

Arthur Ratliff – 28 février 2020- February

Can you tell me about the place where you grew up?

I grew up in Chicago, Illinois in the Midwest, one of the big cities in the United States. I grew up in the poorest area of town. It was kind of hopeless back then, I grew up during the Civil Rights Movement and that kind of changed things for us but before that, it was – people moved from the South thinking that things would be better in the North and to an extent, it wasn't as much harsh discrimination but it was like – they received a lot of poor people in the country, Irish before us, the Mexicans now, they move in and live in crowded conditions, people take advantage of them and that some of the things we saw growing up in Chicago. We didn't know we were poor but when you get outside, you realize that you live in the bad side of town.

And can you tell me about the neighborhood where you grew up?

Gang-infested, lot of crime, police was – people complain about police now but they were rapid (01:22) back then. One interesting thing that I told people since I talked with you is that it was so bad that Martin Luther King decided to come from the South, up to Chicago to protest some of the conditions, the living conditions and all. And he lived maybe 2 or 3 blocks from where I lived.

What about your family?

They're a lot of us. They were sharecroppers, former sharecroppers and they moved up North with very little education and so they ended up being, extended family ended up being labors, common labors up in the many many factories that they had at that time. They were 9 of us and people say "Wow, that's a lot of kids" but in the South when you worked in the sharecropper farm, the more children you have to work the farms, the wealthy your family was but people – nobody told them "Ok, you don't have to have that many kids anymore." So it worked against them when they moved to the North. And so it made conditions more crowded and more stressful.

Where were your parents from?

They were from Mississippi, a place called Grenada.

Have you ever visited Grenada, Mississippi?

Oh yeah, many times, yeah.

As a child?

As a child or as an adult. For vacations, we'd go down visiting grandparents and later cousins.

What memories do you have from those trips?

Wow, it was quite different from Chicago! Now, with the mass media, all the stores are the same but it was like going to a different country and I would say going to a third-world country, extreme poverty there. My earliest memory was from I was about 5 years old. I didn't

know it at the time but black people were very segregated into small Jim Crow areas and they kept us from that, we never saw that, we just saw where our grandparents lived. They didn't have indoor plumbing or anything like that. And no paved road, all dirt road. It was really bad.

You would drive from Chicago to Mississippi?

Yeah, it'd take about 12h driving from where we were.

I just went to this conference on the Greenbook so I wondered if you remembered stopping at restaurants or hotels on the way?

Well, what we would do – and that's kind of Greenbookish and I didn't know at the time – is there was very little stopping and we were wondering why our parents would never stop and see the sights and what the hurry was. And we would sometimes say "Can I use the restroom?" and they said "You have to wait, you have to wait!" and didn't realize that this was like in the 50s, so they would just go straight through.

And then you told me you went to college in Chicago. Can you tell me about that?

I went to college back in Chicago at Northwestern. I studied political science, thinking I was going to go to law school but I didn't and then I ended up moving to California and then getting a masters in business from there.

Do you remember what made you want to leave Chicago and go to California?

Well, interesting, in the 50s, everybody was coming there because of the factories. The factories at the same time maybe peaked about 1960 or so and then it started moving away, moving to the suburbs and then later out of the country. So Chicago was on the decline and they would call it the Rust Belt – Chicago was part of it – so people were still coming, these large families, second generation but unemployment situation was pretty bad. So I thought "Well, when I get old enough and I finish college, I'm not gonna come back here." I knew when I left for college I wouldn't come back to Chicago live. It's since improved but it was not a very pleasant place. My memories growing up in Chicago were not very pleasant.

How so?

Because it was always poverty and crime and segregation, still. And the weather was bad, very cold. And we lived in old apartments and buildings – some of these places were nearly a 100-years-old and they didn't have strict codes that made landlords fix things. So the heat would break down all the time in the middle of the winter, just going through that.

I think you told me that your parents managed to buy a house in Chicago?

They bought a house and lost it. The house that they bought was – they used to call it redlining or blockbusting and so they overpaid for houses and really back then, the banks didn't really check if you could buy or not, so a lot of people got in over their heads. And that caused a lot of stress of families because you finally get a place to go and you lose it. That's very disappointing and that happened to us.

I think you also said you were the first to go to college in your family?

Yeah, I was the first in either side of my family, not to necessarily go but to graduate from college.

Did your siblings go to college too?

Well, we have out of 9, maybe 3 have gone and finished.

You said your dad was working in a factory but what about your mom?

She was a stay-at-home mom with all those kids. And then later as we got old enough to kind of help with each other she took a part-time job.

As what?

She worked at Sears. Sears headquarters was in Chicago and so they had a lot of factories and a lot of catalog orders so lots and lots of employment. Sears was the biggest employer in our neighborhood and one of the biggest in Chicago then.

So what made you choose California when you left?

Well, I wanted to get away and my uncles had come to visit and they lived in that nice sunny place and they lived in Sacramento and I asked him if I could come out and visit, because I wanted to head to the big cities, San Francisco or Los Angeles, never made it there but I stayed in Sacramento for 10 years before I came here.

So you studied there?

Yes. I graduated there and then I lived there for 10 years and tuition was free there back then so I went to college every semester for the 10 years I was there.

What period was it?

I was there from 77 to 87.

What school did you attend?

I got my masters from Golden Gate University, my employer paid for that but then I took all these other courses, mostly in the city colleges. Sacramento had three or four city colleges and I went to all of them and then I went to the Sacramento State University. I took writing courses, Spanish courses, photography, whatever they offered, I'd take it.

How was it to move from Chicago to Sacramento?

It was a culture shock, like living in a different country. The weather was very nice, it was a very quiet, country-like town and I went out there with a couple of cousins so the three of us went there together and they were quite bored because they couldn't find much to do. We thought we'd end up in the city so for them Sacramento was boring but for me, if you like

outdoor activities, lots of outdoor activities: skiing, tennis, golf, just all that, offered at very inexpensive rate, hiking and rafting. I did all of those things that you couldn't do in Chicago.

I lived in California for a year and what struck me, especially in Northern California, was how white it is. Is that something that you experienced?

Yes, I did. And that's why I wanted to go to the cities to get a little cultural diversity. What part of California did you live in?

I was in Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz in the 1970s was a little bit more diverse but it became very expensive to live, even San Jose was very diverse, lots of Mexican Americans and as it became more gentrified, it became like so many European cities, that inside the city itself, those places are very attractive, higher-income people move in. And I was out there recently, a couple of years ago and like unless you're high income, forget living in Santa Cruz or San Francisco. Even Oakland, which was mostly African-American, that's changed. But you know, that didn't bother me at all because Northwestern University was very white, very high income so I kind of found my way blended in the end.

So you moved from a predominantly black area to a white area?

Yes and no because I went to the campus in Northwestern for four years and then I moved to California. So you could say that I grew up, from where my family lived, you could say that.

So your experience in college in Chicago was already less diverse?

Well, my university was and it wasn't in Chicago, it was in the suburbs of Chicago. And it was the least diverse that you could possibly get. Tuition I think now is like \$70,000 a year and very few people can afford that unless they're wealthy.

And so was it for you to navigate this, to go to college and then go back to your family?

It was very hard, it was very hard for me. It was a culture shock going back and forth and so I had to kind of change and I had to not feel like I was acting to educated around my family – or not my family but people around felt a bit threatened by that. "He's acting like he's better than us now." And then when I went to the campus, I had to be a different person, I couldn't be myself. So for first-generation people, it was very hard for us. So when they say "Let's take these poor people and put them in college and they're gonna be okay," it doesn't always work out that way.

So after, 10 years in California, what happened?

I was missing home and professionally, Sacramento being a smaller town, there was only so far you could go. I had my MBA and I was ready to make some money, go up the corporate ladder so-to-speak. And there was just so much growth in Sacramento, they offered me a job in San Francisco. Now, to get this, this is in 87, I did the calculation and said I'd have to make at least \$75,000 a year to do that – that was 30 years ago. They said "We're not offering you that." So I came here and they offered me \$32,000 and I lived very comfortably off at 32 that I would have done with 75. And 75 now was in the low end in San Francisco. So I came here

because I couldn't have afforded a house or live with normal corporate pay – living there, you would have to have two people to own a house, two incomes and even that, if you live in the city of San Francisco, you're not gonna get a nice place. So, I looked at all of that and thought "Well, I may have to live outside and do this horrendous commute every day" and I said "Okay, it's time to go back home, or closer to home." So I moved back.

When you say "they offered me," you're talking about...?

I'm sorry, I was working with FedEx at the time and I moved from FedEx there to FedEx here.

So they offered you a position a position in San Francisco and one in Atlanta?

Yes.

So how was it to transition from San Francisco to here?

It was tough, not as tough as the other way around because San Francisco was very liberal and very diverse. People kind of mixed and all and moving back here, it was still very segregated. It wasn't the same South than back in the 50s or whatever but people just kind of – you know if you walked down Peachtree Street or Emory campus, everybody seems to be getting along and all but at night, people were just going their separate ways. This is where the Black Newcomers Network came in. I just found it hard to be myself like I was in California, there were a lot of different races. Here, everything, even the newspapers, it's all kind of racial stuff, even today so I didn't like it then and don't care for it too much now. But after so many years, that's fine. I can find my friends.

How did you hear about BNN?

Well, they had a newspaper back then, this kind of counter-culture paper called Creative Loafing. It's still around. They would advertise different activities and this seemed interesting. I tell you this I was very reluctant to get involved in a black organization 'cause I didn't want to limit myself and I did join and people were nice and I got involved.

How was your experience with BNN?

It was a good one, very good people, some of my oldest friends are from BNN. I think I told you last time that I had to be careful because many of them back then – and still some now – are only associating with each other and I'm the type of person who like to meet a lot of different people and for my job, I need to meet a lot of different people.

What is your job now?

I'm a state-firm agent, insurance agent and salesperson. So I need to meet as many people as I can and go to as many activities so I can increase my business. Which fits me well, that's my personality.

Could you also use BNN as a network for you job?

I did initially and a lot of my initial customers came from BNN and I still have a lot of BNN customers. The only thing with insurance and what we do is that by the time a person is middle-age or older, they pretty much have locked in what products they use or insurance companies. And so for new customers, I need to go after younger people. And I need to get them from more than a limited source like that. I tried to go to everything, festivals and different activities. So BNN was still – I still have some customers there but I always wanted to reach out beyond that.

Because BNN was older?

Well, they are now!

Okay, yeah. But so when you moved here, you worked at FedEx first?

I worked for FedEx for a short time and I knew I wanted to start my own business. So shortly thereafter I came over to state-firm.

How was it to start your own business here?

It was very hard. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Extremely hard. Going into debts for many years until you can get really established.

Was it easy to get loans?

No, I was really poor for – the only thing that was that being in school, and being in poverty as a student gave me the practice for being in poverty and that's why I think it's good for people in college – if you don't have parents giving you money or buying new cars and stuff – for you to kind of do some of that on your own because it teaches you later how to be resourceful. And I had to be resourceful. But I had been there before. And so it didn't matter so much. I was able to get through it.

What did you hear about Atlanta before coming here back then?

Well, it was growing, and I heard that there were a lot of opportunity for growth, especially for people who wanted to start their own business. Surprisingly enough, in California, even for African-Americans there, there were few opportunities and here there would have been more opportunities and the cost, even back then, there wasn't a lot of African Americans having their own business, even now. Not a whole lot. It looks like there is. This was an opportunity with all the new people coming in to work that market.

Did you feel like there were indeed more opportunities here?

Oh yeah, oh yeah. I was in a smaller place too. Had I been in San Francisco, it might have been different or Los Angeles. But Sacramento is a smaller town. And it's not so much a small town now but in the 80s, it was growing but at snail-pace.

And before moving here, were you hesitant or reluctant to move to the South?

No. The reason why – and people in California said "How can you move to the South?" because they had a certain perception. But remember, my parents grew up in the South, I had

been to the South many times and I knew that if you didn't bother people, they wouldn't bother you. There are many Southerners who are very nice. They got a bad rap because of the Klan and all these different things going on, and the Civil Rights Movement but I never felt threatened.

Was that something that you thought about? The Klan is in the South or...?

No, I never felt threatened. In my life, I did go to a lot of places where, even in Chicago, I felt more threatened in Chicago than here because it's street gangs and crime. But the South back then, it was virtually crime-free. Now it's changed, it's gotten a bit of a bigger city. But it was just so quiet, peaceful place. Actually, people used to – when kids would get in trouble, before they got in trouble – they would send their children South to their grandparents' to live, to get away from all the bad influences in the big city. It was very common.

Is that something that happened in your family?

It happened, not necessarily in my family but it happened a lot to families around me.

Which neighborhood did you move to when you moved here?

Here, this neighborhood, in Decatur.

That's where you moved to straight away in 1987?

Yeah.

So you're still in the same place?

Well, I just moved two years ago but I lived in that place for over 30 years. And it was very in-expansive. It was like "Wow, I can't believe how cheap the prices are compared to Chicago or anywhere in California." And I was able to buy a house for \$70,000 back then. And that was very affordable for me. There's no way I could have done that, not even in Sacramento and forget San Francisco.

So what made you choose Decatur?

Because of the location of where I was working. I was working downtown Atlanta and it was near a MARTA train station and I could just take one MARTA and go to work every day. And living in Sacramento, I missed public transportation and I'd been on road all the time. So I felt that if I ever got to a place where I can use public transportation, I would. And I still use public transportation too. When I got to Chicago, New York or San Francisco, I get on public transportation. People think I'm crazy, they say "How can you do that?" Well, you know, it works. It works in Europe and it works in China and it works almost everywhere except here. Maybe in New York City and San Francisco, it does but people are not big on public transportation. That was the main factor for me moving where I did, where I lived. Public transportation.

Being from Europe, I understand that.

Yeah, you miss these things and then you're like "Gosh, I have to drive everywhere, come on!"

Were there any other criterion when you were looking for a place?

Prices. And that was pretty much it.

What about the demographics in your neighborhood?

Well, then, it's interesting, it was just about finished with the white flight, they call it. African-Americans have always lived around here but more were moving in to this area and so whites were going out to the suburbs and so you have the reverse, the blockbusting that we had growing up as a kid. Well I mean you did have the same thing, I'm sorry. But I knew that it would change because, interesting enough, California sets the pattern for the rest of the country. So if I move here and hold on to it, it's gonna change because people are getting tired of living in the suburbs and commuting and it certainly worked out. My strategy worked out for me. My house value just kept going up and I never had a long commute here. People complain a lot about the traffic. I've never had to drive in traffic. That's a big plus for me.

Do you see more and more white residents moving in?

Oh yeah, sure. Because this is happening. It's very expansive to live here in Decatur and whites have higher incomes as a whole and so it's not being segregated like it was but it's more of an income/class thing rather than race.

So you lived in Atlanta for 33 years now. What are the main changes that you've seen happening?

Lot more people. Lot of growth, corporate growth. I had to look for things to do 30 years ago, there wasn't as much to do and Gwinnett County was horrible, they called it Siberia, there was nothing out there. You bought a house out there but there was nothing to do in terms of entertainment and stuff. And that's changed since then. The Olympics changed things a lot, it put Atlanta on the map. So those types of things. More art. More activities.

Angela told me that you were part of this investment group in BNN?

Well, I wasn't. I don't know why she thinks that I was. They kind of got together and pulled their resources. I was always independent so I wasn't part of it. Well, you know, it's a good concept but everybody has to be on the same page and then you have to be consistent. If we pull our resources, we can do better but you can't withdraw money out whenever you want. No I wasn't part of that.

Was BNN involved politically in any ways?

No.

Is that something that you would have wanted?

I don't know. Maybe a little bit more. Things like voter registration but not following different candidates. I'm not a big fan. I majored in political science and I lived in the capital,

Sacramento. Actually, I lived right across the street from the State Capitol so I saw a lot of politics and in between that, majoring and in Chicago politics, under Mayor Daley, I'm just averse to it. So now I vote and I do what people ask me to do. And I'll probably be more involved and I should be because I am part of Leadership DeKalb and so I know probably every judge and commissioners and everybody else, politicians here. And every now and then they will hit me up for some money or some – to do photography for them. And I might do photography for some charitable causes where they're trying to raise money. But other than that, they don't ask me to get involved, or endorse a candidate or even put a sign on my yard 'cause I just don't like it.

Can you tell me about Leadership DeKalb?

It's an organization that trains future leaders for the county, with the knowledge of how the county operates, encouraging people to take leadership roles, either political or administrative leadership roles. I didn't think it was anything I could use because I don't want any leadership role but I actually did very well with them because I was neutral so they all kind of trusted me and did not feel threatened by me choosing sides. So I probably made more friends than the average because they see me as non-political and not trying to advance because there's nowhere for me to go. A lot of them are very competitive with each other.

So you were part of this, you got trained?

Yes, we were trained so we knew all the functions of the county, administration wise, and it does a pretty good job at training future leaders. And actually if you want to be a DeKalb leader, you probably have to go through that program.

How do you get in?

You have to be sponsored by some of the people in the group and they kind of recruit people they like. So it's more higher-income educated elite recruiting other educated elite.

How racially diverse is it?

Pretty much, they cover every – they make sure they cover all the bases.

Do you also work with the Chamber of Commerce of DeKalb?

No, it never really appealed to me. I worked with some smaller groups but it never really appealed to me. Too bureaucratic for me.

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

Well, one thing about growing up in Chicago, the neighborhood where Martin Luther King lived for a while and he thought that Chicago was worse than anything he'd seen in the South, all the hatred there. And we didn't realize that until (?). But I tell people on King holiday, "Oh I got to see Martin Luther King from a distance back then". And he was trying to run away from us because they were a bunch of people waiting for him to come home. So he would get out the car real quick and go indoors so we never got to see him. He would come home tired. But that was how bad it was, that he had to bring attention to what was going on. They used to call slums in Chicago. Something else about the newcomers, they still have remains of that

group where they have broken off and some people started a hiking group and somebody else started a networking group so there's bits and pieces and sometimes I get invited to different events that they have. But it's not like it's open to the public. I'm probably in touch with more people in the Newcomers Network than any of them and the reason why is because I have many of them as insurance clients, have or had. So when people try to track down somebody, they'll usually come to me: "Have you heard from David?" and I don't give up personal information but I will tell them that so and so is looking for them. I stayed in touch with a lot of them because everybody's getting older too. You know we were in our 20 and 30s then and now we're in our 50s and 60s.

And you mentioned you turned to BNN because you had a hard time meeting people when you moved here?

I wasn't having a hard time but it wasn't happening fast enough. And I never wanted to be part of any group so-to-speak. But I said "Well, I'll just try this group" and it turned out to be a good deal for me. I was always reluctant to be part of a group. Sometimes, groups are well because you get to share so much and then at other times, you get into a group and you have to be conscious of that. Especially if it's a racial group. I never liked the term "Black Newcomers Network." I never liked that term. I never liked any term and in France they're really big on this. If you say "I'm gonna be the black so and so" in France. Because I always thought that we should try to integrate into society and if you use any kind of racial or religious term or whatever, then people may shy away from you because they're gonna think "Well, that group is for Blacks only." I think we lost the opportunity to meet and bring in different cultures because of that.

What made you join anyways at the time?

I needed – it wasn't happening fast enough in terms of networking and meeting people so I said "I'll give it a try" and I met some nice people and it turned out, because they were newcomers, almost all of us were from other places and we were having troubles fitting in because – somebody warned me about that when I first got here. A white lady as a matter of fact. She said "When you go to Atlanta, people are gonna have their own friends and their own circles and they don't have to invite you in." And it's not like they don't like you or whatever but you have to earn your way into those circles. And I didn't want to wait a long time to earn my way into these circles. You went to BNN and you had instant friends. Because they were new and they were – One thing I forgot to tell you is that – you may have noticed already, the Black Newcomers Network started as a group called Black Atlanta Transplants. Well before the Black Atlanta Transplants, the same woman, it was really a dating club and so it started off as – Lea O'Neal, I still have Facebook contacts with her – she started off as a black dating organization and that wasn't going so well so she said "Well, I'm gonna change it to a black network organization." And then, there were dispute within the group so we started our own group.

Do you remember what were the disagreements?

Well, we thought that it was a group where everybody had an equal say, you voted for office or whatever and she said "Well, this is my personal group and I'll appoint the officers or the committee chair people" and if you didn't do what she said, she had the right to fire you. But then they had a hard time convincing me to be part of this new newcomers group because I

didn't want to get involved into the politics of a mess like that. But then I also thought that she was so out of line that I said "Okay, I'll do it." Plus, there's my social network gone.

So you first joined BAT and then BNN?

And we formed BNN. I was one of the founders of BNN.

So I never managed to understand if BAT was a non-profit or?

It was a non-profit, yeah. It was a social group. Basically what it was – some people do this. it was a way for her to make money. "Okay we have all these new people and I'll have these activities and I'll plan for this, I'll charge a small fee but I'll organize a trip to the theater or a trip to other things." And that's fair enough. "I'll do everything and I'll make just a little small profit off of it." And we didn't understand that. We thought "Well, maybe it's something that we all got together, and have a little democracy going on." It didn't happen that way, she was very protective of her brand so... And I didn't figure that I needed that 'cause I would challenge myself to meet people and do things on my own. But people got fired for standing up against her and I was like "Okay, I don't like this" and I was not going to have anything to do with any of those but they talked me to go into the Newcomers.

And you mentioned this white woman who told you that you had to earn your way in Atlanta –

Well, she said anywhere, not just Atlanta. And I agree that this is good advice, that's the advice that I passed on to my children and grandchildren. When you go to a new city, it's not like people are gonna hold the welcome wagon out to you. You may have that in small town but if you're in a big city – my grandson is in Japan right now and he struggles with that 'cause he's not very social. I say "You have to get out and meet people and you have to take the initiative to introduce yourself." That's what she was telling me. And it wasn't necessarily Atlanta, it wasn't necessarily black and white. But that's what you do when you go somewhere new.

Some people I interviewed told me that there were tensions between locals and transplants. Is that something that you experienced?

No, and people feel this way, sometimes they feel this tension between black and white, between locals – it's the whole concept that she was saying. They have their own activities and people they are comfortable with and you're new here. "Hey, I'm new!" So? You have to give them a reason for befriending you. And this happens with immigrants, not just transplants. People struggle – the girl out here, her family would tell you that, they came from Eritrea, and then when they first got here, they thought "Okay, African-Americans, they're gonna welcome me" but they're not really friendly. Because they don't know who you are and your culture. They should be more welcoming than they are but they're not so what are you gonna do? Are you going to isolate yourself in little enclaves or are you going to assimilate? And I know that this is a big big deal in France. Maybe you wouldn't have so much tension there if you kind of have a program to welcome people. You understand moving in that you just can't go and move in into the Muslim enclave and never go outside of that until you have to. That's gonna create some tensions. And so on a smaller scale, that's probably what they're talking about. That I don't feel welcomed. Well, it's on you, the initiative's on you, the new

person, to earn your way in that society. Because any society, they're just not gonna – they might do something, some people are friendlier than others but it's on you.

Anything else?

I might think about something else later but that's all for now.