Raymond Eugene Suggs

A Transcription Of An Oral Interview

2105 Robert Drive
Champaign, Illinois
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Interviewed by
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Patrick Tyler

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Introduction

This interview is with Mr. Raymond Eugene Suggs. Mr. Suggs was born here in Champaign in 1928. He attended the elementary, junior high and high schools in Champaign. Mr. Suggs also attended Illinois State University in Bloomington, where he studied social work. In later years, he went into a plastering contracting business by himself and he became a photographer by doing freelance work. In 1960 he then began working as a part-time photographer for the *Courier*. Mr. Suggs is former president of the Champaign County Urban League and is currently the vice president of the Don Moyers Boys Club in Champaign. This interview is being conducted on August 25, 1983, at his home, 2105 Robert Drive, Champaign. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Roundtree: Okay. First of all, Mr. Suggs, could you tell us your birth date and birth place?

Suggs: I was born in Champaign and was born in 1928.

Roundtree: Could you tell us a little bit about your childhood growing up, some of your experiences?

Suggs: Well, I went to Champaign school system and of course to the elementary school, the junior high schools and the high school, and played football and basketball during my early days and I went over to Illinois State University in Normal.

Roundtree: What did you study there?

Suggs: Social work and at that particular time I wanted to be a coach, but that didn't work out so I went into business for myself, into the plastering contracting business. And I also became a photographer through primary through my own studies and through my own working at it. Finally Bob Sink asked me to come over to the *Courier* and to take as a summer replacement for one of the other photographers that was graduating from college and that was going to be for a two- or three-week period but it ended up for about 18 years with the *Courier*.

Roundtree: What year was this?

Suggs: In 1960 when I first started at the *Courier*.

Roundtree: Okay. What year did you graduate from Normal?

Suggs: I didn't graduate. I quit school to go in business for myself.

Tyler: Having with you, having been here, having been born here and went through the Champaign School District, what things did you encounter, you know, being black?

Suggs: What things did I encounter from being black? Do you mean as far as race relations or? Well, of course in those particular times, there was a situation of segregation but I don't think that I had any particular more problems than anyone else. Those were the signs of the times that there were certain things that you couldn't do, certain things, places that you couldn't go, but other than that, I didn't have any particular outstanding difficulties. As far as the restaurants at that particular time, you couldn't eat in restaurants, but of course that was the same all over the United States. It wasn't any different here in Champaign-Urbana than it was any place else. Of course eventually that changed in the early ‘50s, middle ‘50s or so. I was elected captain of the high school football team, which was, at that particular time was an unusual thing, because it was,

there'd never been a black captain on the local football teams before, but at Champaign we had a kind of an unusual situation, because I was elected captain of the football team, the most valuable player on the team was a black player and then on the basketball team, was a black captain. So that was kind of an unusual year for teams.

Roundtree: What year did you graduate from high school?

Suggs: 1948. I'm sorry, 1946.

Roundtree: Okay. You were born here in 1928, right?

Suggs: Yes

Roundtree: Do you remember what year your parents came to Champaign-Urbana?

Suggs: No, I don't. They had been here for many, many years.

Tyler: Did they ever state why they came to this area?

Suggs: Well, my grandfather came to Champaign-Urbana, primary to work on the railroads, which at that time, many blacks came from the South. My

grandparents came from Georgia, in fact, Monticello, Georgia, to work on the railroad.

Roundtree: Okay. When you joined the *Courier*, did you have to have any kind of special training in photography or did you have any?

Suggs: Yes, I had already had actually been freelancing some for the *Courier*, so it wasn't like I just dropped out of the sky and said, 'I want to be a photographer.' Bob Sink had given me some freelance assignments prior to that. Excuse me. [Tape recorder is shut off and turned back on.]

Roundtree: Mother and father.

Suggs: My father's name was Roy and my mother's name was Claudia. My father passed away when I was about 5 and of course, my mother is still living.

Tyler: Do your mother still live on White Street?

Suggs: Right. Have you been by there?

Tyler: No. I was thinking about calling her.

Suggs: Oh.

Roundtree: Okay. Could you tell us a little bit about your work at the *Courier*, your photography work, what kind of pictures you took and the different people that you came in contact with?

Suggs: Well, I was a general, see, I actually worked part time, I didn't work full time at the *Courier*, but part time. I was primary the Sunday or weekend photographer, but and also, the summer replacement. I worked every day during the summer usually at night. But the assignments were general assignments, whatever the assignments came up then that's what I was assigned to shoot. It could be anything from the girl in a wedding dress or it could be church affairs at that particular time, we did a lot of church assignments or it could be officers of newly elected officers of some club or organization or it could be sporting events, Illini football, basketball in particular. Or it could also be high school affairs, sporting events, a lot of high school football and basketball games. Just general, whatever the assignments were. I had no particular, I was not assigned to just shoot black assignments. That was an understanding that was made by the editor to people who called up that blacks were not to call just particularly for me to come shoot their organizations and vice versa. Whites at the time could not call and say, 'Well, we don't want him to come because he's a black guy.' That didn't go with it. I had an excellent working relationship, though, with the fellow photographers. We got along famously well. We're still good friends today with all of them when I see them.

Roundtree: Do you have any sisters and brothers here in Champaign?

Suggs: No, I don't, don't have any brothers or sisters. I'm an only child.

Roundtree: Where did you live? The first place you lived when you were first, house, you know?

Suggs: I've lived on East White Street most of my life. I lived at, on East White Street and then when I married, I bought a house about a block away from my mother, 509 East White, lived there for quite a number of years, until I built a house here.

Roundtree: Have you been a member of any organization or club here in Champaign-Urbana in the past or now?

Suggs: Yeah. Well, I was, used to be, at one time, president of your Urban League, vice president of the boys club, a member of the Illini Rebounders, an assistant with the group that's a basketball program at the U of I, a member of the [P.I.C.] Program, C.E.T.A. Of course, I'm a member of Bethel A.M.E. Church.

Roundtree: What is the P.I.C. Program? What is that?

Suggs: The P.I.C. Program is a program, it's part of a C.E.T.A. Program, but it's geared to businesses that are trying to help find jobs for people. I've also been a member of the Community Foundation.

Roundtree: Okay, when you were growing up in Champaign, how was crime?

Suggs: Oh, there was crime, of course, probably not on the same, same level that it is today, but it was a different kind of crime than it is today. People could walk down the street at night without any, generally without any fear of being hit in the head or anything like that. It did not seem to be the one-on-one kind of crime against people like it seems to be today. I don't know if the percentage is higher or what, but there are more people so obviously, there's more crime, but basically, it's a different kind of crime, than those days than what you're seeing today.

Roundtree: Do you think the community, when you was growing up, was closer than the community today?

Suggs: Oh, definitely. Well, everybody, as far as blacks, blacks knew practically everybody in town. They knew each other, primarily, they lived within hollering distance of each other, so it was a little easier to know each other. Now, blacks are scattered all over Champaign and Urbana. It's not as easy to know

everybody else as well. Of course, there are more blacks in the community today than there were then, but . . .

Roundtree: How do you think the community has changed? In what way?

Suggs: What do you mean?

Roundtree: Besides people . . . Okay.

Suggs: As far as jobs, or as far as?

Roundtree: All aspects, jobs, housing.

Suggs: Oh, I think that there's been a tremendous change in the community as far as housing. In those particular days, it was very, very difficult for a black to live outside of the so-called 'black area.' It was very difficult to buy a house, build a house, buy a lot, or anything else. We were pretty well boxed in but of course, that has changed today and you're limited only by economic system, where you can live today. Job-wise it certainly has drastically changed, maybe not enough but jobs are pretty much open today, if you're qualified to do a job. Blacks were pretty well limited as to the jobs that they could, could do in those days. When I first went with the *Courier,* it was like unheard of, for a black photographer, which was no big deal being a photographer, but something about a photographer

going in and taking pictures of or at least you were almost invading 'white territory' in those days, but now no one would think anything at all probably. It's just a matter of getting used to it. I really hadn't no particular problems when I first started working at the *Courier*, being a black photographer. I was kind of fortunate in that a lot of people in the community knew me and I knew a lot of people in the community, and it wasn't like I was someone odd, you know, coming in. So that was, made it much easier for me than maybe someone outside of the community coming in doing that, but now, any black would have no problem whatsoever in being a photographer now with any, you know, newspaper or whatever. I take pictures, freelance photography now and I have no problems as far as, generally speaking, as far as being a black photographer. I probably would have had a lot more problems in those days doing it, you know, as a freelance photographer.

Roundtree: Do you remember the *Illinois Times*, the magazine? I mean the newspaper that was here like, the people that started it?

Suggs: Mr. Harris?

Roundtree: Right.

Suggs: Uhuh. Sure.

Roundtree: Did you ever write on that newspaper?

Suggs: I contributed a lot of photographs for them, but I didn't do any writing for him.

Roundtree: Was it, remember how it was circulated? _____.

Suggs: It was carried around, you know, by individual youngsters. Later on, I think the, as Mr. Harris got a little older, he probably didn't do that much writing himself or Mrs. Harris. They did a lot of reprinting what had been previously printed in the newspapers, and that kind of, what was of interest to the black community or the black area, then they took that out of the other newspapers and reprinted it in the *Times*.

Roundtree: The newspaper was primarily funded by them?

Suggs: Yes.

Roundtree: Or did the public and not the _____ get the newspaper? Or do you remember how it was done?

Suggs: I don't remember now whether you paid for it. They had advertisers I'm sure that paid but I don't remember now exactly what the cost of it was.

_____ I think there was a small amount that they charged, but it was very small.

Roundtree: We were looking at the microfilm that they have at the U of I, and it was really, I thought it was a nice addition, because they had things like things people who were sick at home and things like that. I thought it was really nice. Okay. Okay. The early newspapers, do you remember how blacks worked for a trade in those days when you were growing up? What kind of articles they had on blacks? Did they have any at all?

Suggs: The local newspapers?

Roundtree: Yes.

Suggs: Unfortunately, blacks were not always portrayed in positive manners. And sometimes, I think that's true today with the one local newspaper. It was very, very difficult in those days for blacks to do anything, that have done anything positive to get any kind of recognition in the newspaper. When blacks did something negative then, it was generally always in the newspaper. But very difficult for a black to get an award or something and get much publicity. Unfortunately, I think that's, was one of the problems that whites who really didn't deal with that much with blacks and only knew about blacks what they read in the newspapers, so what they read in the newspapers were generally negative. So

many, many whites had only negative feelings towards blacks. That's all they knew about. They really had very little to go one-on-one contact with blacks. I know when I went into real estate business in this community, the firm that I went, you know, with, actually, well they knew me, but they really, well, one of the partners prior to that, but the other one had never had any kind of contact with a black in his life, and the only thing that he knew was what he had read in the newspaper. And you know we'd sit down and we'd have a lot of long conversations about things. And so he admitted that he'd never, never knew certain things about what blacks have done in the community, what they really had done even nationally, unfortunately.

Roundtree: Do you think the newspapers are better now, allowing blacks to be put in different parts?

Suggs: Do I think that the newspapers are better as to what they portray blacks? Well, probably better than 25 or 30 years ago, but not nearly enough. If you even look very closely at our local newspaper, you will not find that many positive things that blacks are doing here locally. Not nearly as much as what they're doing. So I'm just saying that, you know, it has changed, but not *nearly* enough. We're doing many, many, more positive things and of course their argument is that they don't have space for it. But, unfortunately, they find the space for it if it a black happens to have done something not too good, they shoot someone, they find the space for that.

Roundtree: I was wondering, were you the only black photographer at that time, at the time you were at the *Courier*?

Suggs: I was the only black photographer working professionally at the time.

Roundtree: What improvements would you like to see in the future of the newspaper here in Champaign-Urbana, as far as blacks or anything?

Suggs: That would take us all day. (Laughs.) No, I don't have all day. Well, you know, in a nutshell, primarily, I would like to see some more positive things printed that blacks are doing. You know as I stated before there are a lot of things that blacks are doing in the community. I think that other people, a lot of the blacks might know what they're doing, but whites, unfortunately don't come in contact enough with blacks, they really don't hear about these things, they don't see about them. There's a tremendous amount of talent, young people in this community, but people, you know, they don't, they don't know about them. And we could get more publicity about that. But, unfortunately, we're, you know, a one-newspaper town and they can print what they want to and there's no competition, so, but I don't like any of the _____, of the newspapers. (Laughs.)

Roundtree: I've got a question, okay? During the ‘60s, you were working on the *Courier*. Right? Okay. How did the Civil Rights Movement affect you personally, or the community?

Suggs: Well, it affected me as well as many, many other blacks, in that there were a lot of things that changed here locally in the ‘60s as far as employment as far as housing, entertainment. I can remember a time when blacks only had one particular area in the theater that they could, you know, if they wanted to go to, like I said earlier, blacks couldn't live where they want to in the community. I can remember the, well, you probably don't remember the picketing of the Penney's, maybe you looked it up in the records, the Penney picketing. I think that in one thing changed a lot of employment possibilities in Champaign-Urbana. The picketing of Penney's. So it not only had an effect on me, because all other blacks _____.

Roundtree: I know in reading the, we read about that, Penney’s, and various other articles that the church was a part of. Has the church always been involved in the community?

Suggs: Yes, the churches have always been pretty much involved because in particular, in that particular area, black churches, well, that's where the blacks were going in numbers and so black ministers had the opportunity to do more, you know, a great deal of leading blacks in those days. Not saying that they, you

know, can't today, of course, but there probably are more facilities and avenues that blacks can work in outside of their church as far as the movement is concerned, such as Urban League, NAACP, organizations like that. Blacks can still work in those organizations, but back in the ‘40s, those organizations didn't really much exist, of course.

Roundtree: A few people that we've talked to have said that that there is an inconsistency with the church in how, you know, like when something comes up then everybody gets together and tries to, you know, do something about it. And, then, you know, if nothing's wrong they don't see anything.

Suggs: Well, that's probably true, I suppose maybe because ministers come and ministers go and members come and members go and so you don't really have that consistency, you know, in the churches themselves so, that probably helps to foster that inconsistency.

Roundtree: That's all the questions that I have, if there's anything that you might want to add.

Suggs: Well, nothing in particular. I think we've come an awful long way in the Civil Rights Movements, in the past 20 years. We have a long way to go, probably a lot longer to go than most people realize, but especially in employment. But I've been pretty involved in retraining, especially young people

to prepare themselves for different technologies for the times. You can't stay the same, you have to keep telling, moving in new directions.

Roundtree: Well, we thank you for your time and everything.

Suggs: I enjoyed it very much.