

Community Archives Center Oral History Project Transcript
Alfonso Brown, Interview date: 11/3/2022

- dindria: Hello, this is dindria barrow from the Community Archive Center, and I am here on November 3rd, 2022 at 10:14 in the Tacoma Main Branch with
- Alfonso: Alfonso Brown.
- dindria: Alfonso, it is so good to have you. Thank you for being here. Um, we are going to begin your oral history interview, so we have some prompts here, and then I have some words that I wanna share [00:00:30] as we go along. Okay. So please feel free to begin.
- Alfonso: So, some of the places, people or things that I call home, that's a tough one because I'm, I'm a transient transplant. Some people call, call it hobo. I'm just kind of a drifter. I, I [00:01:00] moved out to the Pacific Northwest in my teenage years with a relative and kind of went back and forth, never really settled. And so life just has it, it's way of, of bringing you to certain places. They say Tacoma is the City of Destiny. So here I am. [00:01:30] Originally I was, I, I was born down South, but that wasn't a, a, uh, a place that a lot of life was being nourished. And so, I guess you can say I call the Pacific Northwest my home. As far as, uh, places and people specifically, I, I don't, I don't necessarily have any [00:02:00] family. And so a lot of times we're individuals that are associated with, with those places, those locations, logistics. And so, yeah, I guess I'm just kind of, uh, passing through, you know, like, like most people that, that end up in this area.
- dindria: But, um, um, can you tell us about your survival?
- Alfonso: [00:02:30] Well, this is one thing that I've learned about survival is that it's either gonna take violence or patience. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> and I just happen to be good at both. And a lot of times when you use that word violence contextually, people start to think Putin or destruction, [00:03:00] but there can be the same type of passion for life. You could be violently passionate about things. And so that's why I use that term. And, you know, I've been able, I've been able to overcome some things like most people. And, and so I've, I've tried to keep as, as many audio and, and, and, and [00:03:30] manuscripted details of, of just my journey, because I believe at some point I'll be able to share that with others and, and hopefully impart some of the knowledge that I've, I've learned over the years. I am familiar that experience is what separates knowledge from wisdom. And so with just the course that I've been able to, to, to keep with, I've got a few jewels in [00:04:00] my pocket. So let's just put it like that.
- dindria: All right. So I wanna hear about these jewels, um, but we're gonna go to the next prompt and then see if we can get some more of these words out. Who are you and where do you come from?
- Alfonso: Who am I? Let's see. I say I'm just an angel passing through. With good intentions. Now. We all know what the road to hell is paved with mm-hmm. <affirmative>. But who's [00:04:30] to say that our good intentions won't someday be able to manifest themselves in other ways that people can benefit from? And so, uh, where do I come from? Man, that's a great question. Most of the individuals that, that were of some

significance to me in my life have all passed mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So I don't have any family artifacts. I don't have any pictures of [00:05:00] my mom. I don't have any pictures of my grandmother, which both have passed. My grandfather just recently went on, you know, to the, to the next life. And I saw my dad for the first time in about 21 years, earlier this year when I went back for my, my grandfather's procession.

Alfonso: It was, it was right at the tail end of Covid. And so my family was acting really strange. [00:05:30] I didn't really get an opportunity to, to interact with those relatives that I grew up with, because I was sent again out to, to Pacific Northwest at a very young age. So my uncles and aunts, I mean, everybody was just acting kind of weird. And, and, uh, it, it was different. It was really awkward because my memories were of a family that, that [00:06:00] everybody shared what they had with each other and, and, you know, there was that, that affection and that love and just seemed real distant, you know? And so I buried that place. I sure did. I buried that place and decided to take God up on his offer. I believe that whatever we, [00:06:30] we have to leave behind in our pursuit of purpose that God replaces 100 fold. And so that's a story, and I'm sticking to it.

dindria: <laugh>. Right. That makes me think of when we're thinking about family trauma or toxicity that you have to leave behind, it makes me think of pain and suffering. Um, do you have any stories you wanna share about that?

Alfonso: Well, first off, I believe [00:07:00] that there's a difference between pain and suffering. Hmm. Pain is inevitable. Okay. Pain is when your life conditions don't match your model of the world. And so we're all susceptible to that. However, suffering, it's when you feel powerless to change it. And in my opinion, that's optional. And so I've had a lot of both. And one of the things that I know is that knowing who we [00:07:30] are is hard, but when you eliminate who you're not first, then you have a, a better chance of getting to that, that character point to where that you can start to, you can level off that pendulum and things won't, won't be so off balance in your life. And, um, I just made a commitment that moving forward, everything that I do is going to be about [00:08:00] helping people find their freedom. You know, some way of empowering others to discover their potential and individual's power.

Alfonso: And so, what I've, what I've realized is that one of the, uh, hardest things about having hope is watching the people who don't. Mm. So bringing back prompt one and, and prompt two. Yes. As, as, [00:08:30] uh, specifically speaking of the places, people, or things I call home, who I am, where did I come from? I spent quite a bit of time here in Tacoma homeless, and that's really how I got to this particular area. Previous, I was out in the Lakewood area and, and some of the other regions, but life just brought me to Tacoma. And, um, what [00:09:00] I realized is that, you know, it doesn't become real until you've been in a flop house with 56 men squeezed together on cots with everybody snoring at once. And some of those snores so deep, gross and, and unbearable that you think that they're from hell that perhaps maybe these people aren't living anymore. And so your mind almost breaks under those deathlike and intermingling odors. You have thick washed socks with [00:09:30] unwashed, I should say, excuse me, I, which socks was washed, but you have these thick unwashed, excuse

me, socks, just the visual as I'm, as I'm thinking about it, it starts to bring back some real memories, you know, and, and, and, you know, that circulating air of, of, uh, all of those, those different, uh, I don't know what you want to call it, but it was, it was, it was pretty, [00:10:00] yeah. It was, it was pretty rough man. To see people living like that.

Alfonso: And so, uh, when you're amongst people that's armless and legless, and God knows what other circumstances they're having, having these psychosis moments, and, and you really can't do anything, you start to realize how, how serious things have, have gotten for other people. And, [00:10:30] and you also start to wonder, you know, what exactly has happened to you? But fortunately, I was able to overcome a lot of those things. And I don't know, I'm still pretty, I'm still pretty overwhelmed by some of those thoughts. And so one of the reasons I wanted to participate in today's session was in hopes of, uh, you know, just helping people to understand that we all have circumstances and [00:11:00] we all have things in life that we could probably do a little bit better, but it takes a community. I really don't think that we can realize our potential without the help of others. And so, for myself, even though my grandmother's no longer living, she planted a seed early. And so I, uh, I've just continued to fight and, and I've continued to, uh, just move forward in life knowing that [00:11:30] I do have a special, I believe, purpose in this world.

Alfonso: And so, um, you know, even the things that I've, I've not been able to accomplish, or some of the experiences, I want to say I was, it was about seven and a half years I spent homeless, abandoned houses, shelters, did some street sleeping, slept in some garages, you know, places that [00:12:00] aren't necessarily for that. But, you know, I was working at this at, you know, during that time in, in, uh, bettering myself. So I wasn't looking to trade a space for a space. I was looking to build something better. And so that's kind of what kept me going. And, you know, what I realized is that you can't look at it as failure when your story becomes more powerful than if your dream had come true. And so it's been a journey, [00:12:30] but again, I believe that when, uh, we continue to move forward and we continue to extend our grasp and, and, and just better ourselves, that we just kind of strengthen, you know, from an inter, interpersonal perspective. And that's my story again. And that's what I'm gonna stick with.

dindria: <laugh>. Right on. Yeah. So I, I really hear that idea of like failure being something that might just exist inside you, but [00:13:00] once you reach out to other people and find your community, then you have that hope rebuilt again.

Alfonso: Exactly. And, and so again, with some of the experiences that I've had, and now I'm watching others go through that same process mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it's real sad because I did everything that they said that you should do if you want to live the dream, so to speak. And [00:13:30] it didn't work out for me. There's no secret. There are some people that they benefit more from, from resources than others. And so social justice and equity for all, you know, it's popular. It's, it's kind of one of those ad hocs, those filibusters. It's politic-ing in my opinion, but how do you, how do you move from a, a theory into practice mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And [00:14:00] so that's, that is my, uh,

Community Archives Center Oral History Project Transcript
Alfonso Brown, Interview date: 11/3/2022

moving forward. That is, that is where it is that I'm hoping to somehow find myself is helping people make that transition. So...

dindria: Right on. Um, so I understand that the way that you made your transition from survival or suffering and failure is through education.

Alfonso: Yes. It was through education. I, uh, I was sleeping on the street like 10 days before I started [00:14:30] my master's program. That's right. But because I was sleeping in a shelter when I graduated from my undergrad program, and I was sleeping in an abandoned house, when I completed my courses at the technical college, I wasn't intimidated mm-hmm.

dindria: <laugh>, no.

Alfonso: I wasn't intimidated because I had found a way. Yeah. Not once, but [00:15:00] twice. So why couldn't I do it a third time?

dindria: All right.

Alfonso: Yeah. Like I said, you know, we do our best when our destinations are beyond the measurement, when our reach continually exceeds our grasp. And when we do this, the race is never over. The journey has no port, and the venture never ends because we're always on the way. So I've, I've been able to not only survive, [00:15:30] but in my opinion, I've been able to overcome. And I'm hoping down the road I'll be able to help people as they transition from pain and suffering into hope.

dindria: Alright. Yeah. We've got the final prompt. And then, um, anything else that you wanna do as a final statement? What is your past, which we went over a bit, and what are your dreams?

Alfonso: Well, dreams are kind of elementary. I mean, who am I? [00:16:00] Dr. Martin Luther King. I have a dream, you know, and I understand the context, but there's also a reality, all right? And so we live in a different dispensation, different times. Back in the sixties when Martin Luther King marched the streets of Selma, and, you know, he, he, he united with those that were act, [00:16:30] activists in, in hopes of, you know, giving certain communities more voices. We just didn't have some of the things that we have to worry about. You know, he wanted his kids to be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. I want the teachers at the school that my kids go to, to carry weapons just in case there's an active shooter mm-hmm. <affirmative> on the [00:17:00] campus. So you see the difference. Yeah. <laugh> in space,

dindria: It's, it's a completely different world.

Alfonso: It's a completely different world. And so having said that, with all of the violence that has taken place against vulnerable people mm-hmm. <affirmative>, there's a lot of, a lot of individuals that don't have the privilege of having a dream mm-hmm. <affirmative>,

that's the point I'm trying [00:17:30] to make. Yeah. And, and, uh, yeah, they don't have that privilege. The, the, the first, you know, there are a lot of times people are born down in a dead man's town, and, and first kick they take is when they hit the ground, <laugh> Bruce Springsteen. Right. And, and so I I, I know that I realized that, that you got a lot of folks out there that's, they don't have a chance from the beginning. [00:18:00] Hmm. And so, so it's not as much about dreams. No. It's about being, finding the hope. It's, it's, it's about finding the hope and being practical. All right?

Alfonso: Okay. And, and, and for me, being practical is, being is, is dealing with reality. Okay? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so my reality, I'm gonna replace that with dreams, is the [00:18:30] fact that I'm just a couple of months away from obtaining my doctorate degree, all right? I'm the, I'm the new Cornell West, passionate about justice for all people. Somehow, you know, we're, we're gonna be able to fight the powers that are to be, and, and somehow educate people on why [00:19:00] the systems that have been created are insensitive to individual circumstances. And that there's a lot that goes with that. And so you have to, you have to choose your battles, and you have to pick your fights in, in segments. And, and, you know, you, you, you won't be able to save the world overnight, can't boil the ocean in a day. And so I'm just, I'm gonna pick and choose my battles.

Alfonso: So one of the things that I, [00:19:30] to play the, to play the prompt dream about is that this area, Tacoma specifically, will somehow come together and create some interrelated partnerships that can address some of the issues and some of the challenges that it is that I have to experience every day. I tell you something about everything that it is that I've been able to do, to pull myself up by my [00:20:00] bootstraps, to rise from the ashes, it, it landed me right back in the hood. So regardless of what you think, those on the dark stories, you know, have in common for certain demographics, certain underrepresented groups. Only thing a little bit of hope does is put you right back in the struggle. So I, I'm in the hood. I live in the hood, right? So I hear the screams, the yells, the, the, the psychosis, the, the delirium.

Alfonso: [00:20:30] I'm right next to a, a payee office. And so at the first of the month, the line's wrapped around the corner, you have people sleeping in my doorway, everything. I'm not sure when I come out, if my window's going to be busted, and somebody's went through my car console, whatever the case may be. And it's really, really sad. I actually just been able to [00:21:00] see that the blood from a lady that was murdered right under my window has finally dissipated in the sun. It's a, a lady, uh, bless her heart, was, was killed by the guy that worked at the store right on the other side of the wall from my apartment. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And I would see both of these individuals every day. I actually even been, you know, in a couple of situations to where I was in the middle of some of their [00:21:30] disagreements.

Alfonso: And I just don't believe that what happened should have happened. And I, and I believe they're both victims, but as a, uh, doctorate of education, I have to be very careful about what I speak on because especially when it's recorded, it can come back. And so I don't, I don't have all of the facts, and I'm not sure exactly what the city is doing to, um,

ameliorate, I don't think you will ever be able to resolve. But I [00:22:00] do believe that there are certain levels in which we can have a huge impact. And that, that I believe is at the, the desperate and at the chronic stages mm-hmm. <affirmative>, because homelessness is a lot larger than what we can see with the eye. There's still no collective definitions. And I'm doing my research project on an element of homelessness. So I got 200 pages that I'm trying to cut down into about 90. [00:22:30] So I have an overwhelming amount of research on a lot of the, the causes, the pretenses, um, the, uh, underpinnings, uh, for, for example, the, uh, low income housing tax credit, which incentivizes developers to have a, a, a, uh, percentage of their, their properties available for low income. But see, here's, here's the problem.

Alfonso: The public versus [00:23:00] the private sectors are at odds with where these properties should be built. And so what happens is, is that when the suburbs, which their counselors filled with people from the suburbs get these initiatives, or they get these requests, they shoot 'em down. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So you end up building a lot of these properties in low income neighborhoods, [00:23:30] you bring in individuals that still don't have any opportunities to better themselves. And what was at one point, you know, a nice community of town homes is nothing more than the cab. Uh, uh, uh, what do they call it? A Cabrini Green. It becomes a project. Yeah. And so moving forward, I I, I really don't know how this area is going to, to [00:24:00] respond. I was fortunate enough to be at a first annual luncheon up in Seattle with an organization Uplift Northwest. I want to give a shout out to Gina Hall.

Alfonso: She's the only person that has, has given me an opportunity at this particular time. She saw value in my experience and what it was that I was doing, and thought that somehow I could add value to the conversation. And I'm very thankful for that because she's the only person [00:24:30] with everything that I've been able to overcome and everything that I've been able to do that recognizes that and says, Hey, this guy always has a seat at my table. So as I listen to some of the partnerships that they've, they've been able to secure Amazon, Costco, uh, Mariners, Seahawks, they're helping people, first of all get back on their feet. [00:25:00] They're moving them into job training, getting them certified and in positions, not only where they can have employment, but sustain that employment. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, they surround those individuals with the resources that it is, that they need in order to be successful.

Alfonso: Right. So that they can become working partners in the community and not just individuals that are taken from the community. Right. And so I was [00:25:30] very, very fortunate to be a part of that. And so I know it's possible, but we have to start with the root, and that is people's ability to be able to take care of themselves. And that was one of the reasons why I was unable to find any stability for a while. I didn't have any, any co-occurring issues. I wasn't, I wasn't an addict. I wasn't none of those things that people think are the reason for a person becoming homeless. I lost my job. [00:26:00] It was right around that economic downturn. 2008, 2009, I lost my job. I couldn't, I couldn't get hired at McDonald's. Mm. I applied at a funeral home to dig graves, but needed a certificate and didn't have the money to get it.

Alfonso: There were times that all I needed was \$200 a month, but I couldn't get it. And so, you know, when I look at the work that [00:26:30] they're doing, helping people get bank accounts, helping people get IDs, helping people, you know, get the emotional support, I think it's absolutely amazing. And so, having seen that, I know that it's possible. In closing, I've, uh, I've reached out to some of the organizations that I was a part of during my stint with homelessness. And to date, I haven't, haven't gotten any [00:27:00] responses. I've, uh, I've reached out to individuals that are in leadership for the city. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Haven't gotten any responses. And so one of the things that's important about communication is that if we don't share our perspectives, then people are left up to their own devices. And we have to kind of fill in those blanks with what we believe is the reason.

Alfonso: But I can't do that. So, again, like I said, I, I just hope [00:27:30] that there's definitely some, some mitigation here moving forward here in this area, because I'm more than likely going to be working with Seattle as, as probably one of my biggest first movements after I, I graduate in the next couple of months with my doctorate's degree. And so, uh, yeah, I just, I, I wanna leave this for Tacoma and, and, and hopefully someone [00:28:00] down the line, 'cause remember I told you survival, you know, is either sometimes about violence or timing <laugh>. And, and maybe down the road the timing will, will present itself to where, you know, I can be involved. But I've done everything up, up until this point that I could. And, and so I feel comfortable with where I'm headed. And, uh, I just want to thank you again for this opportunity to share.

dindria: Thank you so much, Al. I appreciate your story and [00:28:30] learning from you and hearing from you, and I'm really excited to see what you do with this hope.

Alfonso: All right. Thank you.

dindria: Thank you.