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The Wings Over Jordan and the Scholarship of Oral History

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Wings Over Jordan Celebration Chorus

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The Wings Over Jordan and the Scholarship of Oral History

Maestro Glenn A. Brackens, Founder and Director
The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Chorus

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Rev. Glenn T. Settle (1894-1967) organized the Wings Over Jordan Choir in 1937 in Cleveland, Ohio. The group's local, national, and international broadcasts were widely acclaimed. In 2007, as part of a citywide 70th anniversary tribute to the choir, members of the Wings Over Jordan Celebration Chorus and the Wings Over Jordan Alumni & Friends, Inc. partnered with Cleveland State University's Dr. Regennia N. Williams, founder and director of Praying Grounds: African American Faith Communities, A Documentary and Oral History Project, to record the oral history narratives of individuals with first-hand knowledge of Rev. Settle, the original choir, and other groups inspired by their performances featuring concert spirituals. All of the Praying Grounds digital interviews are housed in Special Collections at Cleveland State University. Maestro Glenn Brackens, a native Clevelander and a product of the Cleveland Public Schools, is the founding director of the Wings Over Jordan Celebration Chorus. His interview transcript is the first of the many Wings Over Jordan-related oral histories that RASHAD agreed to make available via the Internet in 2017, the 80th anniversary of the choir's founding. For more information on the Praying Grounds Oral History Project and its relationship to other oral history collections and existing scholarship on Rev. Glenn T. Settle, African American religion, spirituality, and sacred music, and cultural nationalism, please visit www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/. –RNW

The Journal of Traditions and Beliefs: Hi, how are you today?

Glenn Brackens: Okay.

JTB: Good. Today is Thursday June 7, 2007, and we are in the sanctuary of Gethsemane Baptist Church. As we get started, can I ask you your name?

GB: Okay, my name is Glenn Brackens.

JTB: And Mr. Brackens, what is your church and choir affiliation?

GB: I came out of Gethsemane.

JTB: Okay, and do you have a musical group or choir affiliation as well?

GB: Yes, I'm on the music staff here. The Celestial Choir; so many choirs here. I have been the Minister of Music here. I was also the Minister of Music at Bethany [Baptist Church], 25 years; and I worked with the Cleveland Schools' Music Department. I now teach at Wiley Middle School [Cleveland Heights – University Heights] and I have a choir, a whole music department there, which I run.

JTB: And it is my understanding that you are affiliated with The Wings Over Jordan Celebration—

GB: Celebration Choir, yeah.

JTB: Can you tell me a little bit about that as well?

GB: The Celebration Choir is based on something a little bit different from the original [Wings Over Jordan] choir. The Celebration Choir celebrates the spiritual in all forms, whether it be in the jazz form, whether it be in the gospel form, the traditional form, the classical form, and sometimes we do other music by black composers, too. Our emphasis is on the spiritual, but we don't just do the spiritual in the classical form, though, for the concert stage. We do all forms of the spirituals.

JTB: Okay, and what are those? Some of the favorite spirituals performed by The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Choir?

GB: Okay: "Great Day"; "Lord I Keep So Busy Working (I Ain't Got Time To Die)"; "I Been Buked and Scorned"; which is part of the original Wings Over Jordan [repertoire]. Okay?

JTB: So you perform some of the original Wings music as well?

GB: And we have a whole segment of original spirituals we do by The Wings Over Jordan Choir. In fact, we did The Wings Over Jordan [spirituals] down at your school with the jazz orchestra.

JTB: At Cleveland State?

GB: Yeah, right, yeah, yeah.

JTB: Great, and how did that go?

GB: It was a unique experience, because it was all new arrangements. In a new arrangement, you always have some glitches, but it was fun. It was fun, yeah, to do a spiritual in a jazz form, yeah.

JTB: So would it be an experience or something that you want to do again?

GB: Of course.

JTB: Of course.

GB: Yeah, because now those songs had been written, so now you know once you write something and you go through it, all the trouble spots are gone now, so it wouldn't be as hard.

JTB: And you also mentioned that The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Choir performs music done by black composers?

GB: Yes.

JTB: Who would some of those composers be?

GB: Oh we did music by Alice Parker from *Sermon from the Mountain*. We had done some by Richard Smallwood and others.

JTB: Now, do you compose yourself?

GB: Oh, yeah. All the time.

JTB: All the time?

GB: Yeah. All the time.

JTB: And has The Wings Celebration Choir performed any of your compositions?

GB: Oh, yes.

JTB: Good. And what would be the names of maybe one of those compositions?

GB: Oh, “The Great Day” is one. We do an arrangement of “In That Great Gettin’ Up Morning.”

There’s “Trying To Get Ready.” I do arrangements. I took a lot of “dead” spirituals and rearranged them. . . . We try to reach the masses of people. Or, unlike our ancestral group, or I say the original group, that the spiritual was just the *a capella* piece and done in that form. We try to reach the young people in really . . . we try to reach, really, more of the masses, you know.

JTB: And that was going to be my next question. In that the original spirituals we know were generally a capella, because they were performed in the woods and in the fields—with the spirituals that the Celebration Choir does now, do you incorporate music?

GB: Yeah, right, yeah. We do. You got spirituals, you got your Sunday morning spirituals, you got the spiritual, actually say out of the cry of slavery, and you have the spirituals on the, I say, for the concert stage. All three are different forms of spirituals, but they are all still spirituals.

JTB: Right.

GB: Now, what I did with those, I infused them to another level. So, some of our spirituals, I have done with the orchestra, when you pound the bass, the drum, the horns. Then, sometimes, we go back to the original, raw form or the traditional forms of the spiritual.

JTB: And could you possibly bless us with “The Great Day”?

GB: “Great Day?”

JTB: Yes.

GB: Okay, all right.

JTB: Your own composition.

GB: Oh, yeah, right [*piano*]. And on and on.

JTB: Beautiful.

GB: Caught me off guard, because, normally, I'm not used to playing all the choir parts. Okay?

JTB: And how long have you been playing the piano?

GB: Oh, since I was probably about five or six.

JTB: Five or six? And did you take lessons?

GB: I started private lessons. My grandmother said I had a natural instinct inside of me, but I did study. I did move to the settlement house. Had private teachers. Went on to undergrad school. . . And then people here in the city—the late Barbara Collier, Professor Sims, Professor Bobby Mitchell—all helped mold me into what I am today. Taking up my own natural gift and merging it with the academics to be totally rounded.

JTB: So for as long as you can remember did you know that you always wanted to play the piano?

GB: I knew in the third grade that this was going to be my destiny in life.

JTB: And as you were taking lessons, what would you say the style of music was that you were primarily taught?

GB: We started out with the classical [*piano*]. Okay, the classical. Then from there, my grandmother was open-minded, so she let me do anything I heard on the radio [*piano*]. The Temptations. And her quartets, the gospel [*piano*] because gospel and all of that—I enjoy all of it. As I mentioned, in school, I got interested in theater. In fact, Professor Margaret Ford Taylor, who is from your staff at Cleveland State [University] took me under her wings in undergrad school, and I have a great love for the theater, too. So whether I'm playing gospel or West Side Story or whatever, I enjoy it all.

JTB: You enjoy it all.

GB: I enjoy it all.

JTB: Okay, so now we're going to go back a little bit to your early life.

GB: Okay.

JTB: What year were you born, if you don't mind?

GB: Now you want me to tell my age.

JTB: You look like a spring chicken to me.

GB: I'll say this, I have a son who is grown, and he just got married so.

JTB: Okay, we'll just skip over that. And do you mind sharing both of your parents' names?

GB: Yeah, my mom is Estella Marshall. My dad is David Bell, but I was raised—I spent maybe 75 percent [of my childhood]—with my grandmother. Her name was Persie Ford, who was an original member of The Wings Over Jordan.

JTB: Okay.

GB: She sang in that first 15-minute broadcast out of this church here. So, I guess maybe you consider me the second generation or the next generation like on *Star Trek*. I'm the next generation of that. But through her, she taught me a lot about The Wings Over Jordan and what they went through and, I guess being a music educator, it kind of fascinated me about their lives. I was one of the persons, or person, who pushed to have the 50-year celebration of The Wings Over Jordan, because I just think what they have contributed to history and music is unbelievable.

JTB: So with your grandmother being an original member of The Wings Over Jordan, do you think you have a greater appreciation for [the music group]—?

GB: Oh yes.

JTB: And not even just for the group's music, but also just for the struggles.

GB: Right, because I know a lot of stories she told me, and we were just beginning to put this into a book form when she passed. We had decided that. I had just bought up some cassette tapes and we were just going to let her start taping herself, and she passed in '92, but she was a great lady. She was still functioning, able to travel, all over to Africa to perform. Before she passed at 91-years old, she went on over to Africa and to the Holy City to perform; she still sang. And the older she was, the clearer her voice became. It was an unusual situation. The older she got, the clearer her voice was.

JTB: So it's fair to say that you got your musical talents from your grandmother.

GB: From my grandmother and from my mother, too. I learned that my other grandmother, who I never did meet, also played the piano. And I had another uncle who I never did meet, he played. I come from a musical family. Then I have my brother, Michael Bell, who is a performer. He performs all the time. He'll do the nightclubs, and now he performs with a band called Shout. I've got to plug it and him with a commercial.

JTB: That's fine.

GB: Shout.com (Michael you owe me, okay?). No, he's very, very musical. So I come from a musical family.

JTB: And we were talking earlier about the stories your grandmother used to tell you about what the original Wings Over Jordan group went through. Can you remember some of those stories?

GB: Yeah, once there was a time when they had come to a bridge and it was during a bad storm. The bus driver didn't know whether to go across the bridge or not, because it was raining real badly. So, this truck came along and the trucker said, "I tell you what, if I make it across the bridge then I know you can make it. My truck weighs more than your bus. That was one of them.

And then my grandmother remembered a time, during segregation, how The Wings had to go through the back door in order to perform and how they crisscrossed with other performers. You know how I mean? And they performed just for the love of music. At that time, though, there wasn't a lot of money involved. As individuals, they had a great chance to travel across the country, and to different states. And then the next group, of course, went overseas to Europe and everything. So my grandmother left for nine years. She was really on the road. And a lot of people say maybe that's where I get it from, going on the road. That's a hard life. In and out of hotels, and you are performing out of hotels—plus you're dealing with desegregation, too, and prejudice, and racism, and all that kind of stuff like that. But Wings Over Jordan was just determined, and I think Reverend Settle put together one of the best marketing plans. I think in the—he had all these in Cleveland, the base group here, but he had all these satellite offices all over the country. Once a year, you could come in and audition to be in the main choir. That's why you have a lot of people who sang in Wings Over Jordan who never met each other because you had all these satellites all over the country. . .

JTB: Was your grandmother a part of The Wings group who did the CBS radio broadcast?

GB: Yes. See that's why I was very clear. I said she sang in that first choir. See, when you talk about Wings Over Jordan, now you have to talk about that group that sang in that first 15-minute broadcast, because you had thousands of people who sang with The Wings Over Jordan.

JTB: Did she ever talk about the impact or the importance of being able to sing on those radio broadcasts and possibly the impact that it was having across the United States?

GB: Yes. She would tell me that on Sunday morning that—I guess at that time—CBS was syndicated so they came on in all 50 states, and some even across the water. But on Sunday morning, especially in the African American community, you could go down the street and hear

The Wings Over Jordan just coming from everybody's house, because there was only maybe a few black shows that were out at that time. So if you were African American, you listened to that on Sunday morning.

JTB: Okay, so is it fair to say that your grandmother was a member of Gethsemane here and then—

GB: She was.

JTB: —and then your mother was a member as well?

GB: No, my mom was not a member here. My mom wasn't a member here, but my grandmother was.

JTB: Okay.

GB: My mother was, at that time, working and she was taking care of me financially, sending me to music school to build up my skills. So, she let Grandma kind of take the limelight in my life, and Momma kind of worked behind the scenes. Anytime you have a production, you have people that work behind the scenes and are just as important as people who work or who are out in the limelight.

JTB: Right, very much so. So, you say you came up here in Gethsemane. Were you a member as a young boy?

GB: Yeah, I was two. And my granddad sang with The Wings Over Jordan, too.

JTB: Okay.

GB: But he didn't travel with them, though. My grandmother actually traveled with them almost a decade.

JTB: And at the time when you were a member as a young boy, do you remember who the pastor was?

GB: Oh, I remember. Reverend Settle. By the time that I was born, Reverend Settle, his administration, was over with. I came under Reverend [Benjamin] Colvin, and Reverend [Wilbur] Jones, and Reverend—our pastor now—Reverend [Stephen] Sullivan. So Reverend Settle I never did meet, but I met him through other people that talk about him. My grandmother talked about him all the time and actually, I got—they've got me doing research and learning about him. Dr. [Sam] Barber, folks out of California did a whole life story about him [Reverend Settle] that even traces back all the old, old *[music]*, over to Africa. Plus the Settle family is still at Gethsemane. They still go here, too.

JTB: So you became a member of the church through your grandmother.

GB: Through my grandmother, yeah.

JTB: Was there any type of service? Or was there an experience of joining the church?

GB: An invitation was extended. My whole musical life began here, too. Miss [Williette Firmbanks] Thompson, who was the music coach for The Wings Over Jordan, played a very unique part in all of this, because she was giving me the supplements over what my music teacher was giving me. So I'm going through, I'm studying music, then I'm cutting. Then she [Miss Thompson] is taking what my music teacher taught me and actually letting me play with the choir and congregation. See, by the time I was in the third grade, I was playing for assemblies at school and at Sunday school.

By the time I got into fifth or sixth grade, I was actually doing accompaniments for Miss Thompson, who I don't think people really give her credit, because although you have—I can't think of that director now, the white or the Caucasian director, I can't think of his name now—actually directing The Wings Over Jordan. One of the directors was working out the vocal

arrangements on the piano. People come to her and they just sit down and they'd be like, "I'm just using, I'm going to use." This is not one of their arrangement, but *[makes sound] [piano] [singing - inaudible]. [Spoken] [inaudible]* And she worked out the harmony because doing that style you play in that sort of form in the *[inaudible words]* form like *[piano] [singing - inaudible]. [Spoken]* They did it in very, I'd say, choral structure. Now me, I may go *[piano] [singing - inaudible]. [Spoken]* Now there we go *[piano]*. Now I probably go *[piano]*. But it's just the style, what he wrote in at that given time of keeping the rules of choral music. See, when you say that's a spiritual, the spiritual—if the congregation was singing it on Sunday morning, or at a camp meeting—it's not in choral style. It's just a beat. I'm going, I'm going *[piano] [singing]* "Down by the riverside/down by the riverside." *[Spoken]* Okay, it's just a *[clap] [clap]*, you know *[clap]*. But as we take it to the concert stage, we get into the theory. Keep it sort of harmonized the way it should be. So, that's the difference. But Miss Thompson, she kind of let me experiment, too. Every now and then, I could take a walk on the wild side, but then she did pull me back in.

JTB: Yes, I was going to ask, was it okay?

GB: Oh yeah. She let me go there for a minute or she might say, "I want you to play it as-is." See, "as-is." If I'm playing *[piano] [singing - inaudible]. [Spoken]* That's "as-is." Now if I embellish on that on my own, I may go like *[piano] [singing - inaudible]. [Spoken]* You're just embellishing, but then that's how I saw the spiritual. And when I met Mrs. Settle [Rev. Settle's wife], I was down at—what's the black college down at Wilberforce?

JTB: Central State?

GB: Central State. We were there. And she told me, she said, "I like what you're doing. Not quite what The Wings Over Jordan would do, but," she said, "but you're appealing to the masses

of people.” So she says, “Keep doing what you’re doing!” And that’s all she needed to tell me and I just went. I say, let’s see how far can I stretch this spiritual? But then it’s totally to keep my colleagues and everything. That’s why, in my concert series, when I’m working with The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Choir, in the concert I may say the next five selections are spirituals. I’m going to do them in the traditional form of The Wings Over Jordan. Then I play it safe.

JTB: So, you said at fifth and sixth grade, which I want to assume is about 10 or 11 years old, you were accompanying the choir?

GB: Yeah.

JTB: In church? Was that unusual for someone of that age?

GB: Yeah. My principal was so impressed with me she gave me the key to the music room. I could go into the music room anytime. If I finished my work, I could go into the music room and open a piano and just practice anytime I got ready to. When I got in the sixth grade and I graduated from elementary school, she bought me a piano for my graduation gift. Dorothy Newman, yeah. And Dorothy Newman and Shirley Kilpatrick, who was a teacher out of the Shaker High School system who all recognized my talent—who had been a great supporter even now—she pushed. All of them pushed me. I became associated with the late Booker T. Tall, historian. He was just a historical person who took what I did and just pushed me and introduced me into the collegiate world, different black causes, and black associations. So I had good mentors.

JTB: Well, you mentioned your principal. So, let’s talk about your education.

GB: Okay.

JTB: Where did you go to elementary school?

GB: Captain Wall School.

JTB: And middle school?

GB: PH: Patrick Henry, yeah.

JTB: And then high school?

GB: John Hay.

JTB: John Hay. And—

GB: I went to Kent State. I went to Cambridge. I was there for my master's. I am in the process of receiving my CAS degree real soon.

JTB: So you're a native of Cleveland?

GB: Yes.

JTB: Are your parents natives of Cleveland?

GB: Yeah.

JTB: And then your grandparents as well?

GB: They came from Birmingham [Alabama]. Yeah, the South.

JTB: Do you know why they came from Birmingham?

GB: I'm pretty sure—probably doing, I guess, because of the opportunities, or what they thought was opportunity, anyway.

JTB: Were you baptized here at Gethsemane?

GB: Yeah, in the old building.

JTB: In the old building?

GB: Yeah in the basement. Yeah, in the old building's basement, yeah.

JTB: Was there a pool in the basement?

GB: Yeah. It's gone now, but yeah. But if you go in the old building where the kitchen is at, that used to be the baptismal pool there, yeah.

JTB: Do you remember how old you were?

GB: I must have been about... maybe in the third, second or third grade.

JTB: Do you remember the experience at all?

GB: Well, the water was cold and I was scared, yeah.

JTB: The water was cold and you were scared.

GB: Scared, yeah, right.

JTB: Did they sing a song?

GB: Oh, yeah, yeah. [*Piano*] That's all. [*Piano*] [*singing*] "Take me to the water/take me to the water/to be baptized."

JTB: So, if my ears don't deceive me that was "Take Me To The Water?"

GB: Yeah, right, yeah. They love that song, okay.

JTB: And well, do you remember if you were baptized with other people?

GB: Yeah.

JTB: You were—

GB: In all white, even.

JTB: In all white. Was it a gown?

GB: Yeah, a gown. White socks on, yeah.

JTB: And were you baptized on a Sunday?

GB: It was a Sunday night.

JTB: Sunday night.

GB: About six o'clock, yeah.

JTB: All right. Okay, so now let's fast-forward a little bit.

GB: Okay.

JTB: Tell me about your work now in the music ministry.

GB: My music now, it's complex now. I mean, my brother and I produced my CD. I do a lot of work in theater. I do a lot of church work in concerts. That and along with the stuff I do at school and writing for productions keeps me real busy. You say the music ministry—I think I've kind of interwoven all that into my ministry. Well, I just got through doing the production—back to your school [Cleveland State University] again—"O Mary Don't You Weep," for which I am one of the producers of that production. So, I'm doing it. My career's taking off real good.

JTB: And is it also fair to say that generally when you talk sometimes of the music ministry, you have someone who may be just a director of the youth choir or the director of the senior choir or what have you? But for you, in listening to everything that you've told me, you really do reach a lot of people over different generational gaps.

GB: Right.

JTB: So you work with the young children, you work with older people, you work with—

GB: Yeah, all of it, right.

JTB: Everybody. Do you have any one group that you like working with more; that you've seen more growth in?

GB: The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Choir, I love that. And I love them all. I mean, because they're different, I have a different appetite for each one. I mean I'm doing theater work, I'm doing the church work, and I like that. I'm doing schoolwork, I like that. I'm playing jazz, I like that. I just like it all.

JTB: So, you have a certain style of music for each?

GB: Right. That's one thing about going to school is I can go from one style to another style. If I want to do jazz [*piano*], or if I want to do classical [*piano*], I can go from one thing to—which

when I was coming up the African American church especially, and I don't want to say all African American churches, but they would say you can't do both. We cannot, but grandmother always insisted that I learn to do it all, so I did. I had my preference in music; I'm not going to play for anybody. You wouldn't find me doing musical directing for the group Who or *[inaudible words]*. It just don't appeal to me. Or you wouldn't find me doing, if I had a choice between two... choose a Patti LaBelle, Michael Jackson on a good day, or Small World. I mean I could. Or, Michael Jerome. Because I could fit in.

JTB: Anywhere.

GB: Because to me God is here and if you can carry God with you everywhere you go, you don't have to worry about if, in the old day because the old school says, well, you can't do this kind of music or that. No, but God is here.

JTB: So let me ask you about that now. How do you feel about the contemporary artists like the Kirk Franklins and the Mary Marys and the Donnie McClurkins?

GB: I say go for it.

JTB: Go for it?

GB: Go for it.

JTB: Do you welcome the contemporary music because it's bringing in a greater audience or is there—?

GB: Because it's learning. I mean, it's a musical appreciation. Remember the Kirk Franklins, the Donnie McClurkins, and all of them; they're doing the same thing that Mozart and Beethoven did. They were radical in their time. Mozart did not want to play for the church no more. Mozart did not want to play for the king no more. They do it radical in their music so yeah, the new Mozart and Beethoven.

JTB: So do you think, then, years from now, we'll be hearing something else and we'll say remember those good old days when we had Donnie McClurkin and—?

GB: Yeah, right, yeah, yeah. And some music like Mahalia Jackson, you just—

JTB: It's timeless.

GB: You hear them; it's timeless. I think the Hawkins fellas [Walter and Edwin] were ahead of their time, but then so was the timing with Andre Crouch. He was timeless to me. What Kirk Franklin does will become timeless, because he's just a fantastic artist and God is using them. You know what I mean?

JTB: So, staying on the subject of music, what is your all-time favorite gospel song?

GB: Okay, now, well . . .

JTB: Well, I won't even say gospel. I'll say religious song.

GB: I like so many; I lean towards Smallwood. I love Smallwood. Over here doing [*piano*]. Not only is he being spiritual but he's aroused my musical intellect.

JTB: And for our viewers [listeners, and transcript readers] who may not know the Richard Smallwood song you just played, what was that?

GB: Oh, "Anthem Of Praise." Yeah, I play that.

JTB: Good, thank you. Are you—you're currently still a member of Gethsemane, correct?

GB: No, I'm currently a member of Bethany Baptist Church.

JTB: Bethany Baptist Church.

GB: Yes.

JTB: And who is the pastor there?

GB: Steve Rowan.

JTB: How long have you been a member there?

GB: Oh, about 25 years.

JTB: Twenty-five years.

GB: Yeah.

JTB: Telling your age a little bit, huh?

GB: Yeah. When I started out, I was real young, too.

JTB: Were you?

GB: Yeah, I remember when my first ministry in the music position must have come along about probably... when I was in the eleventh grade; I was the Minister of Music. So, I've been Minister of Music a long time. Yeah, I've been playing a long time.

JTB: A long time.

GB: Yeah.

JTB: And at Bethany Baptist, what are some of the special events that they hold during the year and not just some of these special events, but what is your role in those events as well?

GB: Well, okay. When I was Minister of Music, I was Minister of Music just up to maybe a couple months ago, a few months ago, all of it—anywhere from church anniversary to concerts to homegoing services to doing special programming. It was a very unique program Pastor Rowan had over there. A lot of things for young people. Right now I'm doing an interim position at a Imani Temple, because I'm serving as Director of Music in the interim position. Sure, we have a lot of things going there, too. So you know things go on. Everything changes, and sometimes we move on to wherever life has in store for us, because nothing stays the same.

JTB: Yeah, all these changes around.

GB: Yeah, each experience had been wonderful, since my days at Starlight [Baptist Church]; my days at Gethsemane to my days at Bethany and wherever God will take me to from here.

JTB: And at Bethany during a regular worship service, how would you say the songs are introduced to the congregation?

GB: Yeah, is it that the pianist or the band will start playing the song, then the choir joins in, and then the congregation joins in or is there. Okay? Just like that. Okay.

JTB: And since you're at Bethany now, in addition to meeting the spiritual needs of their members, what else would you say socially they do for members?

GB: That's one thing; I really give credit to Pastor [the Reverend Dr. Stephen] Rowan. He's unique: he had the food program, he got the prison ministry going on. He has the Boys to Men, and the list just goes on and on and on. It's a community church, such as Gethsemane is here. It's a community church. The church is open like seven days a week, so it's unique.

JTB: And since we're briefly talking about Bethany Baptist, where is it located?

GB: It's on 105 on Hampton. I work a lot with Pastor Rowan, Stephen Rowan. I have done a lot of work with him, like I did with his father [the Reverend Dr. Albert T. Rowan]. He and I did tremendous work together, I mean we traveled together; did many programs, especially in the extending of the church to be a community church. And his son is taking up his torch, but I say I haven't worked as long with the son as I have with the father. But the father and I, that was a very unique experience.

JTB: And in our interviews as well we also like to touch on the Civil Rights Movement.

GB: Okay.

JTB: Were you or any member of your church, leader of the church, involved in the Civil Rights Movement?

GB: I do remember, the only thing I remember was during the Hough Riots [of 1966]. I remember trying to get to school, and they had closed down the street and everything. Grandma

had to send me to school in a cab and the cab went all the way around to get me back over to Superior Circle. I grew more into the civil rights after I got older. I had performed in Dr. [Martin Luther] King's church, Dexter Avenue Church. I have performed, I took my kids [students] and I performed at the church in Atlanta. I can't think of it now—oh Ebenezer Church. We've been to the Rosa Parks Museum. I've been to the Civil Rights Museum. We have performed. My choir performed at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where the girls got killed.

JTB: The four little girls?

GB: So, I became engulfed in that as I got older, on my own. I was going through it coming up. As I got older, it became a part of my life.

JTB: And going back to the stories your grandmother would tell you being a part of the original Wings Over Jordan, do you think with the stories that she told you it also gave you a greater appreciation of the Civil Rights Movement? And you say as you kind of grew into it as you got older, you said when you were at Ebenezer, you had a greater appreciation for everything that had occurred there.

GB: Yeah, definitely because grandmother always talked about the South and the things that she had been through. I think everybody at one time refused to get off the bus or that had run across their mind, especially the black people. My grandmother said it was a time when she wouldn't move. I think Rosa Parks got, when she did it, she got national attention, but I think a lot happened to a lot of people who were all doing that same thing. Didn't even know about the girl who was 16 years old who preceded Rosa Parks, but they thought it was a good role model so I mean. So yeah.

JTB: And the reason I ask that is because I've been to the King Center in Atlanta, but when I went I was eight, nine years old, and I don't think I understood quite the magnitude of how

important it was. And because you were older and performing in these venues and these areas, you understood the magnitude of you being there and being able to participate in these activities.

GB: Even going back to Africa—I studied in Africa in my early 20s. I want to go back now, but in my early 20s I was over there for three months, two months and a half, and about 13 countries, and I knew what was going on. I knew my black history real good, but I still—now, I want to go back again because now I could really get into it. I went into it before, and I understood, but yeah you do when you're younger. You just don't take advantage of it like you do when you get older.

JTB: So let me just take a quick look, Mr. Brackens. We are almost finished with this interview.

GB: Okay.

JTB: So right now, you have the opportunity; we talked about your grandparents and your mother and your father. . . You mentioned that you have a brother.

GB: I have, I guess you could call it, a blended family—I have brothers on my father's side, I have brothers on my mother's side, but it's a very unique family. We all just get along. So although I grew up with my one brother and one sister, but as I got older we kind of found each other. Now I've got many brothers and many sister; it's a big family. And we all kind of get along. My brothers call my mom, "Mom," and I call their mom, "Mom," and we—it's a unique situation. Most times you don't find that, but both families kind of came together and we spent a lot of the holidays together, so it's wonderful.

JTB: And your immediate family—you mentioned you have a son.

GB: I have a son James, who I'm very fond of. He just got married; he didn't tell me, but he got married and he's doing real good. And I have another son. I adopted him when he was about 14, though I am kind of a single parent. All my guys and myself. Well, my son's mother Veronica, who's just awesome herself, took him from like, I guess, from a baby until six, then I took him

from six on. I would tell you she tricked me because when he came—you know once they come in your life they are always there. But yeah, two of them.

JTB: And the last question.

GB: Okay.

JTB: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the role that the church has played in your life?

GB: The role... It just gave me the opportunity to see the world. It's nothing like the African American church. Just, besides, teaching you spirituality, it teaches you socialism, it teaches you how to network. The black church is just an institution already in itself. I thank God for the black church, and I think God for The Wings Over Jordan, that God had allowed me to be a part of this world-renowned group, that God had somehow passed the torch to me, and I'm trying to keep this thing running on. It's bigger than me; it's bigger than life. You know what I mean?

JTB: You just made me think of another question now. So we talk about Wings Over Jordan, the original group, being a world-renowned group. Is it your hope to see The Wings Over Jordan Celebration Choir as a world-renowned group?

GB: Oh, we will, we will. But more than that I want it to become more of a movement. Object [lesson] to sing kids to school. It'd be more of a Wings Over Jordan Alumni. We always will be a choir, but it'd be a movement to doing other things. See, The Wings just didn't sing; they did a lot of social things that took us to the next level. That's what the Celebration Choir and Alumni & Friends do—take us to the next level.

JTB: So, that's your goal, to see it to the next level?

GB: To take us to the next level, yeah.

JTB: All right. Well, thank you very much Mr. Brackens.

GB: Okay, thank you.

JTB: You have a wonderful day.