***Transcription sponsored by Leonard & Betty Boesger***

**Robert Madison** [00:00:07] Oh, you need to be on this, too.

**Gregory James** [00:00:09] No, I'm fine. You're fine. I'll be able to talk loud. Okay. We're here. My name is Gregory James. This is Mike Turk. We're here August 1st at Robert Madison International interviewing Robert Madison, and we're going to get the interview started. What community did you grow up in as a child? Describe that community and a little bit about your home life if you wouldn't mind that, please.

**Robert Madison** [00:00:33] Okay. I guess I grew up in a community known as the States. You see, my father was a graduate. He was a civil engineer from Howard University. And back in those days, trying to find employment for an African American man was really impossible. So when I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, my mother and father were here, of course, but there was no opportunity for my father to work. And therefore, we moved to Selma, Alabama, where he got a job as a professor of engineering and math and physics and coached the football team at a place called Selma University. So I had some years there at Selma. As a matter of fact, from the time I was born, we stayed in Selma about three years. Then we moved from there to Benedict College, which is in Columbia, South Carolina, because he got a promotion to go and teach math, physics, and science at Benedict College. So I spent some time growing up there. So you asked me, where did I grew up? And it's very interesting too that... And then from there, we moved to Washington, D.C., and the reason was because, finally, the so-called War Department of the federal government—we called it the Defense Department now, but back in those days it was called the War Department—they offered him a job as a civil engineer. And finally, after all those years teaching, about eight of them, he got this position in the, as a civil engineer, in the War Department of the federal government, and we moved to Washington, D.C. And we stayed in Washington, D.C., until it was time for me to go to high school. And it happens that in high... In Washington, D.C., these were segregated schools. It was clear Black people went to these schools and White people went to these schools. In Washington, D.C., my parents wanted me to be an architect—so did I—but you couldn't study... In Washington, D.C., there were three schools for African Americans, or Black people, in Washington, D.C., high schools. One was for academics, which was called Dunbar High School, and one was for business—we said clerical—which is called Cardozo, and one was for trades, which was called Armstrong. Well, I wanted to be an architect, and neither one of these schools had curricula that would address those issues. So my folks said, come back to Cleveland because there's East Technical High School here in Cleveland. So we came back to Cleveland, and I went to East Technical High School and graduated from East Tech. So where did I grow up?

**Gregory James** [00:03:46] You speak a piece. So you were talking about the years in school. Before I go back to the questions to ask about East Tech, could you told me the years those were? I was curious about the times. Was that 1950s? '40s? '30s? I'm always careful with age and date. I try to be very respectful.

**Robert Madison** [00:04:08] Thank you. Friday was my birthday, this past Friday, and on that day, I was 83 years old. So we're talking about 1923, in the '20s. In the '20s, the Ku Klux Klan was still riding horses throughout the South. Oh, yeah. We met the Klan one night when... Driving in my father's car. They didn't meet us confrontationally, but we saw them crossing the road up about 500 yards, turned out the lights and closed up. So, the era we're talking about for my bringing up was from the 19, early '20s to 1923 to '34 when we moved back to Cleveland. So that was '20s and the '30s.

**Gregory James** [00:05:06] So, to get you, to make sure I heard you right, you were born in Cleveland.

**Robert Madison** [00:05:10] Yes.

**Gregory James** [00:05:11] You went to Alabama.

**Robert Madison** [00:05:12] Yep.

**Gregory James** [00:05:13] After Alabama, you were in South Carolina.

**Robert Madison** [00:05:14] Right.

**Gregory James** [00:05:15] After South Carolina, you were in Washington.

**Robert Madison** [00:05:17] Right.

**Gregory James** [00:05:18] And the reason you left Washington, D.C., is because the schools that they offered Blacks, they didn't have the curricula, so you came back to Cleveland, Ohio, and you graduated from your East Tech?

**Robert Madison** [00:05:27] That's correct.

**Gregory James** [00:05:28] And when you got your East Tech High School back then, where did you venture off to college? Was that a big long list going there?

**Robert Madison** [00:05:35] Yes. The reason why I laugh... it really appreciates the generational gap.

**Gregory James** [00:05:42] Uh huh.

**Robert Madison** [00:05:43] To study architecture, there were only two schools that would welcome me. One was Howard University, and one was Tuskegee. Western Reserve University here in Cleveland had a school of architecture. I was not welcome there and I couldn't afford it.

**Gregory James** [00:06:04] You say you're not welcome because color of your skin? Or basically financial matters?

**Robert Madison** [00:06:10] Skin. You got a lot to learn, haven't you? You got... Oh, my goodness.

**Gregory James** [00:06:13] I try not to be...

**Robert Madison** [00:06:14] It's quite all right. No, it's quite alright. I'll show you an article about me. That's another long story. The answer is no. We were not welcome because of color of skin. As a matter of fact, I did finally finish Western Reserve University, which is where this article is from, but only because after the war I went up to the School of Arch[itecture], said I would like to enter here. And the dean said, We've never had any colored boys finish this school, and I doubt we ever will. And there was no playing around. None of the funny business. He says, We don't want you, period. So I went home. I got angry, and I can be angry. I put on my uniform. I fought in the war. I put on my uniform and went back up to that school with my medals on and my... Not... You didn't have a gun at that time, but I was an officer, and I made it very clear. I said, wait a minute, you know, I shed my blood in Italy, and I was wounded in action and got a Purple Heart, fighting to make this country safe for democracy, and you tell me I can't enter your school? He says, Well, that's right. But then they gave me examinations and stuff like that. And I finally got.. So getting back to your original question, finishing East Tech, where I go to architecture school? I went to Howard University because the only two schools that taught architecture that were welcoming African Americans at that time, that was Howard and Tuskegee. And I stayed at Howard until the war came around.

**Gregory James** [00:07:57] And it's... And it makes me think in my mind because even being, and you talked about generational gap, myself growing up, 1980s, 1990s, I struggled as well. And I'm just curious when I say I struggled, with the racial tensions and everything I went through myself in high academics. I mean, I was allowed to go to school. I mean, you're talking about a situation... My aunts taught at the colored school. I mean, that's what it was called, so I got a chance to experience that. But I'm very curious to see, how did... You talked about your father, what he was doing, how was your mother in this? Was she... Did she... Did your parents push you to go on? Because I know in generalization you were able to fight through and go through that as yourself as a youngster. But I'm just curious. Did your parents say... Like, I think of the movie Men of Honor about how his father pushed him, push and push him, never quit, never quit, never quit. Were your parents the same way like that?

**Robert Madison** [00:08:50] Well, first of all, I am very fortunate in that my mother also was a college graduate. She graduated from Morris Brown, which is down there at the consortium of Morehouse and Spelman and Morris Brown. It is also, you should know, that as we moved around, I had siblings being born, so there were four sons. Each was born in a different state. I was born in Cleveland. Jim was born in Selma. Stanley was born at Benedict College, South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. And when I was born in Washington, D.C. This perhaps is the key to all this. In Selma. I came home one day from elementary, kindergarten with a drawing that I had made in school of some kind of a boat or something like that. And my mother took a look and says, Oh, that's wonderful. That's really good. You're going to be an architect one day soon. And I said, Sure. Yes, Mother. Didn't have the slightest idea what that would mean. And when Bernard Stanley Jr. was born, she said, You're gonna be an engineer. And when Stanley was born, he said, You're gonna be a preacher, but he didn't become a preacher. And when Bernard was when he became an architect. Because, you see, back in those days, trying to get employment as an architect or an engineer for Black people was practically impossible. And so my mother said, one day we will have our own firm, and we'll never have to ask anybody for a job again. And so that through the years, excuse me, there was always this kind of direction that this firm, these groups of people will finally come together, and we will be the first major African American architectural firm in this country. That's how, you said did she push me, she sure did, so did my dad. It happens that my mother was the spiritual guidance. She's gonna push. My father was into it. He was a brilliant man. So that was a combination of those two. And we said, okay, one day we'll have our own firm, was why I became an architect and why I have that stay with it, persistent to do it. That's it.

**Gregory James** [00:11:24] Okay. So you mentioned that you're a World War Two vet who earned three medals and a Purple Heart. Were you drafted or did you enlist? And also, what were your experiences like in the military?

**Robert Madison** [00:11:40] In 1941, on December the seventh, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I was at Howard University in what was called ROTC. But everybody took ROTC when you went to Howard University back in those days. ROTC stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps. When they bombed Pearl Harbor, then everybody, you know, things went crazy in terms of what are we going to do? The students who were in school wanted to stay in school, but we knew that was not going to happen. They would come and get us. So after my second year, I enlisted in what was called Advanced ROTC. I was in the... It was in the beginning, which is mandatory for everybody, but now I went to the Advanced ROTC, which means that I had to finish two years, but I never finished two years. But ostensibly, I was being in the Army to become an officer. So that in February of 1943, yeah, I was shipped out with a group of us to Camp Croft, and we were then Privates First Class because we had college education. And I went from there to Benning to, to South Carolina and back to Howard in what was called the ASTP, Army Specialized Training Program. But we were in the Army now, so I volunteered for ROTC, which is a little bit different environment than to go and, you know, [inaudible]. And then I had to go to Fort Benning, Georgia, to finish my officer candidate school training. So that was how I got into the Army, and that's how I got to be an officer. Now, your question was, what was it like?

**Gregory James** [00:13:55] Yes.

**Robert Madison** [00:13:57] Well, first of all, you have to understand that was a different era, a totally different time.

**Gregory James** [00:14:02] My grandfather fought in the Korean conflict, so I received, one of the things I can remember him telling me growing, and my grandfather was, you know, himself being Black and myself, was a very... He held those racist views all the way until until his death. You know, he died six, seven years ago. He died and one of the things he always told me was, was, you know, being segregated over there, being able to fight in the war and the way that you were treated, the way you looked at when you came back to your country, you know those views, he never did leave. And you know, my family growing up interracial, my mother being Hispanic and Caucasian, those views never left him. And it was.... It was one of the things that I know he told, even though he fought in those battles, that he took with his own, that it's always in the back of his head. He never did forget. Was it something similar to that like that for you or...

**Robert Madison** [00:14:54] No, not really. First of all, when we went in, back in 1940, '41, '42, after the Japanese had attacked America and America was up in arms, we were excited about it, and everybody was vowing to line up to go to battle. We were going to battle to prove that we were worthy of all the kinds of stuff that happens. We were going to show them. That's why I had this battle at CWRU. Said, Don't tell me, I went over there for it so I could prove to you. So the answer to your question is we were in a segregated army. There was no question about that. I was an officer and I was a Second Lieutenant at the time, and all of the officers above the rank of First Lieutenant were White. All the answers below were Black, and it was a Black division. All the troops were Black except for the senior officers. They were dumb. [laughs] I don't mean to be unkind, but they were misfits. And if you were in the 88th and you didn't, you know, they couldn't throw you out, so they sent 'em over to 92nd, and we knew that. And we had a real interesting time, us guys, proving how dumb they really were, but they were officer sent back as misfits over there. To answer your question, when we went to Italy, we didn't know we were going into battle, number one. They didn't give us guns till we got off the ship. The White troops had passed out words that the Black folks were coming and they were like monkeys and they had tails and all that sort of stuff because they expected the Italian citizenry to really, you know, reject us because they were monkeys. [laughs] But all that did was make them more curious about who these people were. And before... And we were... It happens that we were, you know, we were doing a job, and it's a different kind of conflict you see now. The citizenry were respected. We did. We respected them. We were there as liberators, not as conquerors. And when we marched into Lucca, everybody came out and waved flags and handkerchiefs, and they would bring us our chickens and stuff like that. So that... But you see, we didn't tear up the countryside like they're doing over there now.

**Gregory James** [00:17:42] Mm hmm.

**Robert Madison** [00:17:45] Our battles were out there in the, in the countryside where we knew the Germans were dug in and we were over here, we'd fire, they'd fire back, and we... And when they got to a town, they would go through the town the other side. So you look at Rome today, it's beautiful. You look at Florence, beautiful, because both sides respected the civilian population and all of the infrastructure, the buildings the city was in, so that what was my experience like? My experience was like, first of all, we proved that we were worth something as African Americans. We could fight as good as anybody else could. We could take chances as anybody... And we were wounded as I was, and we were killed. And we spent all that time, four years that way, saying, look, we're Americans just like anybody else is. It happens that the Italian people looked at the 92nd Division with utmost respect to the extent that... I don't remember the date now but about fifty years ago, which would be about 1994, fifty years after 40—yeah. They the Italians invited the members of the 92nd Infantry Division back to a celebration at Sommocolonia, small town. But this town was famous because that's where, it was... That's where I was wounded. That was where people died. Not only Italian soldiers, but the Italian citizens died because of a pitched battle. And they made this monument to the 92nd Infantry Division, the Buffalo Division, African American troops and the Paisanos, which were Italians, and the citizens. They didn't mention anybody else. [laughs]

**Gregory James** [00:19:49] See, that's, that's very...

**Robert Madison** [00:19:50] And they had a great, right, great big plaque up there. And I didn't go, but some of my members went, and they said, treat 'em like royalty. So the answer to the question is we gained respect of the people we were fighting to help. They respected us. That was the kind of thing... I came back and the dean says, I have not had a Black person in this school so that the residue of anger began to surface after we proved we could do like anybody else. So that was what was the kind of residue.

**Gregory James** [00:20:29] Mm hmm. Then you're going to have, you're not going to have guns until... Can you explain that more? That's just...

**Mike ?** [00:20:35] I mean, that's that's I mean, that happened in... [crosstalk]

**Robert Madison** [00:20:37] See, see, they....

**Gregory James** [00:20:38] They thought they were out of control. It sounded like...

**Robert Madison** [00:20:40] Well, no, the point was. The point of this was that, first of all, we trained at Fort Huachuca in Arizona because no other state warranted that many Black people armed. [laughs] Dangerous! Now, they just thought that, but we went to war. So we've trained in Huachuca. And secondly, we went out on bivouac. We went out on tto maneuvers, as it's called where you go out and go to the jungle like you did fighting the war with guns, with blanks, no ammunition. So they took us from... So when we got back, we were on our way to... Shipped out to Fort, to Hampton Roads in Virginia to get on the boat. And I came home for one, two, three days before going over. And they said, Where are you going? We don't know where we're going. And we did not know where we were going. And we were on that boat for 14 days, and we had all kinds of guesses, but we said this. We said, you know what? At that time, the only people who were Black at this war were the Quartermaster Corps. They were people taking, you know, supplies. We said we're going to be quartermasters. Heh, big piece of cake. But then we got to Naples, Italy, and we still didn't know where we're gonna finally wind up until we were there in training for about a week. I mean exercises are nothing like that sort of... Then they got us on a boat, a train, and we started headed north and we finally realized we were in Italy. And just as we got off in Civitavechia up there near Pisa, we were handed guns and ammunition because, you see, back here, these people were really frightened. If you give all these Black people guns, they come out, get drunk, and shoot up the town. But that was false.

**Gregory James** [00:22:36] Okay.

**Mike ?** [00:22:36] I know. I know. It's just one of the famous things I studied was the 54th Massachusetts. I studied that a little bit in detail more just from the movie Glory. And it was just that same... It's weird to see that in the fifties that carries all the way over into the 1940s. You know, even now, we're talking almost 100 years that in Mississippi that's still going on. But that's pretty... That's pretty impressive.

**Gregory James** [00:22:58] So now that we've seen a little bit about your background growing up very, very broad, what led you to be interested in the arts? You talked about your mother, said that, and your picture, I remember you said about kindergarten, but there had to be something else that drew you in as the older you got. Can you explain that for me a little bit?

**Robert Madison** [00:23:17] I guess, in that era, and I'm talking about the '20s and '30s now, the most sought after profession for Black people was being a doctor or a lawyer or a dentist, a preacher, or schoolteacher. Architect? God, you're out of your cotton-pickin' mind!

**Gregory James** [00:23:42] That's what hits me, I mean...

**Robert Madison** [00:23:43] And I guess... I guess... But my father wasa civil engineer. Now, the question is, why did he become a civil engineer? That has been the burning question in my mind. He's dead now, been dead for a long time. I never got around to asking him that question because there were no examples. But the point is, the more I got to know about architecture, the more I was convinced it was what I wanted to do. I didn't want to be a lawyer. I couldn't stand blood. I couldn't be a doctor. I had classmates who went into medicine, and I said, no, I can't do that. And so it became architecture. And I... It's all I've done for seventy-something years. And I am good at it and I'm determined and I like it. That's why I'm still working.

**Gregory James** [00:24:31] One things that makes me interested in this is I'm very big on the '20s when I teach. What... Did the Harlem Renaissance have any impact on your thinking or anything in the arts at that time? Did you follow that or not at all? Different type of...

**Robert Madison** [00:24:42] See, when I was a kid, I was born in '23, [crosstalk] and, you know, I didn't know until later when I began to read about the Harlem Renaissance that I realized.... But it did not impact my life per se at that time.

**Gregory James** [00:24:58] Okay. I see you have a graduate degree from Harvard and went to Paris for the Fulbright. Can you tell us about your education, which you did already, how does this education that you've been talking about compare with your childhood friends?

**Robert Madison** [00:25:13] Well, first of all, nobody who was my childhood friend became an architect. [laughs] So there's no... But a lot of them became doctors and a lot of them became this, that, and the other. Yes, a lot of 'em became doctors and lawyers and stuff like that. But what's important is that when I finally came back to Western Reserve University and I went through that whole charade about We don't want you, you can't be... And I went back, put my uniform.Then they examined me all summer. Every Saturday I had to go up and take some exams. They were trying to find a reason not to admit me. I knew that. And it was a game. I was going to beat 'em, and they're gonna try to beat me. So that was, you know, that was sort of understood. I knew that. But here's the point. The dean said there's no jobs for you out there. And when I got my degree, he was right. There were no jobs. But more importantly, there was an incident in the year before I graduated, and the incident went like this. This is 1947, and I finished '46, one year in the college, and the senior class was having a class picnic. And the class picnic was going to be at the Bratenahl Country Club. Bratenahl Country Club. And was I coming? Of course I'm coming. I paid my dues and I played baseball with the guys and stuff like that. Well, I lived in the projects. [laughs] But I knew I could think as well as those guys because... So, but the Bratenahl Country Club, my goodness, that's where they came out for the day, golf in the morning and tennis and swimming pools and they had the dinner. Well, I couldn't swim. I didn't know what a golf club was. So I said I'll come out for the evening play for dinner. I wasn't gonna bring a date because I didn't know what was gonna happen. And so I got out there and met all my friends. At 6:30, nobody was moving. I knew what was happening. I looked at my watch. Dinner was probably at six. Well, 6:45, nothing was happening. People, about 200 people sitting around. So at about five minutes to 7:00 I got approached. Said, Mr. Madison, the manager of the country club would like to see you in his office. I said, Okay. I knew exactly what was happening. Got in there and there was the dean in there, two professors, the president of the class, and the manager of the country club. Gee, Mr. Madison, I'm so, you know, I'm so glad you're here. Please understand that we have a difficult situation here. You see, this country club does not feed Black people. He says, now here's the charter of the club and the charter, and I read it, charter says this club is forbidden to have Jewish people, Black people eating at their facility, and some other stuff. And I read it and said, Oh, that's interesting, isn't it? Well, you understand what it says? Said I certainly do. I said, What you are gonna do about it?

**Gregory James** [00:28:37] [laughs]

**Robert Madison** [00:28:39] Look, I paid my dues. I was invited here. I'm here. I'm here with the class. What's going to happen? So then they started pulling out their hair. And what are we going to do about this situation? And finally, the president of the class said, Well, look, if Bob doesn't eat, I don't eat. And if I don't eat, nobody eats. And they had 200 meals prepared to go to waste. So he said, well, maybe we'll have to feed him. So they said, okay, well, Mr. Madison, you know, we'd be, you know, what happens if the members of the club come and see you sitting down in the dining roomd? And my position was always, well, that's not my problem. That's your problem. So they finally said, Well, okay, you can eat, but, you know, if you don't mind, you know, you know, because we don't want too many... I said, I understand. I understand. So I ate, had fun, and left and went home. Well, the next the dean said, We got to get rid of this guy. [laughs] It's a problem! This is a problem. So, they, the next semester, they just said passed, passed... I didn't take half of the curriculum I was supposed because they [wanted] to get rid of me. See, I was supposed to graduate in 1949, and I was determined to graduate in 1948. And they started scratching thingsoff, but a couple of courses that... They couldn't just do that with. One was the history of architecture. And I had... Said I'll outsmart these people. So the dean taught the history of architecture. And so I went into his... And I had read, when I was on the boat coming back from Italy, I read a whole book this thick about the history of architecture of Europe, Gothic, Romanesque, and all of that. I went in the dean's office, said, Dean, you know, I'm so looking forward to taking your class next semester, I can hardly wait. Now, this is April. I just want you to know how much I really look forward to it. I said, you know, I've been trying to figure out... I'm having a little problem with who designed the Gates of Paradise for the Cathedral of Florence. Was it Giuseppe Brunelleschi or was it Giovanni Bramante? And he said, Well, you know, Mr. Madison, you don't have to take my course. [laughs] He couldn't have me embarrassing him in his classroom. See? So pass! Okay? Pass! His... Then the guy in structures—this is April now, you had to take these things in sequence. I said I'm going to figure out how to get rid of this, too. So I went to him and said, look, I'm looking forward to your class next semester. Fine, Mr. Madison, I'm glad you're doing it. I said, Would you mind if I audited your class? You know, just come in and sit and see what they're doing? Oh, no, not a problem at all. I bought the book. And this is April now. And I came to class. It was 8:00 in the morning, and I got there religiously and went to sleep immediately because I was up half the night studying. I went back to September and studied everything up until then because I was.... So when it came time for the final examination, I said, you know, Dean, Mr. [inaudible], I really would like to find out what it's like to take your examination. [laughs] What've you got to lose? He said. I took the examination. They marked it. I got a B. The students who had been in there since September got C's and D's. Now he had a problem. Now, what are you going to have this guy who just got through coming in in April, sleeping all the..., but he's studying all night long and he gets.... He passes the examination. So, pass! [laughs]

**Gregory James** [00:32:49] I just... I can't...

**Robert Madison** [00:32:50] Well, I created a problem. I was a troublemaker. So then he said... Then so what happened was that I said, I got to finish in '48, and this is '47. So they skipped me. Not only these classes. Those that I just told you about.? And I didn't take half of the curriculum. Get rid of me because he's not going to be an architect anyway. It won't make that much difference. But what happened was that I said, alright... So, when I got... When I was in... and the dean said there'll be no place for you. And that's true enough because I walked the streets for a month trying to get a job, and I finally offered to work for somebody for nothing. And he said, well, I'll think about it too. But the point was, in order for me to be equal, I had to be four times better than you. That's why I went to Harvard. It happened, I went to work for a guy who was my teacher, Robert A. Doyle. He's the guy I said I'll work for you for nothing, and we became friends for the rest of our lives. And he was a guy who called up and said, I got a guy who once studied at Harvard. And he said, Look out for him. So when I sent in my application, they said, Well, really, he doesn't have... He doesn't have all the requirements for a bachelor's degree. Look at his transcript. I never saw the transcript. And so I had... I was a registered architect. So they admitted me to Harvard. So from Harvard, then I went to Paris to study because I had to have the credential. When I came back, there was nobody in Cleveland or the state of Ohio with a bachelor's degree, a master's degree from Harvard, and a Fulbright scholarship to study in Paris. So don't tell me I'm not qualified. That's the way it was. But...

**Gregory James** [00:34:41] One thing is spurs me off with this, when you talk about this, and this might be out of the blue here. What are your thoughts on affirmative action right now? I'm just curious what you think. Is it needed or not needed? If I can make it a...

**Robert Madison** [00:34:53] It is. Yes, it's needed and it should always... If it is right.

**Gregory James** [00:34:58] Okay, explain "if it's right." I'm just curious.

**Robert Madison** [00:35:01] Affirmative action is an opportunity. For people who have been denied those opportunities. Affirmative action means to take positive steps to find people on that threshold and give them the opportunity. Not go down here in the back room to find somebody and say, okay, he's, this is it. But once we do that, then we begin to get a society that has some degree of equity, so that, yes, I do believe in affirmative action as a means of opportunity. Not... I don't want any favors. Like I was talking... We were candidates for the county office building. I said, Don't do me no favors. I'm going to earn it. But when I earn it, I want it!

**Gregory James** [00:35:47] Yeah, I know what you're saying.

**Robert Madison** [00:35:48] Don't tell me... Well, so, yes, I believe in affirmative action.

**Gregory James** [00:35:53] Okay. That's... That's... Okay. Even myself coming up as a teacher, which is kind of hard to believe in this day and age, in the year 2000, when I was going out interviewing for jobs, one of the first things they told myself coming out with the bachelor's degree from Marietta College, which is a very significant degree, which I honored, I was top of my class, that one of the things that I would ask to interview, or they were doing my subject was, Don't hire me just because you want to fill a spot for a Black male. That was my word. And I said a lot of jobs I didn't take because they said, Mr. James, that's what we're looking for, is a Black male. And I said, and then I went to my father and I talked to my father about that. He, his first reaction was he was mad and he said, Never be embarrassed of what you are. And I said, and I got into that thing talking about it. But it was, it was kind of interesting there with that. One of the things to go on a little bit about your firm is can you describe the history of your firm? With that being said and also with that, I see that you have worked with governments of Trinidad Tobago, Jamaica, Bahamas, Nigeria, and the UAE. How did you become international?

**Robert Madison** [00:37:01] Okay. Well, I guess starting with the firm, we started in 1954, I did, with one person who was... I told her at Howard University. I don't know whether I told you that.

**Gregory James** [00:37:17] You taught at Howard?

**Robert Madison** [00:37:19] Mm hmm. When I finished... When I finished... When I got my master's degree from Harvard and I went to had a Fulbright in Paris and I came back and I was teaching at Howard University. Okay. So, and I taught at Howard from '52 to '54, and I decided that... And what really made me decide to practice was this. This is fruitless to sit up here and give these young people education in architecture, and when they graduate there's no place for them to go. Somebody's got to do something about that. Okay. It's me. So I quit my professor teaching at Howard. I said everybody thought I was nuts, said I was out of your cotton-pickin' mind. You can starve to death out there. I said, Well, I know where the bottom is, but here I know what the top is. I would be the dean one day, but I have no idea how many people I can impact, what I can do. I was there. I knew the bottom out there. I knew the top here. So I came out. I started practicing. So the point is, we started with me and one of my students came up to Cleveland to work with me. And my wife did a few things and my brother did a few things. And then one thing led to another thing, led to another thing. I guess the most important thing was that we were designated as architects for the A.M.E. Church. We belong to the A.M.E. Church, and which means in that area, time an A.M.E. Church is going to build a building, whether it's in Little Rock, Arkansas, or Texas or wherever, we were the architect. That's how we got going. That's how we got going. Then we began to hire people who came along and we said, look, if anybody is going to prove that democracy works, it's got to be us. So we begin to hire people who want to work for us. And a lot of them were immigrants. We had a fellow from Yugoslavia, from Russia, from India, etc. So, and then... So that became... We really became known as an international group of people because I had people here from from Ghana, from Nigeria, over the course of time, not all at one time. Russia, from Bulgaria. Some of the guys I couldn't even speak language with but I had an interpreter who knew Yugoslav and could speak it. Had fun, we had a lot of fun. But then, when Nixon was president, we came to realize that the work we were doing which [was] mostly housing was drying up. He said no more housing. So we had to do somebody something. At the same time, the African countries were becoming free, you know, liberated, in the '60s. And we got a call from the State Department to submit our credentials to design the American Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, which we won the contract and we built the embassy in Dakar. And in so doing, we were also invited to come to to Nigeria, to Botswana. And that's where why said, well, we are international now. And the point is that among African American firms in the world, we were about the leading one, if that's important, because they weren't that many. And the point is that we then became, we got involved with Jamaica and the Caribbean because they were Africans who had a need. We had the skill and we were trying to put them together. The problem, though, is that wherein we had come, we always came that close. For example, Nigeria was going to move their headquarters from Lagos to another town. I don't remember the name right now. We were going to design the whole town. I said, Boy, you couldn't ask for any more as an architect. Design a whole town? Great! And we laid out plans, we got things... But then, you know, we had to sign a contract. Well, they didn't quite understand the language. Now, these... This is the natives, now, running the place. And we finally got through a whole array of data about, you know, we do have to be paid. We're not... This is not gratis. And just before we were getting ready to ink the contract, there's a coup d'etat. [laughs] So start over again. Well, we did about three times, and we went to Botswana. We went through South Africa. And I was very excited about... Well, when I did the embassy in Dakar, it was really a remarkable experience because here I am, a Black man, coming back to Africa to design a project from where my ancestors had left in boats. It was sort of poetic, something about that.

**Gregory James** [00:42:18] That would be.

**Robert Madison** [00:42:19] Yeah. And we did it. So. So the point is, that's how we began to become and consider ourselves international, from the point of view of our work and from the point of view of our employees. We had quite a quite a group of people here.

**Gregory James** [00:42:36] That's a big thing about the [inaudible]. This is something I've found interesting. In the description that we found about the jail, number two, Justice Center, it said that it was built by a firm opened in 1954 by an African American, Harvard-trained architect, Robert Madison. What do you think of this label? Is it necessary? Will it ever be dropped?

**Robert Madison** [00:42:57] Which label?

**Gregory James** [00:42:58] The one that it says, the jail, Justice Center, that has that it was built by an African American, Harvard-trained architect. Does that... And when... Does... Do you like that, or is it... Does it have to say because it's built by a Black man, it has to say it's a Harvard-trained, or do you think anything about that? Or it's just... Do you like the title?

**Robert Madison** [00:43:21] I never saw that, number one.

**Gregory James** [00:43:23] You never?

**Robert Madison** [00:43:23] No. But, you know, it's this sort of thing. First of all, you have to realize that if you ask how many African American architects are there in Cleveland?

**Gregory James** [00:43:34] Yes.

**Robert Madison** [00:43:36] By anybody out there on the street, there are not many who would even tell you, passing by this door. To be... To give you an example of what is really for me was [has be]come almost the epitome of ridiculousness. I was over at Cleveland State University talking to one of the Black professors over there about being an architect. And we chatted and we chatted, and he said, well, Mr. Madison, have you built any buildings around Cleveland. I said, Yeah. Well, which one? I said, The one you're in. That was... That got a picture out there. Let me see, it's right here.

**Gregory James** [00:44:13] That would be... [laughs]

**Robert Madison** [00:44:16] Yeah. This one right here. It's right down the street there. Cleveland State University.

**Gregory James** [00:44:22] Yeah, I know where it's at.

**Robert Madison** [00:44:22] The point is this. Here's an African American talking about being Black and [going on and on]. And I said, Well, look, if you're really serious about this you ought to know something about what's going on. Here you could spent three years in this building... There's a plaque on the wall. It says architect Madison, Madison, you didn't even know it. So the answer to you question about that, it doesn't bother me from the point of view, as it's time and people, and even then they don't connect it up. First of all, there were a few people who realize what an architect does, and they don't they don't understand what all this means. And so, what's an architect? So the nomenclature there doesn't bother me.

**Gregory James** [00:45:13] Okay.

**Robert Madison** [00:45:14] But it happens, though, at this stage in time... But that picture and all things like that, I go out someplace, Oh, Mr. Madison, you're the architect. Thank you. Because a lot of people have seen the publicity about me in the newspapers, and they say, Oh, yeah, Mr. Madison is the architect. And I go lots of places now. And so that's good. So it doesn't bother me if that, if some young Black kid says, yeah, he's a Black architect from Harvard. Doesn't bother me.

**Gregory James** [00:45:48] Okay.

**Robert Madison** [00:45:49] My... I would like for people to say Robert P. Madison, Architect, but there's got to be a connection, you see? And they're not people, many people, who have any image of what an architect is. So that really Robert P. Madison th architect does not mean a lot to a lot of people, unless you've read about me or know about me and say, oh, yeah, he's an architect. There are people who do that now.

**Gregory James** [00:46:14] Okay. I see exactly... I see the... Okay. I believe we're correct in this. It says your firm trained 190 African American architects and spawned five Black firms. How proud of this are you?

**Robert Madison** [00:46:26] Very proud.

**Gregory James** [00:46:27] That would be... Is it one of the things that you think, because you talked about how, and the reason I think back we said in the interview a little bit earlier was when you were that, when you were the professor, you said at Howard that you had to open the door and to actually see that you opened a door and let this go away. Okay, that makes you... Okay.

**Robert Madison** [00:46:44] But I guess, I guess when you think about life, and I was thinking about it, I'm getting my, well, some people say close to retirement. I'm never gonna retire. Just going to quit. [laughs] But when you ask me, I can say, Oh yeah, I've left that building, that's a stadium, and that's that building and that building and all these buildings. That's true. They'll be there. But when I see a young man out here who's now an architect designed that building, that really that really gets to me because the buildings will be there. But the people who come along that I've trained can carry on not only a mission, but the image of really making a difference in life. And for me, that's what people should do. We should share. And I have so many... I know so many people who are so selfish. They wouldn't dare try to share information with anybody else. And as far as I'm concerned, Take it all.

**Gregory James** [00:47:57] That's right.

**Robert Madison** [00:47:58] Take it all. What good to me?

**Gregory James** [00:48:02] Now, we've got a lot of bunch of history there. We want to ask you some very basic questions here about just a couple sentences here. You can get right to because I know we've been on for a while, some things I'm curious in knowing, what is your favorite building in the world? If you have one.

**Robert Madison** [00:48:21] You mean that I designed or somebody else designed?

**Gregory James** [00:48:24] Just your favorite building, period, in the world? If you had to... I know that's kind of hard off the top...

**Robert Madison** [00:48:31] No, it isn't hard. Mm-mm. I think the building that I think is just absolutely majestic is the Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C. Have you ever seen that building?

**Gregory James** [00:48:51] Never.

**Robert Madison** [00:48:51] You ought to see that building. It was done by Eero Saarinen. And it's really great, and I'll tell you a definition that I had. I was asked some time ago by a prospective client, and we were being interviewed, and Mr. Madison, what makes a great building? And after a good deal of thinking, and mind you, this is after I had traveled through Greece and seen the Greek Islands and the Acropolis and all that, and I came back so absolutely beyond myself, and I said, Even in ruins it's majestic. So my answer to her was a great building is one that will make a great ruin.

**Gregory James** [00:49:40] That's very interesting. After seeing that, you know, I've never been over there. See, that's one of my dream days to travel...

**Robert Madison** [00:49:45] If you go... If you go to Rome, for example...

**Gregory James** [00:49:47] To see that?

**Robert Madison** [00:49:48] In Rome, there's a Roman Forum. All you see now are these columns that stick up. I don't have a picture down here. But for me, I can see the patterns that were there laid out and, boy, what magnificence it was! Even today, it's magnificent in terms of its layout, its formal involvement in light and space. So Dulles International Airport for me, you have to see that because they are these great big columns that come like that and the roof goes like this, and it's concrete and everything is in glass. And when that becomes a room, [laughs] you see these three things like this, it'll be great.

**Gregory James** [00:50:40] That would be... Okay, now I have two more questions I definitely want to ask you here, then we will conclude this interview. This one first is a two-part question. What are your three favorite buildings in Cleveland? And with that being said, I guess you could say I have three more, what are your three favorite buildings in Cleveland, and what is your favorite one you've worked on? Favorite building you've worked on. It's kind of a two-part question here before we get to the very last one. If you don't have two, maybe you have one? But definitely I want to know the one that you... The most famous one in Cleveland that you feel that you've worked on, the biggest progression you've had for this city.

**Robert Madison** [00:51:26] You know, for me, thinking about a great building involves a number of things, not just how it looks...

**Gregory James** [00:51:44] Yes, yes, yes.

**Robert Madison** [00:51:46] But what is the meaning of it and its era, etc., and I think that for me, the Cleveland Museum of Art has a majesty about it. And you look across that lagoon and see it standing there. It really is majestic. And so that... And this goes back into antiquity. And this is when architects built buildings at the inspiration of their clients who knew what they wanted and were able to provide for that which they could do. The Cleveland Museum of Art is just majestic. I think that the Cleveland Public Library main branch downtown here is a magnificent structure. But you see, what I'm describing are buildings built in a certain era in which it took four years to build it, not like we do now, and it took three years to design it. And we look at every detail is drawn, every... We don't do that sort of thing anymore because everything is so much a rush we've got... And unfortunately, much of the architecture being produced today is built for and built in obsolescence. And I found this out when I was coming out in Harvard, that they were building buildings to tear down in twenty years because it would be much more economical to tear it down. That's... And I found that to be just totally incomprehensible. There are some other buildings around. I think that the Euclid Epworth Church is a great building. That's what we call the Holy Oil Can up on the campus here, as you go out toward University Circle. And then if you look at the the Jewish Temple, which is on 105th Street with that dome on it and go inside there, it is magnificent. Now, you know, what I'm really describing are buildings built in an era when architects were truly respected and were considered the persons who gave form to our community. We don't have any more form givers now because the society doesn't want it. They're not willing to pay for it. Quick and easy. Stuff like that. Another group of buildings, which I think were just absolutely majestic, were the Cedar Estates over here. Public housing.

**Gregory James** [00:54:37] Okay, I'm not...

**Robert Madison** [00:54:41] Over here on Cedar Avenue, 30th Street down. Built in 1931. Just great. They had balconies, they had front porches, back porches. Not like the public housing today where you just do the front and the back. This was really thinking about architecture, and I'm sure I could go on for others. I think you asked me about the buildings I like of my own?

**Gregory James** [00:55:10] Yes.

**Robert Madison** [00:55:10] In Cleveland area? Well, I think that the one that is... There are a number, but I think that the Cleveland State University Science and Research building...

**Gregory James** [00:55:20] It's beautiful.

**Robert Madison** [00:55:21] But it takes on a personality for that campus which was not there before. Ours was the first building on the campus that respected Euclid Avenue so that it's... You have to see it because it's a transition from a Science, one building, to the Main Classroom building, and you walk through that walkway there and look out on Euclid Avenue with all the landscaping there. It's something. That building is one of mine that I think makes a statement and contributes towards the built environment.

**Gregory James** [00:55:58] Okay.

**Robert Madison** [00:56:00] We did some buildings out at Tri-C East, we did the Waterfront Lines, which I think have a kind of a quality to them that's important. Now, we worked on these others, but they were not my original design. I mean, the stadium...

**Gregory James** [00:56:19] Just to be part of working on that stadium, that was...

**Robert Madison** [00:56:20] Oh, yeah, no, we were the architects of record in that our drawings... We had to stamp the drawings and produce all the working documents. But there were a number of other people involved in it, as was the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, as was the Science Center. But those, and that over there is the Waterfront Line. So, I guess, you know, to be very candid with you, I'm a happy man.

**Gregory James** [00:56:51] That's awesome.

**Robert Madison** [00:56:53] You know, I could never have dreamed, back in 1954, I'd be sitting up here talking to you guys about something like that. People like me weren't supposed to do things like that back in those days. And to be able to have set my portfolio, fifty years, it is, boy, you can't ask for much more. I'm not rich.

**Gregory James** [00:57:16] Yes. I'm not, I'm comfortable, but I'm not rich. I don't want to be rich, but I'm still here. You know? What else is there? I play a little golf. I did until I broke, till I hurt my knee. But to have meaningful work and to have structures that are mine—other people use them, you know, I just let them use them, they're mine—and to have a group of persons who worked here and are now carrying on a tradition, I am comfortable with what I've done in life.

**Gregory James** [00:57:57] That's a perfect way to end. I mean, just to say, my last little note is to be 83, and myself feel very honored that I'm sitting here right now. I mean, you enriched me historically on a lot of things, and I just want to say thank you by the end, if you're still open. Thank you for that opportunity.

**Robert Madison** [00:58:15] My pleasure. My pleasure. My pleasure.

**Gregory James** [00:58:20] Thank you so much for that. That was... Woo, that's some information...

**Robert Madison** [00:58:23] It's a lot.

**Gregory James** [00:58:23] I'm going to take, and I'm definitely going to, oh, man, that's...

**Robert Madison** [00:58:29] Whatever. Whatever.

**Gregory James** [00:58:30] I mean, you just remind me so much of my grandpa, just how much the same way. It's just, I guess a lot of the African American struggles of that time. I mean, yourself being from the Cleveland area traveling over and my grandfather, being from Mississippi, coming up to Cleveland, coming for a better opportunity and seeing that, you know, because like I said, I'm new to the area and I just don't get a chance to go out and interview many people like that, you know, and it's just that your same story up here up North is the same story that so many people in southern Ohio...

**Robert Madison** [00:59:04] No question.

**Gregory James** [00:59:05] It's like that doesn't change.

**Robert Madison** [00:59:08] It's a battle. It's a battle. But when you look back at the results, you know, as I said before, I'm not rich. And I guess if I had not been Black, I might have been able to design the Terminal Tower. But in spite of all that...

**Gregory James** [00:59:26] You were given what you got and you took the best of that opportunity.

**Robert Madison** [00:59:29] It's the hand I was dealt. By George, I'm gonna play it! [laughs]

**Gregory James** [00:59:31] Yeah. If you had any buildings taken down?

**Robert Madison** [00:59:38] Well, it's a good question.

**Gregory James** [00:59:40] Because when we were talking to Nina... Good question. She was talking about that student center at Cleveland State. They were talking about taking that down, and she said that was an international...

**Robert Madison** [00:59:50] Don Hisaka. I know Don, yeah. It's just funny. In 1957, I got my first really big commission. It was a medical center by a group of Black doctors, for 139th and Kinsman. And I went to that and I laid it out and I designed it, on 139th and Kinsman, and the Chamber of Commerce came through and gave it all kinds of design. It won every award in Cleveland. Desirable. This was my first building, you know, it's great. Ten years ago, I got a call from the Mt. Pleasant Now neighborhood. They were going to put up a family service center. And it was the site was where I did my first building. So they went to the city and said they're gonna tear it down. Okay. So they tore it down, but I built a building in place of it, right over... and that's just sort of a first. So that was kind of nice. Okay.

**Gregory James** [01:00:56] Thank you so [much]. [recording ends]