

Interview with Mr. Jiam DesJardins and Bert Dearing featuring BBA Fellows

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PART 1

[[00:00:00]] - *(Background noise)*

MR DESJARDINS: They had a mayor, they had uh... all these villages just like you said -- a village, or a little town, at least nine blocks. And ten, uh... businessmen got together and formed the Paradise Valley Businessmen's Association. That was to bring all the other Black businesses that were separate into one table like we're sitting right now. And discuss, or uh, feel out what we can do in this area to promote. So that ten eventually became one-hundred... And... they had every kinda business. Just like today. Uh, it was more like, uh, like Greektown is now. That particular area. And it was also 24 hours. We had restaurants, you have the movie theaters, hospitals -- everything that you would basically have. That's what was uh, the area -- that particular area of Paradise Valley. That lasted up until they, uh... I will say, really-- really lasted up until they built Ford Field. Last two businesses were still there -- the buildings were still there... Any questions?

JA'MONAE: What were the last two businesses that were still there?

MR DESJARDINS: 606, uh, Cocktail Lounge.

(Background noise)

MR DESJARDINS: And two restaurants.

(A brief pause)

BERT: And what was behind one of the restaurants?

MR DESJARDINS: Behind one of the restaurants? Oh, you're talking about during the time -- modern time.

BERT: No, I'm talking about just before it closed down.

MR DESJARDINS: Oh, that would be modern times.

BERT: Yeah.

MDJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh, well, uh. They had one -- you talking about the barbershop.

BERT: Yeah, who had the joint there?

MDJ: The barbershop. That was, well, that was illegal.

(Laughter)

MDJ: Yeah, that -- I was naming the legal business.

(More Laughter)

MDJ: They're many illegal -- a lot of illegal businesses everywhere today. But uh, yeah, they uh, that-- that, uh, that particular type of-- of thing in our society in general still functions. You know, people have private clubs, and so forth and so. And that's basically what -- what they really were. Just private clubs -- a group of people that knew each other. Wudn't just like anyone coming in off the street. They all knew each other, so they gambled, and they drank, and they ate. And they enjoyed and socialized. It was more of a social thing more so than, uh -- even though it was illegal because they were selling alcohol.

MARCIA: So um, I would try to uh, introduce -- maybe we could introduce ourselves to you.

MDJ: Uh-huh.

MARCIA: Um, did anybody wanna start?

[[00:03:00]] - PEREZ: Uh, my name's Perez Montgomery.

MDJ: Perez?

PEREZ: Perez, yes sir. Uh, um, I recently graduated from Renaissance High School and I joined the program to learn more about the history of Black Bottom Detroit. I knew some of -- a little bit about it I heard -- something about it. I seen, uh, a model of Paradise Valley in the Charles H. Wright Museum. Uh, I heard something about Black Bottom but I didn't know a lot of the people history, or I didn't really think that I knew anybody that had *(indistinguishable)* from anybody, so that's why I wanted to join to find out more about it.

MDJ: Mmm-hmm, ah, very good.

JA'MONAE: My name is Ja'monae and I joined the uh --

MDJ: Ja'monae? Parlez-vous français?

JA' MONAE: *(Laughs)* Everybody thinks that.

MDJ: Well, it's French.

JA' MONAE: I know. Um, I joined the Black Bottom program to basically get a deeper inside story of what it was 'cause I knew a little bit about it from, like, school and stuff. But you know, they filter out everything.

MDJ: Yeah.

JA' MONAE: From successful black people. So, I wanted to learn more about it - maybe from a first hand experience from, like, someone such as yourself.

MDJ: Mmm-hmm. Alright. Mmm-hmm.

ALEXIS: My name is Alexis.

MDJ: Alexis, Alexis.

ALEXIS: I go to Cesar Chavez Academy High School.

MDJ: Mmm-hmm.

ALEXIS: And I joined the Black Bottom archive program because my neighbor talks about Black Bottom so much. And--

MDJ: Oh, yeah? You have a neighbor that talks about it? Really? No kidding.

ALEXIS: Yeah, I felt interest in it. I wanna learn more about it, so I joined the program.

BERT: How old is your neighbor?

ALEXIS: Um, around 80.

BERT: Okay.

MDJ: Yeah.

(Laughter)

MDJ: Yep, that's the magic number.

(More laughter)

MDJ: Okay, yeah. That-- that's almost like first hand, if you 80. *(Laughs)*

PG: Um, I'm Paige--

MDJ: It's one thing -- well, it's still one thing that whenever I hear that. I'm sorry, I didn't wanna interrupt you.

PG: Oh, no. Please go ahead.

MDJ: But uh, it's relating to a Black Bottom and-- and-- and, you know, you're probably not only gonna hear this from me is that most people get it confused being an area containing Black people. And that was not so. We had every-- every nationality, every race were living there all basically at the same time. It's just like in certain areas that it became more prominently Black, you see. But all-- all of that time -- it had nothing-- That name had nothing to do about Black people. That's what I want you to really understand. And i-- it wasn't called Black Bottom because Black people were there because if you understand that terminology, you find it that looking Black -- being people identified. But Bottom that means the low. So the undertone of that -- Black Bottom, if you're talking about people when you say "bottom" then you're talking about that's the lowest thing on the-- on the book.

[[00:06:00]] - MDJ: And that's not so. See, that's how it's been kind of uh, *(clears throat)* misconstrued as being uh, a place where black people. And-and the boundary lines have gone -- I've seen uh, uh, uh, um, people take it all the way up to the Boulevard, you see.

END

[[00:06:17]]

PART 2

[[00:00:00]] - *(Background noise)*

MDJ: Started really in um, in Suriname. You know where Suriname is?

MARCIA: Yes, yes.

MDJ: Where is Suriname?

MARCIA: Is it uh, it's a Afro-Caribbean country? Suriname?

MDJ: Uh, more South - more South America. More South America. Uh, you ever heard of Jonestown?

PG: Oh, yeah. With uh, the kool-aid.

MDJ: Yeah, right.

PG: Drinking the... the kool-aid. You know.

MARCIA: Yes, yes, yes.

(Chuckling)

MDJ: Right.

(Overlapping voices)

PG: But um, y'all ever heard the term the...

M: Don't drink the kool-aid.

PG: People were like don't drink the kool-aid. Right? Do y'all know where that came from? Okay, so it was this-- Okay we're not going in-

MDJ: Go ahead.

PG: Basically, that's where it was.

MDJ: Where it come from.

PG: But it was uh, it was basically a cult that this guy started.

MDJ: Religious cult.

PG: A religious cult. They started uh... And they moved, they created their own. You know, they bought up some land and like basically moved to South America to... do their own thing. I don't know. I don't know much about what the actual teachings of the religious cult were. Basically, he had all these people really uh, brainwashed. And then gave them all kool-aid to drink that killed them.

MDJ: Well, they-- they were being-- they were being investigated.

PG: Right, and it's all these other layers.

MDJ: Legal -- legal things about who he was and what it was.

PG: For sure.

MDJ: But he had, uh, uh, enough power over these people to say, rather than have us uh, taken away somewhere, we'll all die together. So, and so, and so, a lot of believed that. When actually, when it came down to it, there was a lot of people wouldn't - wouldn't drink it. Yeah, and they had to stick a gun on they head. And say, drink it. But anyway, that's the area that my mother and father met. In-- in Suriname. In South America. And then they left from there to uh, uh, Montreal. And then from Montreal -- we came from Montreal to Windsor, to here. I came here in 19-- really moved here -- we would visit -- I came here in 1933... *(Pauses)* That would be -- what -- 86 years or something?

PG: How old were you when you -- you said you moved here in 1933?

MDJ: Yeah, I was born in 1928.

PG: Oh, okay. Okay.

(Long pause)

EMILY: And you had family that were living here already, right?

MDJ: Oh, yeah. Yeah, my grandmother and grandfather came here in 1919 on my mother's side of the family. And some aunts. Yeah, they were here. They came here in 1919. And like I say, we were visiting up until the time, you know, the time I came. *(Pause)* But I -- but the first street that-- that we lived on was Hastings. You know. First -- the first street we lived on Hastings. We lived there for maybe about two years. Hastings.

BERT: Hasting and what?

[[00:03:00]] - MDJ: Uh, Hasting between uh, uh, um, Benton and um...

BERT: Elliott.

MDJ: N-- no.

BERT: Burskin.

MDJ: What a minute, no-- no. Uh... Alfred.

BERT: Okay.

MDJ: Alfred-- Alfred-- What -- wait a minute -- which one -- Alfred, Winder, Benton. Benton. Benton and uh, and uh, the North. Benton North that would be Mack. Rowena.

BERT: Okay.

MDJ: Yeah, Rowena.

BERT: Okay.

MDJ: Right, right, going North.

BERT: North, okay.

MDJ: Right, right. Rowena. That's like the next--

BERT: So you--

MDJ: That's likely where the Castle Theatre was.

BERT: It was on this side of Hasting 'cause Hersting was on the other side. Okay. I just want to just--

MDJ: Right. *(Chuckles)* Right. But then from there we moved to Brewster. Off of Hastings. Between Rivard and Hastings.

BERT: So, you stayed on the Eastside?

MDJ: Yeah.

BERT: Okay.

MDJ: Yeah. Then we went from there to Brewster between Boubien and St. Antoine. That was -- the was the last we lived in. That-- that close to Hastings in that area. *(Clears throat)* And we had, *(clears throat)* we had a grocery store. Uh, we also had a 250 acre farm out in Flatrock, Michigan. That was uh, kind of like a -- a working -- a resort farm. Horseback riding, hunting, and so-and-so. But it was also a working farm because we had three grocery stores. A-- and all of the stuff was fresh. We grow it a-- and kill it, then we had uh, we had to package the sausage. Called Henton Sausage. Doing that. We used to -- I used to have to do that like in the summertime. Stuff it and-- *(Laughs)*

BERT: Grind it.

MDJ: And grind it. Right, right.

BERT: Put the thing on the -- turn in it--

MDJ: Put it in the tub -- things like that. And package it because we had a label to go with it.

(Bert says something and MDJ clears his throat)

MDJ: But I was doing it and I wasn't getting paid. And I realized I wasn't getting paid. And I would not do anything, you know. And I w-- washing dishes, I was washing dishes in the uh, our restaurant -- our restaurant was-- was which you call... the exclusive restaurant around in Paradise Valley. The Pekin -- Pekin restaurant... And, uh, I'd wash dishes through the summer. Now, understand this -- I was in Hollywood makin' movies. I was getting like \$500 dollars a week. But w-- you know, you only work a week -- one movie. Not like a salary every week but I got as much as \$500 dollars a week, you know. And I was -- at that time I was around 7 or 8 years old, you know. And I realized by the time I was 9, I was making more money than -- here these people tellin' me to wash the dishes and I'd go out to the farm -- really I learned to plow. You think I-- I learned to plow.

[[00:06:00]] - MDJ: Bale hay... Did all of those. Feed the chickens, early -- wake up early in the morning and so and so. Take food to the cottages, to the people that came there or somethin' like that. And I wasn't getting paid. And it dawned on me that I wasn't getting paid.

(Laughter)

MDJ: So, when it dawned on me *(laughs)* I started -- st-- stuck my hand out. So, one of my older cousins on my father's side -- Destaga -- he used to uh, uh, uh -- they were trying to help him out. Don't forget now, we still talking about during the Depression years, you know. And uh, they-- they -- quit his job *(clears throat)*. They let him work beneath washing dishes. And they was paying him \$10 dollars a week. I was doing the same thing and I wasn't getting anything.

(Laughter)

MDJ: And I'm noticin' he gets \$10 dollars and I'm just doing this and what they used to say, "Oh, working," you know, "It'll make a man out of you." You know, work, work, work. I say, "No, no, no that's - the only thing that's gonna make a man outta me is this here -- " *(presumably makes gesture)*

(Laughter)

MDJ: And th- and that - everybody understood that from that point on. You know, because I-- I was a little more older than uh, than most kids. I was -- I-- I -- in fact I was really never a kid. I'm a kid now then I was not a kid.

(Chuckles)

MDJ: Yeah.

EMILY: Bert, do you think that we could see the murals?

BERT: Mmm-hmm.

PG: Do y'all have any other questions?

(Long pause)

M: Uh, could you talk about uh, when they were proposing the plan? Uh, to build the highway that kind of displaced the community. Like what were people's reactions? What was-- ?

MDJ: Uh, which-- which time? They've done that s-- several different times.

M: Um...

MDJ: What-- what time you talkin' about?

M: Um, when they built 375.

MDJ: With what?

M: When building 375.

MDJ: What building is that?

M: The highway.

MDJ: Oh, I-75.

M: Uh-huh.

MDJ: Oh, oh, no. Well, that's just the 60's. Yeah, that's just the 60's, you know. Well, I-- I know about it but I wasn't -- you know, I was in New York, I was in São Paulo, Brazil, uh seven-- when that was going on. But I do know that the overall thing is urban renewal, you know. And really, it was under Eisenhower's Administration. That's really what it was -- under Eisenhower. But these plans had already been mapped out many years before, you see. They just layed around until they found out how they can handle it. So, that it wouldn't look like that-- that Black Bottom situation, you know.

BERT: Let me go ahead and I'll give my concept of it. Uh, um, my being in the service, uh Eisenhower was a military man. Okay? After World War II and uh, Korean conflict, Blacks had been all over the world.

[[00:09:00]] - BERT: And Jim Crow was still going on here. And when they came back they thought things would change or whatever. But things were still the same. But they came home with guns, different ideas, and different things, and whatever. So, um, Eisenhower bein' a military man, uh, came back and devised a plan when he went through every Black community where the Blacks had their main avenue, their strips. They did in Baltimore, Cleveland, Boston -- that's when he put the freeways in. Okay? Now, when the freeways got towards Oak Park where James's cousin was -- How long was that closed for how many years?

MDJ: James's cousin?

BERT: You know, th-- they went around--

MDJ: In the Lodge. In the Lodge. Got kicked out.

(Overlapping conversation)

BERT: And they ended up going uh, towards 7 mile. It stayed closed because the Jews didn't want it to go certain areas or whatever, was killing their neighborhood and stuff. You know, so, uh... They named something one thing and it'd be completely opposite. You know, whatever they can sell us, that's what they sell us. You know, but they came through every Black community and eliminated every Black strip in every city where Blacks stayed at.

MDJ: See the important thing about that is you also have to remember that politically there were no Black people on the c-- on the council.

BERT: Council, none of that. Yeah.

MDJ: So, there was no one who could get information to know before and after in the same sense. You know, that didn't -- that didn't happen until Coleman -- until Coleman-- Coleman Young. Up until that time people were still bumping heads together trying to figure out what they gonna do because of the situation. And not-- and not knowing their history. Yeah, you're talking about another generation -- that's another thing to go back to still -- to not know their-- their history. Because the only history that they knew is that where they came from. "I came from Alabama, I know what that was," blah, blah, blah. They didn't get here until the 1950s, you see. You got here 1950s, things h-- had... did a flip-flop before you got here. It was something else to worry about. You didn't come in on the-- on the tail end of something else that was cultural. And-- and that would give you the incentive to want to know more. And that's what -- that's what needs to be. You have to be -- the mind has to be stimulated first *(clears throat)* to want to know. And then wanting to know -- once you get the answer yourself individually then you realize how to deal with it because you're dealing with it strictly from a political standpoint. You know, you got to vote. You got to do all of these other things because that's the country -- that's the way it's set up to do, you know. No matter what you do -- but for yourself just being you... U-- uh, the most thing that I could advise you to be is to just to be open -- keep the mind open. A-- and they're many doors that you can slide in even though they closed some doors.

[[00:12:00]] - MDJ: But there's always an open door that uh, will uh, put you on the right path to uh, whatever you would like to do. I-- it's the worst thing you can do is to work for somebody you don't like working for. You're working for 'em just because you-- you gotta pay bills, or so forth and so on. *(Clears throat)* That's the trap. Credit cards--!

(Laughter)

MDJ: No cash! Credit cards! I got this, bluh, bluh, bluh -- next thing you know when you talking about what do you owe? How much do you make to owe, to pay what you owe? You see, okay, so.

M: And can I, um, ask... Could y'all talk about your perspective on the type of development that's happening now in the city?

MDJ: Oh, yeah. Well, I know all about-- all the develop-- what's happening now. This is-- this is a same phase again. You know, it's-- it's uh, it's an experiment. It's not improving, you know, it's a crashshoot. People-investors are coming in. Right now, this town is what you call, hot 'cross the country. A lot of people are coming in. But--

BERT: Across the world.

MDJ: But... the automobile industry is what (*bangs hand against table*) made this. That's about to disappear. So, what's going to be the main economic (*chuckles*) finance that's gonna remain? High tech or i-- is this gonna be uh, what? They don't know yet. You haven't fell into what's going to be. So, right now you're just doing this. That's what I think of it -- a crashshoot.

(*Long pause*)

EMILY: Bert, do you have any thoughts on that?

BERT: Um... (*long pause*) Joanne Watson used to have um -- do a radio thing. And her main thing was telling people, "Wake up Detroit." You know. And my thing, right now, would be "Wake up Black folks." Because things are changin' where we don't own anything in the city now. The stuff that we own, we let it sit and lap. And it all went back to the county and the state. So, they own *all* this land in the city -- land bank owning, okay? And individuals like me who -- people that's been around for years, or if you wanna -- if you have a house and you want the lot next door, you cannot develop... on that lot. You can build something from your house -- extended over -- but you can't create, or build uh...

[[00:15:00]] - BERT: ...apartment or something that can benefit your family's sum in the long run. But you are able to -- they don't mind you cuttin' the grass and keepin' it up, you know. So that individuals from -- they can come across the world or anywhere and they have the opportunity. Don't even speak English. And they want to buy blocks at a time, you know. So, uh, all the folks that were here in Detroit -- they're all in Sterling Heights, Mt. Clemmens, okay? Where the structure was new 40 years ago. Everything here now is being -- in the last 10 years -- have been bought up to date. Anything new -- they gettin' ready to do all new structure waterwise. Okay? So, we've been displaced but been tricked indirectly. You know. But uh, we just still sleepin' to a certain extent. You know. And, uh, see the changes going all over. But if you don't own no property, you don't own nothing. You have to own land. Okay? Okay? If you don't own a car, it's nothin'. You can go get a car for nothin' but go try to buy some property, (*chuckles*) or a house. Something that's -- or a business that's gonna be successful but they'll give the money to somebody that they know that's gonna be -- they gon' lose it. Now, he can go get the dollar, okay? But they take that and use that as an example, okay? Individuals that's been in business that have a vision -- he can't get a dollar. That's the system.

MDJ: Oh, see... this is-- and this is the -- this is the hardknock of it. The hardknock of it. Uh, (*clears throat*) racism. Still prevalent. They use other tricky terminology -- the names, or something, but it's still basically the same thing. Racism is still prevalent. And now, they've changed it so that Black people... as a new enemy... in a sense. And that enemy are the brown people.

(BERT chuckles)

MDJ: Who... sit back and in-- in your neighborhood.

[[00:18:00]] - MDJ: The liquor store-- Arabic, so, and so, and so, and so. Paki over here. *(Indistinguishable)* over here. And Black people are saying, "Well, why don't we, you know." What? What? I said but you, you, you're playing the race card. You always playing the race card. So, and so, and so, and so... We're not the ones that are in your neighborhood -- they are. But they finance them to be in the neighborhood. So, here you walk into a -- and this is what I really don't like about these gas stations, these little liquor stores that are on it. And most of them -- now, I understand when you say Arab, you're really talkin' about a language. We're not talking about the race of people -- people used that terminology. 'Arabs, A-rab,' you understand. The people that have liquor stores are not Muslims. Muslim -- that's a no-no in Islam. People that have liquor stores are Christians. Chaldeans and so forth and so. But they're... Christians. And they're placed and lent money to open up, go to the bank, get the money -- come from -- they haven't been here a week. A cousin can come here and open up a business just like that. Um... uh, a lotta these banks are owned by Arabs. That's another thing. When's the last-- What-- what happened to the last bank?

BERT: It got -- Comerica got a percentage.

MDJ: Naw, but what happened-- W-- what happened to the Black-- the Black bank that lasted for a minute uh, uh--

BERT: Independent?

MDJ: Yeah. Independent. Right.

BERT: Uh, it's still run but they don't have no value.

MDJ: No, no value. But I'm just sayin' that they were like -- that they did have a Black bank. They finally got one but they still kept it at a -- at that level. So, the major point I'm making is, is that *(clears throat)* how do you get out from under that? *(Pause)* Uh, the corner liquor store, the gas station, those prices, these markets, these inferior markets that they have selling all of this inferior needs so forth, and so, and so, and so. That's all in your community. All in -- all these-- All in your community. So, how do you think this-- I'm asking this question to you. Maybe you may come up with an answer. Seein' that you know these things... what can you do about it to make sure that they-- they don't pop up in your neighborhoods? Liquor stores and those kind of things. *(Pause)* Got any ideas?

PEREZ: You said to make sure that they don't pop up in that group?

MDJ: Yeah, yeah.

(Pause)

MDJ: Um, let me ask you this, in your neighborhood is there any around?

[[00:21:00]] - PEREZ: Yeah.

MDJ: Yeah. More than one.

BERT: Course.

MDJ: Yeah. But it could have been stopped at some point.

BERT: Right.

MDJ: It could have been stopped. Just like you can -- just like there's a law that says that a liquor -- that gas can't sell liquor so many feet from a church. So many feet from a school, so many -- But that's beca-- that's because they used to-- neighborhoods-- There used to be neighborhoods where neighborhoods were together. That lived-- People lived in the neighborhood, they knew everybody, and they organized. They had block clubs, you understand? They organized. I-- I don't see that anymore. I only see it now more in exclusive areas. Boston Edison, Rosedale Park, so forth, or something. But we used to have those kind of things on any street, neighborhood, across the city of Detroit. No matter where you went. So, i-- it has to be a bunch of you together. Like now, sitting at a table and coming down with (*taps table*) new ideas to--to--to bring to the council, or uh, anything else. You gotta -- you have to get -- which you call it -- involved. People really have to get involved from that level. 'Cause that's the only way that you can make any kinda change in the first place. Where you - where you still have control. While you still -- excuse me -- *while* you still have control. Because you're losing it rapidly.

(A brief pause)

M: You have your last questions?

(Indistinguishable dialogue)

M: Thank you, thank you so much.

EVERYONE: Yes, yes.

M: I appreciate you spending time with us like this.

MDJ: Okay, okay.

BERT: Wanna see the mural?

MDJ: Okay. What time we got?

BERT: 12:30.

(Shuffling)

BERT: Sit down, sit down, relax.

(More shuffling until the end of the interview)

END

[[00:23:41]]