

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable Mike J. Horsey (D)

190th District

Philadelphia County

1995-2004

INTERVIEWED CONDUCTED BY: Heidi Mays, House Archivist
November 23rd, 2004

Transcript By: Gino Pasi

Heidi C. Mays (HM): Good morning. I am here with Representative Mike Horsey. Representative Horsey has represented the 190th District of Philadelphia County for the past 10 years. Good morning, Representative.

The Honorable Mike J. Horsey (MJH): Good morning madam, how are you?

HM: I am well, thank you. How are you?

MJH: I am doing fine.

HM: Great. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself; and, how did your childhood upbringing prepare you for service in the House of Representatives?

MJH: Well, at a very young age, I was very sick. I was the youngest of about five children and I am the only one in my family that went to college. And I was really nurtured by all my brothers and my one sister. As a small child, for example – my brother was a little older than me, probably by about 10 or 15 years – took me to the Girard College to participate in the Girard College March around the College. At that time, it was in the [19]60s and I was just a little boy and everybody in the city gathered at that particular point. I didn't understand the significance, but I got an opportunity to meet Cecil B. Moore¹. And, Martin Luther King [Jr.] also participated in that March around the College. And I didn't understand the significance of those people, but over

¹ Influential Philadelphia lawyer and civil rights activist –served as Philadelphia NAACP President 1963 to 1967.

the years I got to establish a relationship with Cecil B. Moore, who was the primary Civil Rights leader of the City of Philadelphia – or one of the primary – and when I had the opportunity, for example, to do public service, that was the first step that helped me realize my desire to be an elected official. And it's really amazing how life can be very tricky, because when I opened my first district office, it was directly across the street from where Cecil [B.] Moore had been. And I didn't realize that. One of the first pieces of legislation I introduced had to do with Girard College and I didn't realize that; that was all Freudian in the back of my mind. So, my early childhood, my early raising, did definitely have an impact on me and my desire to be an elected official. Cecil B. Moore changed Girard College. He's in Black history books, and he went on to serve on the Philadelphia City Council.

HM: What role has your faith played in your outlook regarding policies, decisions, and votes?

MJH: Well, that's an interesting question, in that about, I guess, six years ago I went to Washington [DC] to the Center for Policy Alternatives. And what they encouraged people to do – their whole focus – was value based politics. And, as a result of that training, I realized that a multitude of votes and political stances I was taking were based on the values I had received as a youth growing up. I came from a rigid family. My father was a construction worker for 40 years, a laborer, so the work ethic was there. My mother was a domestic for a while and worked as a hospital domestic – very hardworking people – and they encouraged me to be hard working, also. And they were devout in

their faith and their beliefs. And, a lot of that, I think, is responsible for many of the stances I take on a multitude of issues, a multitude of issues. I am not the liberal politician that you would anticipate that 99 percent of my colleagues are. I'm not that liberal person; I'm a moderate, and some would even refer to me as a conservative.

HM: Could you describe your education and career before coming to the House?

MJH: Well, you know I, as a result of being the only one in my family to have a college education, my family stood over me and encouraged me and worked with me when I was a child, getting my homework done after school. I never went out during the week – very rigid upbringing – and education was a primary focus, if not for my brothers and sisters, but for me, because they were determined that someone in our house, our family, was going to go to college. And being the youngest one, I happened to be that one. So, they sort-of stayed on me. I went ahead and got a degree from Cheyney University and Philadelphia Community College. [I] did a little bit of study; got a Certificate from Harvard, got a Certificate from Penn State; got a Certificate from the University of Pennsylvania. So, I've been a "professional student;" my wife constantly refers to me as a "professional student." But, it's also that there are so many things wrong with the world and so many things that are unanswered, and I think I relied for a period of time in my life, trying to look for those answers in books; but they're not all in books. And it took me until I got to this age to realize that a lot of those answers are not in books. But, it didn't stop me from seeking the answers in education in books. I'm a graduate of Cheyney University, which happens to be the oldest Black college in America. Many

folks don't realize that. It was started by Quakers for Afro-Americans back in the 1830s. I take special pride in being a "Cheyneyite," my wife is also a "Cheyneyite."

HM: Your degree that you earned was in education, correct?

MJH: Yes, secondary education. I did a small bit; I did some teaching in the Philadelphia public school system, off and on for about 10 years. I left education and went to the [Philadelphia] Parking Authority as a manager for about six years, and then I bounced into the Pennsylvania State House [of Representatives].

HM: You had shifted, as you said, you had several degrees. You had shifted from education to criminal justice and the law. You had, I think, a Certificate as a paralegal?

MJH: Yes, and I also have two years of Law School. I think the search for answers was in education, per se, which directed me to read the books. And then the focus in law was a result of having seen, and been a part of, the Civil Rights Movement and seeing people who were hosed with hoses and had themselves bit by dogs. The question for me became, "How could this happen in a just society?" and that sort-of directed me to the technicalities and litigiousness of law – looking in that way. I actually participated in a few demonstrations myself. [I] take special pride in that.

HM: What made you decide to run for the House the first time?

MJH: Well, it had nothing to do with me running; it had to do more of me doing public service and thinking that I could do a greater good as an elected official to people than just as “John Q. Public.” It’s curious, because I had never met the gentleman who used to have the seat; he’s now a Senator². We bumped into each other in the State Department when we were both filing petitions for the same seat. Not being encouraged by anyone, I was filing for the seat and he was filing for the seat at the same time. I often tell that story, because I think there’s a desire to do for your people and the State House, or the immediacy of the State House was there, and so I decided to file for that particular seat.

HM: Do you enjoy campaigning?

MJH: I enjoy campaigning. I enjoy being in front of people. I am people friendly. I enjoy shaking hands and smiling for people (*laugh*). I have a difficult time remembering people’s names, but I enjoy asking people their names, asking them where they live, trying to connect with them. I enjoy many of those things.

HM: You still live in the same neighborhood in which you grew up?

MJH: Yes.

HM: How has this area changed over time?

² Vincent Hughes; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1987-1994; State Senator, 1994-present.

MJH: Well, in the last 10 years – and this is a terrible thing to say, but I need to say it – in the last 10 years it has changed radically. We had high-rise projects that have been imploded and taken down and ground level houses that have been built. We’ve got youth clinics in the neighborhood that service poor single mothers. We’ve got a multitude of things going on; a couple of senior citizens’ facilities, a couple of schools that have been done from the ground up, and many of that. Most of those projects have taken place in the last 10 to 15 years with certain people in public office.

HM: Could you describe the 190th District?

MJH: Very, very, very, extremely poor – poor working-class people. Very poor and with working class people. People who go to work; blue-collar people; people who go to work day to day and try to make it.

HM: Do you feel that you represented them well?

MJH: Oh, I think I have. I think I have represented them very well. Having been raised in the neighborhood, having been educated in the neighborhood, and never leaving the neighborhood allowed me to – what I gained, because of education, be able to give back to people. I often take great credit for a brand-new clinic built from the ground up in a neighborhood that had the highest infant mortality rate in America. And we had a brand new clinic, which was private dollars invested, built from the ground up, to service that

end of the community that addresses that particular problem. And I take special pride in that particular project. That's only one; there are a multitude of others.

HM: Could you describe your experience of your first Swearing-In Ceremony? How did you feel?

MJH: My first Swearing-In – I don't think it made an impact on me until a year later. I will never forget the oration that was provided by H. Bill DeWeese [H. William; State Representative, Fayette, Greene and Washington Counties, 1976-present; Speaker, 1993-1995]. I mean, it made an impression. His presentation was excellent and I was encouraged by that presentation to try to hone my skills and be as articulate a speaker as he continues to be. That, by the way, was – the time that I was Sworn-In – was the time where the Democrats had won the State House by one vote and that one Democrat switched to Republican which threw the balance of power into the hands of the Republicans, and they've never looked back. They're up by about 17 votes; then, it was only one vote when I came in. Actually, I've never been in the State Legislature when the Republicans didn't control the entire process. I imagine it must be nice to have that controlled by the Democrats, but I've never been able to have that experience.

HM: At the time did you realize what was going on?

MJH: Yes, because I was educated. I, you know, I had read a great deal. Right before I took office I read a half a dozen books. Again, I take special pride in having read, for

example, the *Federalist Papers*³ 11 times from cover to cover (*laugh*). Some people would tell me, “Hey, Mike Horsey, get a life,” but, I take special pride in having done that. There are many people who don’t even know what the *Federalist Papers* were, but they sort of describe how the U.S. Government does function and why it functions certain ways. So, I had read a great deal before I came into the State House, so I understood the significance of the switch over from Democrat to Republican and I understand what its long-range impact would be.

HM: Of what prime sponsored legislation or achievement are you most proud of?

MJH: Probably a piece that was never even introduced but, that was in Committee that was never introduced – and that’s because of my childhood – it was a bill to restructure the Philadelphia Board of City Trusts [HB 2077, 1997-1998]. That I’m extremely happy was not introduced in the past because, inevitably, the powers to be in the City of Philadelphia knew that there was something that needed to be done and they did it within the confines of the city boundaries. We have more Afro-Americans on the Board of City Trusts now than we’ve ever had ever; and it wasn’t necessary for the Legislature to tell the city to do that – sort-of like that. I don’t think that we need to write as many laws as we need to do; sometimes you can do it through resolutions; sometimes you can do it through threat, and that will make people sort-of take an eye and look at some things and say, “Hey, we got to change this.” You know, resolutions and existing bills can make people do the right thing. I have faith in people doing the right thing.

³ Series of 85 articles written arguing for ratification of the US Constitution, written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay.

HM: What were some of the hardest issues or the most difficult moments that you encountered?

MJH: The most difficult moments was – I came up here with three agenda items: education, crime, and how I could build my district. And I was able to fulfill all three of those while I was in for the short while. The most difficult thing was education, because education had been steadfast and had been done a particular way for years, and we were going into a “brave new world,” and some of the legislation that we were, as legislators, introducing, we were sort-of trying to fix something without really knowing whether we had the right solutions. And all the Education legislation, I think the Emergency School Act, the Charter School Act, and you know, a multitude of others – even School District takeover was necessary for the legislature to stir the pot up and get some people off their rear ends to get some things done positively for children and education in the City of Philadelphia and across the State. And I think, not knowing where we were going is what made me nervous – the most nervous. I simply knew we had to go somewhere. And it turned out for the best because test scores are up.

HM: Could you comment on your relationship to Leadership?

MJH: Well, coming from a rigid family background and really, probably, being a moderate/conservative, you know, my relationship with the present Leadership hasn't been what it should be; but that's not unusual, in that I don't think my particular Party is going in the right direction. And I think the present Leadership reflects the national Party

as well as the local Party in Philadelphia. I just don't think – I think they're just a little too liberal. So, that as a moderate and a conservative, some of the things that we've voted on and some of the things we've done have really driven me up a wall. I don't think we took stands on many things and issues where we didn't have to and we took the incorrect stand. So, while you want to have a relationship with the present Leadership, it's the public policy that gets in the way of that closeness and that need to be close to this Leadership. I'm coming off the [John F.] Kerry/ [George H.W.] Bush [2004] election and the Al Gore election of [President George H.W.] Bush [2000], and it's obvious to me that the Party has to do a reexamination of itself – from the local level in Philadelphia to the State level in Harrisburg here, to the Federal level in Washington [DC]. But, I think my particular Party, which is the Democrats, needs to do a reexamination of themselves.

HM: Would you consider anyone to be a mentor to you or is there anyone you would consider to be a positive role model?

MJH: The person, elected official, that's been the greatest role model for me, was Congressman Bill Gray.⁴ I admire the man. I admire the man. He'd been a Congressman for a number of years, was in Congressional Leadership, was a Pastor of a Baptist Church, was an excellent role model, and took charge of the United Negro College Fund to close his career. But as a role model, [a] very good man. And before him, Cecil B. Moore, a man who had a wide range – had his imperfections, but also had his perfections. He was the best. His range was just so wide, sometimes you didn't want

⁴ William Herbert Gray, III; U.S. Representative, Philadelphia County, 1979-1991.

to be around him and other times he was just huge, huge – huge in his thinking, huge in his conduct. So, Cecil B. Moore and Bill Gray, primarily.

HM: How has the House changed, if at all, since you first took office?

MJH: Well again, I've never been in office when the Republicans, when the Republicans were not in control. I think, kicking and screaming, that the Democrats are inching toward the middle in terms of public policy positions, without even realizing they're moving more toward the center. And that's a good thing. They're just not moving fast enough – evidenced by this last election between [John F.] Kerry and [President George H.W.] Bush. But they've changed; their public policy positions have changed on some issues.

HM: Has technology helped you at all in your job?

MJH: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. When I first came into office there were few cell phones out there, but not like they're out there now. And that allows us to communicate with our constituents, and keep closer to our families, and I think that the cell phone is a big thing that needs to be mentioned here; its presence – now – it's arrived; the cell phone.

HM: How did 9/11 [2001] affect you personally, and also, how did the House respond?

MJH: 9/11 [2001] was a devastating experience for me, devastating, because with the thousands of people that were killed in that explosion – of terrorist running planes into high rises, indiscriminately killing people. I, in fact, lost a kid, Kenneth Caldwell, who I considered almost like a son, and I've have never gotten over that. I have never gotten over that. Kenneth was on the 102nd floor [of one of the World Trade Center buildings]. The last time his mother talked to him was when he made a phone call to her. I went to elementary school with his mother; you know, my wife went to high school with her. She had a boy and my son [Michael Horsey, Jr.] was born a couple months after her son was born. My son went to New York; he went to New York. My son came back home after Law School, and he didn't come back after 9/11 [2001]. And it made a lasting impression on me. He was a Godchild, so it made a lasting impression on me. I'm still bitter about it, and still very much hurt by that entire experience – indiscriminant killing of civilians – it's terrible, terrible. And if you wanted to be someone who sets public policy – and if you wanted to be close to a group of people on that issue and empathize and sympathize with them – I think after 9/11 [2001], any empathy or sympathy for those issues went right out the window for me.

HM: Can you talk about your role as an African-American in the House?

MJH: Well, I think I've tried to make an impression as an Afro-American on the House. I've tried to be articulate; I've tried to be learned and educated and I've tried to let folks know that all of us—many of us are liberal, but not all of us. There are a few moderate/conservative Afro-Americans out of the Afro-American community. You

know, the key significance between this liberal/conservative thing is that – it's close to Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* [1915], in that you can get to where you need to be and the road you choose is not always the incorrect road. You can't define it as the wrong road; it's just the road that you think will get you where you need to be. And I have a friend, Miss Carole Campbell, who always tells me it doesn't matter what road you take, or what transportation process you get there, as long as we arrive at the same time. You can take the bus; I can take the plane, as long as we get to that destination, that's the important thing.

HM: What role does the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus play in setting policy?

MJH: They try to be influential collectively. I think they are as effective as they can be. Again, I'd like to move them away from a few issues, [but] I haven't had a chance to. I'd like to sit down and have a formal discussion and debate with them on the gun issue for example. And they are good advocates; they collectively advocate for the Afro-American community. They do [an] effective job.

HM: Can you describe your relationship with the media?

MJH: In one word; edgy, and I won't go any further with that. I've never established a relationship with the media and that's a weakness on my part. And that's always because I assume certain things about the media; that if you're doing good deeds that the media will automatically notice, and that's absolutely untrue. If you're doing good things for

people and you're doing them for the right reasons and that someone would notice, and the media, they're busy doing what they need to do, in terms of trying to look at other folks so they may not get around to you. It's an area where I neglected, and I can say I honestly neglected because I was always too preoccupied with serving people and doing that part of being a legislator, doing good constituent services, and I never developed a real media connection. And that was a weakness as a legislator and as an elected official on my part. Maybe, when I die and come back in a new life I'll have a better relationship with the media.

HM: What would you consider to be your fondest memories of serving in the House?

MJH: My fondest memory – there have been a multitude of good times in the Pennsylvania State House. But, it's not one single experience, but the experience of getting to know “men of honor,” and I consider most of the men in the Pennsylvania State House and the Senate as “men of honor;” men that you can shake their hand and know that they will keep their word and do the right thing and go forward. And you don't have to keep looking behind your back, whether they do what they said [or not]; you don't have to keep questioning it. And the foundation of the American Government is based on it being a system of “men of honor” and it is working; I can honestly say that. It is the experiences of having met “men of honor;” that's the way I like to characterize my experience with the Members of the State House and State Senate.

HM: How would you like to be remembered?

MJH: Oh, that's real simple; as one of those "men of honor." One of those gentlemen you could go to and say, "Mike Horsey, how about this or that?" I give them the response and they can say, "He said it, then obviously this is how he feels about it and you don't have to go back again and ask him again, because he has given us an honest answer." Many people who know me, know that once I give my word I try and keep it. And if I can't keep it I go back to the person and say, "I can't do this or I can't do that," but in 99.99 percent of the time I try to be as the rest of the Members of this House are and Senate, one of the "men of honor." That's important to me. That's important to me. I like to believe that my mother and father raised an honorable person, and there's a duty on me to be honorable.

HM: Do you have any regrets?

MJH: Do I have any regrets? Absolutely not. Absolutely not. Would I do a few things differently? A few. Not many, but a few. But, I have no regrets. I'd do media different; I do try to influence this Caucus and [I'd] work with this Leadership a little differently, but generally speaking, no regrets, no regrets.

HM: Do you mind commenting on the untimely passing of your son [Michael Horsey, Jr.]? Would you like to talk about that?

MJH: Yes. My son was 30. He was an Attorney, had never been ill in his life and Christmas Eve he passed – Christmas Eve of [20]03. And I was involved with the longest Session ever – one of the longest sessions ever in the history of the Pennsylvania Legislature, and we were still in session [on] December 23rd. And my son called me and said, “Dad, I’m sick.” I said, “You probably got the flu. Go to the hospital.” And I understand that he did go to the hospital [and] they did medicate him. When I got home from out of the Legislature – we were in Session – on a Tuesday, I said, “How do you feel?” He said, “Oh, I feel terrible,” but he said that, “The hospital sent me home. I’m going to see how I feel in the morning and then if I don’t feel any better you can take me back.” He called me that next morning. I took him to the hospital; that afternoon he passed. There have been – let me mention something about that. My son, a Republican staffer by the name of Tom McCormick, around the same age as my son, and Kenneth Caldwell, killed in the 9/11 [2001] attack, were three young men and the shame of their death was that they never got an opportunity to fulfill their potential. But, so is life – things occur in life that you can’t always change. But, the shame of their death is their inability to fulfill their potential. And they were three, three very good men of honor.

HM: What does the future hold?

MJH: I don’t know; it depends on what the people decide. I operate and I do whatever the people call for me to do. So, what the future calls for depends on what the people want. If the people want me to be an elected official again, I’ll be an elected official. And I have time, now that I’m about to be unelected real soon, have time to contemplate

and figure out what people want me to do. But, I'm a servant of the people and I like to think that I do whatever their whim is and their desires.

HM: Well, this concludes our interview. Thank you very much Representative Horsey. It's been a pleasure.

MJH: Thank you. Thank you very much for interviewing me.