hit by a car years ago. All this happened like in three months' time. So, I was had a mental problem, and I didn't care about nothing. I had money. I can't even spend it. So, I went through Hugo and survived. So, now I don't like getting screwed by nobody, no one, for any reason. If I can make it through Hugo, I can make it through anything. So, when it come to taking crap, I ain't doing it, and that's just a fact.

CJL: What did it look like when you came back after Hugo hit?

WJ: I never left. We were just in the – we were at the Gaillard until the storm was over. Yeah, then even the Gaillard, like the ceiling caved in in the Gaillard, so people had to get out of the Gaillard and go someplace else. So, it was horrible. So, I went through enough to take any more. You know what I mean? I just can't stand it.

CJL: How did you put your life back together?

WJ: With the grace of God and having faith and being honest to myself and taking a lot of crap to get there. You don't build up unless you take a little crap on the way, but I have to go through all that to get back where I'm at. Yeah.

CJL: Did you write about Hugo at all?

WJ: That's one of my number one poem. Open the book and I'll read it right now. Are you allowed to hear it?

KP: Should I get your [book]?

WJ: Well, it's right there on the table.

KP: We should get you –

WJ: Let's get that one right there. I'll read it for – you need to put this on film. Find it, not read it.

CJL: Which one?

WJ: Hugo. She'll find it real quick.

KP: I'll find it for you. You go ahead.

WJ: Look for --

KP: Where did you move after Hugo?

WJ: After Hugo? I forget, been so long. Oh, I moved over on the east side, back on the east side on Hanover Street. Pure hell, that's the name of it.

KP: Oh, it's here [referring to finding the poem].

WJ: Pure hell.. Yeah, I moved on the east side after Hugo. I live over there for about three years or something. You want to read it?

CJL: No, no.

WJ: You want [00:38:56 unintelligible] read it? You ready for this? Oh, man, I do a lot for us. I love a smile, but somebody ain't got none.[Laughs.] I know. You ready for this?

CJL: Yeah, look this way.

WJ: Okay. Okay. I'll look at you. Okay. That ain't it. Oh, here it is. Are you ready to hear this? Here we go. [Reads] "It was September 21st, 1989, when it came like the devil from hell. It knocked on my door and my window. I could not ignore it. So, I fled, and I took my mother to shelter. And it tore up everything, my heart, my mind. I was confused. It tore up my soul. It was so terrible. It was a sore for eyes to see and a crushing feeling that's still inside of me. It only brought pain, tears, and misery, even death. It even disturbed the dead. And that horrible song remain in my head. Cars flying in the air. Even boats flew on land. It hurt everybody, woman, child, and man. It was a no-win situation, and I pray for it to go. That was one dirty sonofabitch. So, if you don't know, his name was Hurricane Hugo. And that's the truth."

CJL: You saw all of that?

WJ: Oh, yeah. I saw coffins floating past me. Hundreds of years old coffin that was dug out of the ground after the storm came, it came out of the graveyard. I was walking in front of cars. It floated right past me. I had to push it aside to keep walking.

CJL: Where was that?

WJ: On Alexander Street right in the front of the municipal auditorium. We had like four feet of water. I had water up to past my waist, And no place to go. I mean, when we did get back to check our apartments, we had fish and crab in the house jumping around. Eels and anything in the water was in the house, because we had seven feet of water in the house. The house was unlivable for months, the projects that we lived in. That's when they said it was contaminated for us, but not for them, because now they live on it. Well, what we had was supposed to be contaminated, but now they got it. It ain't contaminated no more.

KP: This is where Ansonborough Field came [down?] –

WJ: Ansonborough. That's where I used to live. They said it was contaminated. The minute we move out, they move in. So, what happened to the contamination?

CJL: How do you feel about that?

WJ: I hate it. A lot of people lost family, not lost, but they had to disperse. People moved out of town. Some moved to New York. Some died just because of that. You can't just take over a neighborhood and disperse them like that. Now they can't get – nobody will know nobody [00:42:01 unintelligible]. We were trying to find each other for years after that, trying to call and connect. Nobody can't find nobody. Then you hear one day they died. Oh, I should've seen. But that takes a lot [00:42:10 unintelligible]. That's like taking your brother and putting him in New York and putting you in China. You know what I mean? It just don't work to bust up a neighborhood like that. And it happened to me not once but, if you remember, twice.

KP: Do you ever worry that as this neighborhood gets gentrified that something like that will happen here?

WJ: Not if I can help it, because I ain't going nowhere. [00:42:35 Unintelligible] went anywhere.

CJL: How do you feel so confident about that? Is it because you paid off your house now or –

WJ: No. I feel confident about that because I ain't going nowhere. They'll say, well, you're [00:42:48 unintelligible]. Just so much rhetoric, politics, and I got the right people on my side, so I ain't worrying about it. It's the least of my worry. I don't worry about that.

CJL: Do storms scare you?

WJ: No. That's God work. Storms don't scare me.

CJL: Have you left again for any storms?

WJ: No, never did. Storms don't scare me because you can't duck God work anyway.

CJL: Yeah.

WJ: You can still – no, you can be right around the corner and still get blown away by a bullet. So, what's the difference? If you're going, you're going. Storm ain't so bad. Man fear me more than storm.

CJL: What goals do you still have left to accomplish in your life?

WJ: Sell me a painting for \$100 million.

CJL: What would you do with \$100 million?

WJ: What would YOU do with \$100 million?

CJL: I wouldn't be getting it. You'd be getting it.

WJ: But what would you do with it?

CJL: Hmm. I don't know.

WJ: Me, I'd just sit back and live like a king. That's all I'd do. I'd buy me a nice little house on the water with a dock where I can go fishing, help who I could help, those who helped me. I'd sit back and relax. I wouldn't get no rentals because I don't need no problems, no headaches. I will just get one little house with a dock on it where I can fish and relax, help the people that helped me and enjoy the rest of my life. I don't care about traveling or leaving town or buying no big boat or no big yacht or no big house. I don't care about nothing about that. I just want to sit quietly enjoying the little time I got left. Traveling will kill me, so I might as well stay in Charleston enjoy.

CJL: If you could get that house on the water, would it be near Charleston?

WJ: It would be in Charleston. Only thing like it'd be like in James Island, Johns Island, or Mount Pleasant. That's where it would be. But y'all got to give me \$100 million to buy this painting, man. [Laughs.] Come on, go [00:44:39 under].

KP: All right. Anything else? Can you think of anything you'd like to talk about that we haven't asked you?

WJ: Yeah. I'd like to know – everybody I talked to said, man, P-Nut, you're going to be famous. I'm already famous. Never get rich AND famous. Okay. That'll work better. Anything else y'all need to know?

CJL: I think we covered most of it.

WJ: You think I covered it all?

CJL: Can you think of anything –

WJ: I can tell you something else y'all might want to know, though.

CJL: Tell us.

WJ: When I grew up – like you saw King Street is now, all college and people everywhere. When I grew up, after 6:00 King – you probably remember that if you from Charleston. After 6:00, King Street was empty. There was nobody on King Street after 6:00.

CJL: All of King Street?

WJ: All of King Street was dark. It wasn't dark. The lights was on, but all the stores was closed. Butchers on King Street closed at – they had a little couple of nightclubs that would be open 'til about 8:00 or 9:00. But after a certain time, even they had to close the door, couldn't let nobody in. So, the difference from what you see now to what I see, it's a big change. I could walk down King Street and know everybody who owned their store. I knew them by name. I

knew every store owner by name. They knew me. You know what I mean? Everybody. But now it's chaos.

CJL: Read that Charleston poem. I think that one's really interesting.

WJ: Yeah, I was thinking about that one.

CJL: Especially – and don't say the date until the end of when you wrote that one.

WJ: Okay. Well, what's the name of that one again? I'll find it. You got a little time? I know she ain't in no rush. Okay. She got to save me a smile anyway. Okay. Where is it? Ooh, what's the name of it again? You should know.

CJL: It is called –

WJ: Come on, come on, come on. Oh, I can't – ooh, wait. Where is it? What's the name of that?

CJL: I know. I have it here.

WJ: Okay. When you get over 25, you don't remember nothing no more.

CJL: Oh, listen.

WJ: [Mumbles.] "Wasted Memories," [page?] 27.

CJL: No, "Crying Out."

WJ: No, "Wasted Memories." I didn't want to be "Crying Out." We can do – what page is "Crying Out"?

CJL: I just have a picture of it.

WJ: Well, I can find it real quick. "Crying Out." Okay. That will be [page?] 57. Y'all want to hear it?

CJL: Or "Building Souls," either one. Which one do you want?

WJ: I'd like to do 57.

CJL: Okay.

WJ: Oh, 57 is "Crying Out." Okay. Okay. We can do 57. Okay. That's the one we'll do. Okay. Ready? Here we go. [Reads] "So, wow, look at Charleston now, a hotel on every corner and many bars and restaurants in between. Carriages everywhere and tourists every day. Street crowded by day and night. But is this right? Well, honey, it's all about the money. But then I

walk across Calhoun Street uptown, and I see anger, poverty, and violence. No silver, no gold. So, let's break up the South and try to stop this anger, crime, and violence. So, let's get together and throw away the frown, and maybe all of Charleston can be like downtown."

CJL: When was that published?

WJ: Oh, man, that's back in 1994, before all this happened. So, it's like a prediction. This is 1994 before it happened. Yeah. I got a good one for y'all, last one for you.

CJL: Okay. And pop up your hat.

WJ: Okay. This one is for the lady behind the camera over here. [Reads] "Why were we born? Oh, why?" It's called "Work Hard." [Continues to read] "Why were we born? Oh, why? I know. See, if we're – see, if we are good, God will take it. Sorry. I know. See, if we are good, God will take you out of the world. See, if we take care of our shoulder on the world and stop using it to lean on, then God will take care of us. See, every time we fertilize a plant, God will fertilize us. And every time we sweep and clean the Earth, God will clean our soul. And as long as we respect and help one another, God will take care of us. And if we just keep growing vegetable and feeding the creatures, God will feed us. So, if we be good and sweet, we might can live until eternity."

[Sound of snapping fingers.]

KP: P-Nut, do you ever go around the corner to the Romney Urban Garden?

WJ: I was there on break – when they break it open. I was there twice.

KP: It reminds me-- That poem reminded me of the garden.

WJ: Oh, yeah, I was there when they – on opening day. I was there on opening day. All right. That's pretty good. I – people support me, I support them. Anything else y'all need to know? You got time. Ask me.

CJL: Is there anything else on your mind or your heart that you want to say?

WJ: No. I'm enjoying – I'm glad I can give y'all the interview. I hope y'all are doing it from your heart. I hope y'all mean well. Oh, Pop Pop's good. She's just resting.

CJL: Do you think Pop Pop wants to say hi?

WJ: Huh?

CJL: Should she be on camera?

WJ: No, she's good.

CJL: Okay. She's taking her nap.

WJ: Yeah, she's good.

KP: Thank you so much.

END OF RECORDING