

I Was Here

Episode 2: FLOW 93.5 with Denham Jolly

Please Note:

These transcripts reflect a taped conversation and as such might not read as grammatically correct in every instance.

Introduction

Catherine: I Was Here was created with generous financial support from the Accessibility Project at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University. The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the storytellers and are in no way endorsed by, or representative of, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education.

Disclaimer

Catherine: Just a warning for those of you listening with young children, this episode contains a discussion of strong language.

Cold Open

Denham: You know something? Because I've always maintained I know these people more than they know themselves. I do. I know them more than they know themselves. I know every move they're going to make. I say white people. I know them. With great respect [laughs]. I know them because my survival depends on knowing them.

[music]

Interview

Catherine: You are listening to I Was Here a podcast featuring older adults who have interesting stories about, or long histories with, spaces and places in Toronto. I am your host Catherine Dunphy.

[music]

Catherine: In this episode I am talking to:

Denham: Well, this is Brandeis Denham Jolly, from In the Black: My Life. Talking to you from my living room with Cathy. I am a senior citizen now. I've had the benefit of wisdom at 83 and I hope many more years.

[music]

Catherine: The Cabbagetown house where Denham lives is a welcoming art and artifact filled space overlooking a much loved garden. Definitely the home of a successful man. Denham owned and operated profitable nursing homes in Toronto and Mississauga. He published Contrast, the influential newspaper for the Black community. And after a decade long fight he won the CRTC license for FLOW, Canada's first urban music radio station. Denham wins a lot. When he decided to write a book about his life and times, In the Black won the Toronto Book Award. But there's another side to Denham's story. It is about his lifelong fight against racism and discrimination. He experienced it in 1955 as a 19 year old from Jamaica when he was stopped by a suspicious police officer for just walking down Spadina Road. And he experienced it recently when driving near his home. He tells both stories and more, punctuated with his wonderful infectious laugh, but listen carefully. There's steel in his voice too.

[music]

Catherine: Denham, your Toronto story starts in 1955. You're a middle class kid and you're leaving your happy home in Jamaica. And you're coming to the University of Guelph, and later you ended up studying a little bit more and McGill and Dalhousie, but Toronto was the one that drew you every summer. Tell me about the Toronto you found as this young 19 year old full of hopes and dreams and brains and smarts coming to our town.

Denham: Well, it was a time when there weren't a lot of Black people in the country. There were of course the inherited progeny of the escaped slaves, you know you had a little settlement in Windsor. There was a settlement in Halifax because of the Underground Railroad. But Toronto for the size of the city, not so much. There was a settlement around downtown Toronto. You know, Niagara Street, Queen, Bathurst, Ryerson in that area. There were a number of Blacks at University of Toronto and Guelph. And so in the summertime they'd all come here and work on the railroad. And so there were not only students to whom I related from the islands, but there was also a nucleus of Black West Indians where I found this lady Viola Williams with whom I stayed at Queen and Manning. She took me in because she took in students and so I stayed with her and she always said I was the son she never had. So she treated me like a son. If I didn't have a job, she wouldn't charge me for boarding. She gave me pocket money.

Catherine: I think you lucked in, not just because of the good deal she gave you but she was a bit of the epicenter of a lot of the sort of baby political action that was starting, wasn't she?

Denham: Absolutely. She knew Marcus Garvey personally and she was part of the UNA, United Negro Improvement Association.

Catherine: And there was a Toronto branch that was fairly new starting right when you came, is that right?

Denham: Absolutely.

Catherine: I remember you telling me that one of the reasons was there was a young people's social night, on the Saturday or was the Tuesday?

Denham: Both.

Catherine: Because so many people were coming to Canada and working as domestics that that was their day off.

Denham: Yeah. That was one of the reasons. But there was also a gentleman named Mr. Moore who had a Laundry and he had a special place for that on Cecile Street. It's almost across the street from the Steelworkers Hall on Cecile right now. And so a Thursday was their day off, now some of them had Saturday off too. Some of these domestics were librarians, teachers, personal secretaries, where they came from, but the only way they could get into the country was as a domestic. In fact, the Honorable Jean Augustine got in on that program.

Catherine: She was the first Black woman to be to be elected to parliament.

Denham: Exactly.

Denham: And also she was Deputy Speaker of the House.

Catherine: Do you remember them as being happy times, good times?

Denham: There were happy times because people made the best of it. You know, it's like a Tale of Two Cities, where it says, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It equated to that. You know, people made the best of what they had. They were happy in their own world. They made their world happy. But at the same time the outside world was not so welcoming.

Catherine: In your book, one of the first memories you have is of walking down Spadina with a friend. And a police car pulls up. They get out, they pass by your friend, and they come right around to you, to inquire what you're doing.

Denham: It was Spadina Road up in Forest Hill. And I was visiting a friend there and was leaving late. I was wearing these boots we called desert boots, a grayish color booty sneaker, and I mention that because he made reference to it later saying that I was dressed for speed. Like a thief [laughs]. I didn't know about private policemen. That they drive around in unmarked cars with no uniform. It was my first year here. They said, hey you. We want to talk to you. And I kept walking because at that time of the night, two men, in an unmarked car. He said it a couple of times and I ignored him and kept walking. Then they pulled right up on the sidewalk and opened the door in front of me so I couldn't go any further. And then he said, we're policemen. And showed me his badge. And he said, we want to talk to you. So then I identified myself and apologized to them. I said jeez I'm sorry. I apologize that I didn't stop it. I didn't know you were policemen. And in fact I got scared and I almost took off. And then he patted his chest with his shoulder holster [Denham pats his chest] and said, you wouldn't have gotten very far [laughs]

Catherine: Yeah, well you're laughing about it now but how are you feeling then? Welcome to Canada and all that.

Denham: I thought, wow I almost met my maker [laughs]. Through no fault of my own, just walking along.

Catherine: Were you expecting this kind of reaction when you chose Canada?

Denham: No, not really, because I had never encountered anything so hostile before. I'd never been in trouble with the law. You know, my mother was a Justice of the Peace. I had never encountered anything of that nature. So it was scary.

Catherine: But it was also always in the back of your mind. Even though you sort of put it aside. You went up and you taught at the Sault for a while. But then you came back down to Toronto and ended up in all places teaching chemistry at Forest Hill Collegiate.

Denham: Right.

Catherine: I mean this is the epicenter of white privilege.

Denham: Right. Forest Hill was after I went to the Sault. I had had some Canadian experience teaching and had done research on air pollution. Forest Hill wanted a science teacher so I went down and applied. And I was very much an athlete and I loved to dress well, so aside from my resume, when they saw me they liked the cut of my jib [laughs]. So they hired me.

Funnily enough the kids there were very interested in talking about life and things with me. You know I just sat on the lab desk, by the Bunsen burners, and talked to them about life. Because they were so brilliant that you didn't have to teach them. And they were interested in the outside world because they were pretty sequestered. They were Jewish, they went to Jewish camps, they went to Jewish schools, they associated with Jewish friends and they're in Forest Hill. Forest Hill was one of the few schools that had its own school board. So that gives you an idea of the privilege and the isolation there.

But yeah we had people like, oh his name escapes me now, but he was a judge who stopped Mike Harris from selling Ontario Hydro. Yeah. People of that nature. Charles Harnick was there. He was the Attorney General for Mike Harris. People of that nature. Wayne and Shuster's kids were there. The guy from Saturday Night Live was there.

Catherine: Which Saturday Night Live guy would this be? Mike Myers?

Denham: No, No. The main honcho.

Catherine: Oh yeah. Lorne Michaels.

Denham: Lorne Michaels. Yeah. People of that nature. You know, heavy hitters. And they all turned out to be pretty influential doctors, lawyers, surgeons, entrepreneurs. Just recently 12 of them invited me up for my fiftieth year departure from the school. It was 50 years since I worked there. One of them showed up in a Bentley [laughs].

Catherine: And this was just to say hello to you and acknowledge your influence?

Denham: Yeah. Well, I was like a friend to them. They didn't call it coaches at the time. They called it sponsors. And I would take them to curling for example.

Catherine: Which I'm sure you did a lot of in Jamaica.

Denham: [laughs]. Absolutely [laughs]. And I would be the sponsor for the track team. The swim team. The tennis team. I would be sponsors for all these teams. And then of course I also had my own homeroom. So I got to be good friends with a lot of these kids.

Catherine: But at the same time you were starting your entrepreneurial career. You had purchased a boarding house or two.

Denham: Yes. Well, teaching was not for me. There was some pretty strong indicators of the way I interacted with my colleagues. As I mentioned, the kids were great, but my colleagues, including the principal, were not. I realized I wasn't going to go very far. I knew it wasn't for me. And my dad had always said if you can, avoid working for people. And he always said, by land, you can't lose because they are not making any more of it. So I always wanted to get into some form of real estate or be my own boss. So I had someone co-sign a loan for me. In those days, for \$5,000. I bought a house on Huron Street, in the heart of the University of Toronto campus. I rented it out to students. And in those days you got a furnished room for \$10 a week.

Catherine: But you also were a landlord with conscience because I do believe you rented them out to Draft Dodgers as well.

Denham: I did. Black and white. In fact, the FBI or the CIA came over to talk to me one day on Huron. They were working in cooperation with the RCMP. And I said, you know what? I don't want to talk to you. Get the F out of here. It was pretty militant.

Catherine: So that sort of opened your eyes a little bit to their cause?

Denham: Yes absolutely.

Catherine: Injustice as such.

Denham: Oh yeah. I knew pretty much what was going on.

Catherine: But you were a boarding house landlord with a conscience.

Denham: Yes, there was a white guy there from California. In fact, his parents even came over to visit him because he couldn't go there. This was in the late sixties. The Vietnam War. It was pretty brutal. People were pretty polarized on both sides.

Catherine: And you basically kept moving forward in this business because is this when you bought your first nursing home in Mississauga?

Denham: Well, the business grew to that stage. Before that they were building the Spadina Expressway was going to come right downtown. And that's where Jane Jacobs comes in.

Catherine: She was a New Yorker who came here and really electrified Torontonians.

Denham: And Environmentalists.

Catherine: And believed in community and believed in neighborhoods and the Stop Spadina.

Denham: Yeah. Stopped the Spadina Expressway.

Catherine: Which was really one of the first successful grassroots community movements

in Toronto.

Denham: Absolutely.

Catherine: Tell us about your involvement.

Denham: Meanwhile the city had gone ahead and bought up all these big homes along the Spadina all the way downtown. So when she stopped it, the city had these homes which were sitting there empty. And they were right in my hood. A block away. So I approached the city and said, hey I want to take them off your hands. So they rented me a couple of them. And I went to the Salvation Army and furnished them and expanded my rooming house business.

Meanwhile, I was still teaching which drew the ire of my colleagues. They objected to me getting in business and advancing. In fact, my department head would schedule meetings on Friday afternoons, even long weekends, so I couldn't leave. So that's when I went to the principal and said, I'm not going to any more long weekend or Friday afternoon meetings. By that time I had 28 people working for me. I was making money. But the irony of it is the guy who was calling the meetings, he was the one had the cottage to go to [laughs]. I didn't have a cottage. I lived three blocks away. So we was cutting off his nose to spite his face. That showed me the depth of what I was up against. The envy and the animosity.

Now a white lady that lived in one of my homes worked as a nurse's aide in a care home. And I got along fine with my tenants so she said to me, why don't you look into starting a care facility? So in the Star in those days they had pages of business opportunities, and a column for want ads. I read that religiously every day. Lo and behold one summer a private hospital came up for rent. For rent. Talk about luck. All I needed with first and last month's rent. No big money. And it had everything in there. They used to do tonsillectomies. I wonder how everybody's tonsils suddenly got so good. They don't cut them out anymore.

Both: [laughs]

Catherine: Is this the one on Broadview?

Denham: Yeah. 682 or 684. A stately colonial home. It had everything: beds, blankets, pots, pans. The works. All I had to do with the first and last month's rent and I had a nursing home. 21 beds. So I went ahead and Mr. Cardoza was in charge. He rented me the place. And we got along fine. And I was in the nursing home business.

Catherine: Indeed you were. You're not going to say this, but I will. Talk about creating an empire.

Denham: [laughs]. Well, I was a little ambitious I guess. I went to a good friend of mine who was an accountant. I gave him 50%. I said, you do the books, and I'll administer it. So we set it up and got it going. And it took off. I hired people who had the expertise that I didn't have, and it worked. It worked so well that at the end of the year I was ready to buy another place that was for sale on Tindal Avenue.

Catherine: And you were also still very involved with the Black community in Toronto. You talked about something that happened with a shooting with 13 police in 1978.

Denham: Yeah.

Catherine: At the Flying Disco at King and Bathurst.

Denham: Absolutely.

Catherine: That was a turning point for you. Tell us about that.

Denham: Well, there was a guy from Nova Scotia, a young man named Buddy Evans. He went to this nightclub, The Flying Disco at Bathurst and King. And there was some altercation. And he had an encounter with policemen. He was unarmed. And there were 13 policemen that were trying to arrest him. And they had to shoot him in order to arrest him. 13 of them. And to top it off, they took their time calling an ambulance and made him bleed to death. And in those days police were never called to question for anything. And I thought, this isn't right. We have to do something. So I call up Brownie Armstrong, who just passed away.

Catherine: He was well known at that point. He was very much at the center of a lot of the civil rights issues.

Denham: Absolutely. And he went down to Dresden to desegregate the restaurant down there when they refused to serve Black people.

Catherine: This was in the early sixties, wasn't it?

Denham: Fifties.

Catherine: And he was the one who went down there to make the point that this is happening in Canada.

Denham: Absolutely.

Catherine: Which of course all of you knew, but a lot of people in Toronto remembering the underground railway, thought that we were somehow different.

Denham: I know.

Catherine: And he was the one who was saying to many people, no we're not. So he was integral. And the fact that you knew him and called him was an important step for you I think.

Denham: Absolutely. So then we call up Al Hamilton who operated the Contrast newspaper, the Black weekly newspaper. And we each put up \$1000 and we hire Jack Penkovsky.

Catherine: Really one of the top legal minds.

Denham: Criminal lawyer.

Catherine: Absolutely.

Denham: And the thing I liked about him was that he had no fear. You know the judges always say, this is my court. But he was saying, well your honour, this is as old as the law itself. I mean he was never intimidated by them. So we fought and we had rallies and we had marches. And we managed to get an inquest.

Catherine: And this was one of the first times that the Black community had come together and publicly protested and gone right to the seat of power.

Denham: Absolutely. And in fact this ended up being the longest inquest in the history of Ontario in the death of a single person.

Catherine: And it was your marching and you're protesting that got the inquest.

Denham: Oh yes.

Catherine: And this is an extensive history-making inquest.

Denham: Absolutely.

Catherine: And the result of the inquest?

Denham: They exonerated them. And the community was watching it. And some were not happy that we were making or changing history. After the verdict came down, I was interviewed by the press for television. And I said, it's an abortion of justice. Sure enough the very next morning my Bank Manager called me up and said, oh abortion of justice, eh? [laughs]. Now what does that have to do with him? You know, they just close ranks are you.

Catherine: Is that what you felt happened when you first went publicly in terms of your protest?

Denham: Oh yeah.

Catherine: People closed ranks on you?

Denham: Oh yes. They don't like to see you protest these kinds of things. Not everyone wants to see the status quo changed. Especially with the police. You know cops are cops and cops are always right. Even if they kill you.

Catherine: Were you putting any of your thriving business in jeopardy at this point?

Denham: I didn't think so. But you know, last week, and this is probably a little diversion. But it was something we said recently about the way things are omitted by the larger society and not brought to the attention of people. I was invited by Word on the Street to go to Halifax to the CBC tent. My secretary of 25 years had moved there after she retired. Living in Truro. So my partner invited her to come to the event. So she came and after the event we went for tea up on the roof of the library. Beautiful library. They have a cafe on the top floor. So we're there with her and her husband and we're having tea. And we were chit chatting, and she was saying how at her church, they had this speaker come in who was talking about residential schools, and she said to one of her colleagues, and this is a woman in her seventies, what's a residential school? She never heard about it. So that makes my point about how certain historical significant events in Canadian history about

injustice and things of that nature are never even brought up in schools or even brought up in conversation at the dinner table and certain circles.

Catherine: I know you're very aware of the Black history of Toronto. You were saying that the first taxi driver in Toronto was a Black man.

Denham: Yeah.

Catherine: Who has a story behind him. Do you want to tell us that one?

Denham: Yeah. Well he is buried right over here. Right next door.

Catherine: In Cabbagetown.

Denham: Yes. He was a good friend of George Brown.

Catherine: George Brown, the rebel.

Denham: Yeah. The guy who started the Globe and Mail. He's buried next door too him.

Catherine: Really?

Denham: They were such close friends. And this guy was a runaway slave.

Catherine: He was Thornton Blackburn.

Denham: Thornton Blackburn. He and his wife they were quite the entrepreneurs. In fact there is a church down there on King Street that he built. It's still there.

Catherine: Is it?

Denham: Yes. It's quite propitious that there is a convention center in the George Brown College named after him. The Blackburn Center. Yeah, it was dedicated within the last two years. In addition to that the colors of the streetcar are his colors. They used the colors that he used on his coaches. Of course his were horse drawn, but they were the first delivery for hire in Toronto. And he changed laws too. Right now in Canada there is a law that if you commit a crime in Turkey and you come to Canada to escape and you are to be extradited to a country where you're going to be executed, Canada will not allow you to be extradited. And that law was because of Blackburn. He was from Oklahoma and was detained in Chatham because the Americans wanted him back because he was an escaped slave. Blackburn also built houses for slaves in Ward 9. At that time it was called Ward 9. Behind the City Hall.

Catherine: Oh yes, the Ward.

Denham: The Ward, that's right. Ward 9 might be the place in South Africa that has a similar history. But he built smaller homes there for escaped slaves to stay because at the time if they had a place to stay they would be looked upon more graciously. He also worked with George Brown to build a saw mill down in London, Ontario near where Uncle Tom's Cabin is. He couldn't read or write. His wife Lucy Blackburn was the organizational genius behind it. But he had the drive. Yeah.

Catherine: You know as you say so many people don't know about these things. The other ones that you've mentioned such as, George Abbott, a doctor who had a practice on Don Avenue and happened to be a close personal friend of Abraham Lincoln.

Denham: Yeah. In fact when Lincoln was shot they sent for him and he went there. His wife even had a scarf that Lincoln gave him. Yeah, he was one of the first Black doctors in Canada.

Catherine: And the other person that you've mentioned is William Peyton Hubbard who was the Deputy Mayor.

Denham: Yeah. In fact Mayor Tory dedicated a park to him just last year over here in front of the Don Jail. He was the guy that advocated for Toronto Hydro.

Catherine: Yes, he was the one who made sure that Ontario Hydro was owned by the public.

Denham: Absolutely. He felt water was like air. It was for the public good.

Catherine: The amount of Black history that we don't know is embarrassing. You also mentioned that there was a Black regiment in the 1812 war fighting for Canada.

Denham: Yes.

Catherine: And that Blacks have fought in every war for Canada since Confederation.

Denham: Before confederation. And the Black regiment that you mentioned, it was Anne Murray's dad who was their doctor.

Catherine: It sort of makes me quite sad the fact that I don't know these things. But there are some events dating to your time in Toronto. In 1967 Caribana was started. You were a part of that. Black History Month started in 1979. I think you had a finger in that pie.

Denham: Well, not really. Jean Augustine and Rosemary Sadlier were instrumental in that.

Catherine: But you were the one who started the Black Business and Professional Association, which I think has been quite integral in terms of what's happened to Toronto since then. I believe you were the one who got the idea to start the Harry Jerome Awards.

Denham: Yes.

Catherine: So how did you get this idea?

Denham: Well, it was 30 odd years ago at the time of Ben Johnson, when a bunch of athletes went to the Commonwealth Games in Australia and did very well and they did so well that they came back here and a lot of organizations wanted to honour them. And one night while watching the 11 o'clock news on CTV I saw that the Optimist Club of Scarborough was going to honour them. Now at the time Blacks were very much vilified in Toronto, as they still are today. They treated everybody as welfare recipients. Drug dealers. You never heard any good news about anything. You heard all the bad news. So I thought, why don't the Black community honour them? At the same time why don't we use

that opportunity to present ourselves? To showcase people like Dr. Howard McCurdy, who is head of the science department at the University of Windsor. Why don't we have him make a presentation to them? People of that ilk. Let them know that we have eminent persons among us doing things and helping to build the country. And so I called a meeting at the Underground Railroad which was on King Street and Sherbourne at the time. And so we had our first presentation to these athletes and Dr. McCurdy gave the keynote address. We also had Harry Jerome.

Catherine: He was Canada's first Black runner.

Denham: Yeah.

Catherine: Tell us about him.

Denham: He held the 100 meter record. There's a big statue to his honour in Vancouver right now. Originally we were to get him as the keynote speaker. But lo and behold a couple of weeks before, he died. So Dr. McCurdy did the address and we named the event after Harry Jerome. It was Hamlin Grange's idea to name it after him.

Catherine: Hamlin Grange is a well-known television journalist.

Denham: Correct. So it started there in 1982 and it has grown since. In fact, now I facetiously say it's the Black Nobel Prize because everybody cites it's on their resume. So it has been a stellar institution in the community since 1982. And in fact the first occasion had over 1,200 people. I should also mention Bromley Armstrong and Al Hamilton. They were what the young people nowadays call, woke. They were very aware of what's going on and wanted to change the society.

Catherine: And the awards have gone on now to include acknowledgement of excellence in a wide range of activities. Arts and science and culture and community service. As well as the original focus which was athletic skill.

Denham: Correct. And the organization has given out almost \$4,000,000 worth of scholarships. Just last week there was a presentation at York University for this year's scholarship holders.

Catherine: It is very impressive. You mentioned that the context in which this started was one of negativity. That the Blacks were getting no respect. That they were being hounded by police. There'd been several well-known police shootings of Blacks that had really ignited the Black community.

Denham: Correct.

Catherine: Was there a feeling of not getting ahead? Not being accepted? What was it like then?

Denham: You're very correct. You always felt as though it was a sustained effort to demean you. We had of course the Sun newspaper and the Star, which is a very liberal paper, but even they couldn't glorify any Black person. They take more delight in jumping on occasions where there are things that are not so gleaming.

Catherine: Part of the motivation for why you then bought Contrast.

Denham: Yes, we wanted to tell it like it is. Overcome some of this omission. And bring to light the young people who were top of their class going to university, getting scholarships, becoming doctors and lawyers. Uplift our society. Our group.

Catherine: But you were the publisher. And when you were publisher you stated there are about 300,000 Blacks in Toronto, and that that newspaper had a circulation of 30,000 which is really significant. And more to the point, it had influence.

Denham: Yes it did. They read it at Queen's Park.

Catherine: But you also were encouraging them to look outward. Not to simply write feel good happy stories but to talk about what's happening. You encouraged Canada to have a boycott of South African goods because of the apartheid system and Nelson Mandela being in prison. You really were looking outward as well. Was this a deliberate move to kind of make the Black community of Toronto feel part of the world?

Denham: Absolutely. And to make the wider society aware of the role of South Africa's misdeeds. In fact, I remember, when we were talking about Forest Hill, I had a meeting with Larry Grossman, who was also an alumnus of Forest Hill and a minister in the government at Queen's Park. I had a meeting with him about getting South African wines delisted. After the meeting I said to Al Hamilton, my colleague at arms, I said, you notice there was nobody taking notes [laughs]. That's the kind of disrespect afforded us. You know at the time, wherever we'd go to the liquor store, and I would see the South African wines I would maybe dislodge some of them [laughs]

Catherine: Clumsy were you?

Denham: Yeah [laughs]. I did it a number of times.

Catherine: So, it was really important for you, when you took over Contrast, to make sure that this was a voice for Toronto Blacks as well.

Denham: Yes absolutely. Not only that but it was a good training ground for a journalist. People like Jo Jo Chinto started there.

Catherine: He was well known on City TV.

Denham: Right. A lot of these people didn't start on my watch but it was the same paper. Royson James started there.

Catherine: He is a really respected columnist at The Toronto Star.

Denham: Very much. Even this week he was right in the paper although he's semi-retired now. Hamlin Grange worked there. So it was very much a training ground when people could not get jobs at the so-called established media. So not only was it a voice, but the people who gave it a voice were very much recognized and honoured because of these positions which they managed to nail down. But a lot of people have brought their grievances to the paper too so that at least they had an ear, literally and figuratively, to air their grievances and let people know what was going on.

Catherine: Were there some crusades that you felt that the paper undertook that were

successful?

Denham: Well, the South African thing was very solidifying here in Toronto because I don't think that the major newspapers were that concerned about it and Contrast was like a bulldog with the South African issue. We never let go. Contrast was also very instrumental in supporting Mandela. We helped to get the freedom of Mandela. In fact, I myself used to send the monthly subscription. We had people like John Piper who worked on Mandela's endeavors in the city.

Catherine: You wanted to make sure that they understood that they had support in Canada.

Denham: Absolutely. And they were aware of it.

Catherine: That's amazing.

Denham: And the different Black movements here were very much energized by those efforts.

Catherine: And were there any local campaigns you were fighting? Did you do any editorializing about the police versus Blacks issue that was happening in Toronto at the time?

Denham: Almost every week [laughs]. Constantly. There was police brutality at the time. It was very much present and accepted. And there was very little recourse. And people would come to complain about their grievances because otherwise these things happened and no one would hear about it because the police and their misdeeds are very much a closed society. So the community looked towards Contrast to find out what was going on and to air their personal grievances.

Catherine: Paper closed about 20 years ago?

Denham: Just about yeah.

Catherine: And other than the fact that no paper is healthy at this time, was there any particular reason?

Denham: Well, we had trouble getting people to pay their advertising fees. There was always a big problem collecting, and we have expenses to meet, so, you know, you have to cut your losses at some point.

Catherine: OK. So in some ways it served its purpose. It was a paper of its time.

Denham: Yes.

Catherine: Certainly in the eighties in Toronto. It was an important organizing and centralizing tool for Toronto's Black people.

Denham: Yes, because it also made people aware of different rallies, different advocacy groups, and what they were doing. And it brought people together. To get people to know people like Charles Roach, who was very much an advocate for human rights and justice. He was a big advocate for Nelson Mandela's movement.

Catherine: Well, there was a number of people who were really voices. Charles Roach being among them. You were another.

Catherine: Mmhmm.

Catherine: There were others.

Denham: Yeah.

Catherine: Who else was there?

Denham: Well there was a gentleman named Al Mercury. He was a Canadian born Black guy from North York. He and his family were very influential up there during the Mel Lastman years. Bev Salmon who was a Counsellor in North York for a very long time.

Catherine: She led the protest against Showboat.

Denham: Yeah.

Catherine: There was a production of Showboat and she shut down the production and made the museum change how they were presenting their whole idea.

Denham: You know, it's interesting to see. Just two or three months ago this new presentation they put on at the ROM. It's 180 degrees from the presentation that they had put on, Into the Heart of Africa, back 30 years ago. A lot of people got arrested there with their protests when they put on a very insensitive display of Into the Heart of Africa.

Catherine: Absolutely. So that was when?

Denham: That was the era of Dudley Laws. He was fearless. He would stand up to everybody. In fact, he called the police murderers, and for that they had 32 policemen, and spent millions of dollars, trying to get something on him. They went as far as to rent an apartment across the street from his office to spy on him. He couldn't leave his house without being stopped by them. But he really pulled punches with them. He was not afraid to call them out for their misdeeds.

Catherine: Dudley Laws was the head of the Black Action Defense League.

Denham: Correct.

Catherine: Which was a significant organization that I think you had you worked with.

Denham: Yeah, well after they killed Donaldson, three of them went into his apartment and killed him.

Catherine: Let's back up. This was a Black man who was killed in 1988 because he had a kitchen knife in hand when the police came into his apartment.

Denham: Yeah, in the St. Clair and Dufferin area. Yeah, it was in his home. Little mentally incapacitated. Three police went into his apartment and they murdered him. There was a big protest.

Catherine: This was led by Dudley Laws.

Denham: Correct.

Catherine: And you.

Denham: I wouldn't say I was a leader. But I was one of the marchers. I mean you're going into this guy's apartment. He has a paring knife. You have three guns. You should be fired if you can't subdue him. Why are you policemen? [laughs]. Anyways after the march people decided to form this Black Action Defense Committee and Dudley was a fiery speaker. He was also a union organizer in London and came here. Born in Jamaica, then he went to London England, and was there for a lot of the disturbance, and then came back here to Canada. He was also part of the UNIA, Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. In fact, there was an office of the UNIA where mom was head cook and bottle washer.

Catherine: Is that right.

Denham: Yeah.

Catherine: United Negro Improvement Association.

Denham: Correct.

Catherine: Which is where it started with your first landlady.

Denham: That's right.

Catherine: Viola Williams.

Denham: And Marcus Garvey and people like Mr. Harry Geary. He was another.

Catherine: He was the famous Porter.

Denham: Correct.

Catherine: Worked for the CN railway.

Denham: Correct. He gave me my first job.

Catherine: He did?

Denham: Yes. Because I came down for the summer from Guelph University and needed a job. And mom said why don't you go to Union Station and ask for this man. So I went there and asked for Mr. Geary. And he put me on to one of the foreman on the tracks. I had a job loading the freight.

Catherine: And you had no idea it was the famous Mr. Geary?

Denham: No. But later on I learned that he was part of the Marcus Garvey crew.

Catherine: Absolutely. And the thing is that this is all connected, isn't it? The story of the Black community in Toronto and the fact that it learned to have its own voice. It comes back around again and again. And to me one of the final actions you took was when you decided to do something that, on the surface might seem purely commercial, but it was when you decided that Toronto needed an urban radio station. And you formed Milestone Communications and you fought for a dozen years to get FLOW 93.5 on the air. You want to talk about that?

Denham: Yeah. But just a word about Mr. Geary before that.

Catherine: OK.

Denham: He lived on Bathurst and Dundas, and there's the skating rink there. And so his son went over there and they wouldn't let him in. So he told his dad. So Monday morning his dad went down to City Hall. He spoke to a Jewish Councillor there named Joe something or other. And Joe said, alright you come back. He went back and he presented this to City Council. He said, I don't mind if you want to discriminate against my son but when the next world war comes if you want us to fight your wars for you, then we have the right to skate too. And sure enough they relented and banned the practice of not allowing Blacks there. Mr. Geary was that kind of firebrand.

But about the radio station. At first we had 32 guys come together and we put up the money to pay for lawyers and research and to write the application. We had to get what you call interventions, which were letters of support. We had thousands of letters of support in fact more than the CRTS had ever seen. But there were 12 people applying for this urban station.

Catherine: Yeah. You're applying for a spot on the F.M. dial.

Denham: Yeah. Our first one was 92.5. They had the hearing to decide. And we had support from everywhere but they gave it to a country and western station from Alberta. Now at the time five commissioners listened to the applicants. You go up. You make your pitch. They ask you questions. There were 13 other commissioners back in Ottawa. At the end of the day none of the five that heard the application voted for the eventual winner. It was the 13 people back in Ottawa. But it was the only time the Chairman, Keith Spicer, had ever written a dissenting opinion. And his opinion was that we should have gotten it. He said not only should we have got the station, but that we should have gotten it 10 years ago. But they gave it the country western station and guess what? It didn't last. It wasn't long before they started playing popular music.

It was not for another three or four years that another frequency came up and this time we got the same treatment. A station went bankrupt and it was closed for three or four years. They decided to keep the station together and they put it up again for competition. Three weeks into the competition Sheila Copps said, as you were. We are forgetting the competition. We're going to give them all to the CBC. 99.1

Catherine: She was the MP from Hamilton. Right.

Denham: Minister of Heritage under which the CRTC comes. We were the front runner there again because at the time if people wanted to listen to rhythm and blues or soul music they had to tune into WBLK in Buffalo. Not only that but if people wanted to put on a concert with Black entertainers in Toronto, they had to pay for advertising over in Buffalo.

So Canadian money was going to Buffalo.

We had a staff. We had an office. We were geared up for this competition. We said, you can't cancel it now or else we're going to sue you. So she reinstated it but in the end she still gave the stations to the CBC. We said, this is callous. I still think she should be sued. And again we were shut out and people raised holy hell.

Catherine: I'd like to interject that most people might have given up now. What's keeping you fighting?

Denham: Well, you know I saw a guy on YouTube last night and he was out in the park waiting for his friends to go running and he was saying how much he respects long distance runners because they don't give up. They finish the race no matter what. I used to be a cross-country runner. So I said, you think you're going to wear me down? I'll wear you down. But of course there's money to it too. So I decided I was going to be in their face. They are not going to get rid of me.

And so when the CRTC would have hearings in Montreal, I'd go sit in the front row. When they had hearings in Coburg, I'd go sit in the front row. Even if I wasn't applying. We made a lot of noise. In fact, our supporters flooded David Collenit's office with faxes to let him know we're not happy. And we were well-organized. And we had gotten a lot more support than the CBC. We had like 14,000 letters of support. The CBC had 4,000 with all their might. Their three radio stations and four television stations or whatever. They had seven media outlets and they used them all. They also did a mail drop from the Lakeshore to Richmond Hill to get letters of support. They only came up with 4,000.

And all the major newspapers supported us because people recognized that it was time to be playing Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder. But most radio stations in Toronto did not play these. Some were forbidden to play that music. I had friends who sold records out of Detroit and they said that some stations in Toronto were forbidden to play their music. And if you go back and check their playlists you'll see that that was true. So people were enraged.

So finally 93.5 came up and they just couldn't get rid of us so they decided to relent. But it was a bittersweet victory because there wasn't a strong frequency like 99.1. 99.1 was a powerhouse. 93.5 was kind of a low power station. But nevertheless we took it. And in the first or second year, we were the number one urban contemporary station in the country.

Catherine: You went on the air February 2001.

Denham: Correct.

Catherine: And the Washington Post wrote a big article about it as an example of racial barriers in Canada.

Denham: Absolutely. And It was because the CRTC was biased. I have to say that. One of my colleagues in this endeavor went with me to Ottawa to meet with one of the main players in the CRTC and we give him our pitch. And his remark to us was, tell me again why you want to do? So when we got to the elevator I said to my colleague Tony Davey, you know something? Because I've always maintained I know these people more than they know themselves. I do. I know them more than they know themselves. I know every move they're going to make. I say white people. I know there more than they know

themselves. With great respect [laughs]. I know them because my survival depends on knowing them. So I said to Tony, he's going to have to hear it out of a white mouth to believe it. So we had this powerhouse lawyer Bob Buckham, and he had been at a party with the guy we met from the CRTC and when he came back from the party he said, now he understands [laugh] and I said to my friend, voila! [laughs].

Catherine: But you went on the air to great fanfare. And I think it's only a year later that you were voted the most popular radio station in Canada.

Denham: It was pent up demand because we said we were going to take all of the budding stars that are in their basements and their garages and put them on mainstream radio. And we were the first to play Drake.

Catherine: Wow.

Denham: Which gave us great gratification. Now more than ever. So we were right.

Catherine: Your daughter became very integral in running the station. Was she manager?

Denham: Yeah. She was a station manager.

Catherine: And she had a vision for this.

Denham: She was also our publicist and our advertising guru. She came out with an ad which looked like you were giving them a finger, but it was part of the radio equalizer.

Catherine: Yes.

Denham: So that kind of tickled everybody's fancy and got your attention.

Catherine: She set the tone. It was irreverent. It was smart. It was sassy. But tough.

Denham: Yes.

Catherine: Tell us the story about Kanye West. It must have been a bit of a coup to have him in the station.

Denham: Well, they all came there. Beyonce, the Jacksons. All the hip hop stars went through there because it was the only station in town at the time that would play their music. So Kanye, we were doing him a favour. I mean the station was very popular at the time. We were right at the epicenter. The Eaton Centre was at our front door. We were at Yonge and Queen. The center of the universe. So everybody wanted to be there. Kanye being there was no big deal. I mean Sir Richard Branson came in there. It was a funny thing actually. People like Kanye and Missy Elliott they'd come in with their advance party to scour out the place and tell you what they wanted. Richard Branson, he jumped off the subway and come up in his t-shirt [laughs]. But Kanye came in there with his bombast or whatnot and he used the word, bitches. And you know the announcer said, you can't use that word here. Well Kanye didn't like it so he stormed out. But we never relented. We had more than 50% women working there. You know it took the city by storm. We got good support from Gary Slate at Standard Broadcasting, one of our stakeholders. He was very supportive. We had certain standards and we stuck to it. Kanye notwithstanding.

Catherine: The station went off air when?

Denham: It didn't. We sold it.

Catherine: You sold it.

Denham: We sold it to CHUM in 2010 and then CHUM sold it to Bell and Bell sold it to the Move.

Catherine: You'd like to say that perhaps it's time was important then and that perhaps the Black communities of Toronto and Canada don't need the voice as much. But are you willing to say that now?

Denham: I going to say that our legacy is the number of Black people that are now on the air everywhere. Not just in Toronto, but from Vancouver to Halifax to Calgary to Kitchener. And every position. We have Black station managers now. We have Black people in charge of producing shows. I think that is what we have done. Because when FLOW came on the air the number of Black people in radio in Canada you could have counted on one end. And a Black station manager was unheard of. A Black program director was unheard of. You know, so now they're there.

Catherine: And your next project then was in your own voice when you decided to tell your story when you published your book *In the Black: My Life*. It was published in 2017 and it went on to win the Toronto Book Award.

Denham: Unintended consequence.

Catherine: There you are.

Denham: [laughs].

Catherine: Against pretty impressive competition. You start that book with an anecdote about something that happened just three years ago not very far from here, your home. Do you want to tell us about that?

Denham: Well, I ran out for an errand, and when I pulled out from a parking spot, I had a fender bender with another car. We were there exchanging documents when the police drove up. He came over and said, you're going to have to call a tow truck. I said, well I don't really need a tow truck. My car has roadside assistance. I have CAA. And my sons play hockey with a guy that owns a tow truck. He said, no you got to take that tow truck. I said no. He said, well I am going to give you a ticket for \$500 and charge you for careless driving if you don't use that tow truck. So I say, you know what? I know my rights. I don't have to use your tow truck. He said, do I have to put a gun in your face? So I shouted out at the top of my voice on busy Parliament Street, so now you want to shoot me! [laughs].

At the end of it you know I thought he shouldn't get away with this. So I went to the station to complain about it. They gave me a form to fill out. It took me a while to see the investigating detective. When I did, he said, what do you want done with him? I said, well I don't want him fired, but he needs a serious attitude adjustment. Home remedies aren't going to work on him. And the detective said, well we already have a charge against them so we can charge him with discreditable conduct. 10 days later I got a report in the mail. It read: we can't substantiate your claim. The report said, Mr. Jolly a 78 year old Jamaican

immigrant. And I thought, OK, that's the reason right there. What does that have to do with anything? I've been a Canadian citizen who has employed hundreds of Canadians for 40 years. I put bread on the table for over 200 Canadians every Friday. And I could never become a Canadian [laughs].

Catherine: It's discouraging. But because of this book, you went to Collins Bay Penitentiary and you talked to people there. Tell us about that experience and how they reacted to your story.

Denham: There were about 21 inmates and each one had a copy of my book. They had been given this book to read over a period of three weeks. They were asked to come with a question. And there were no guards in there. And I figured well you know what. I'm in my eighties. I'm an experienced guy. I'm going to do something special here. I'm happy to be here. I know the justice system sucks. Some of you guys are criminals, but I know that in the past 15 years the number of Black inmates has increased by 90%, Aboriginals by 50%, and white inmates have gone to minus five percent. I thought, I am going to do something special. We were there early. I sat near the door and as they came in I asked each guy their name and shook his hand and asked him if they wanted me to sign the book. Right away I disarmed any problem there. They saw me as a father figure but it was like we're sitting here in the living room, just talking.

And I enjoyed the experience. They didn't want to go after two hours and I didn't want to go either. I enjoyed it so much and there was a certain empathy and propinquity in the room that was evident. And they were asking questions about starting businesses, about life, about how difficult it is to get employment after being incarcerated. And one of the things I said to them, which I'm quite proud of myself, is that you have to convince people about your reincarnation and you can't do it with words, you have to do it with deeds. Because you can't just tell people, I'm a different man. You've got to prove it to them. And we had a great time and I think that they enjoyed my presence because they said that not a lot of authors show up for these book clubs. They saw me as someone coming as an immigrant here, of different color, making a success of it. A lot of them were talking to me about their life after prison. They saw that I was empathetic to their plight and I think they saw that even if you're Black and the police have issue with you, you could still make it in this country.

And I emphasized to them that you have to be able to get along with white people too because they're in control. You just have to go along to get along and put your time in here and do the best you can. And don't create any waves because it's not going to help you. Even if you're in the right. You just have to suck it up. Because they hold the handle of the knife and you hold the blade. So just be gentle in all encounters and you'll be fine. But they didn't want me to leave [laugh] But I couldn't stay [laughs] Please don't go [laughs].

[music]

Closing

Catherine: Special thanks to today's storyteller: Denham Jolly. If you enjoyed his story you can read more about Denham in his book, *In the Black: My Life* published by E.C.W. Press.

If you enjoyed this podcast please subscribe and leave us a review on iTunes. We're relying on listeners like you to tell your friends about these stories. You can listen to and

download this podcast, as well as, transcripts from our podcast website: ryerson.ca/ce/IWASHERE. On our website, you'll find a portrait series of each storyteller. These photos were taken by the talented Toronto-based photographer Jessica Blaine Smith.

Credits

Catherine: Time for the credits. Project Supervisor: Darren Cooper. Audio Engineer and Producer: Matt Rideout. Coordinator and Producer Melanie Santarossa. Our theme music was also created by Matt Rideout.

Finally, a very special thank you to Programs for 50+ and Community Engagement at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University, who supported us in our endeavor to give these storytellers a much needed platform and audience. I'm Catherine Dunphy and on behalf of all the storytellers thanks for listening to I Was Here.

[music]

Last Words

Denham: The only way you don't get old is if you die [laugh] So be nice to old people.