Episode 1: Transcript

Guest Frederick Murphy- Historian and Documentary filmmaker, discusses filmmaking, race, historical trauma, his personal story (and Melungeon connection) and the mission of his project organization, History Before Us.

Lis Malone (Co-Host):

This is Melungeon Voices: a new podcast series presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. I'm Lis Malone, podcaster, writer, and advocate. And I'm proud to be partnering with the association in producing this content along with the president of the Melungeon Heritage Association, Heather Andolina.

Heather Andolina (Host):

Thanks Lis. First, I would like to officially welcome everyone to our new podcast, presented to you by the Melungeon Heritage Association. On behalf of myself and the executive committee, we would like to remind any members who have not yet renewed their memberships, to please do so. And for those of you who are newcomers joining us for the first time, check out our website at www.melungeon.org for more information on becoming a member. We would love to have you become a part of our association.

Although we are disappointed that this year's union meeting had to be canceled, we're thrilled that we could still bring you such engaging content from our lineup of speakers. We truly hope you enjoy this first podcast series of Melungeon Voices, and look forward to using this platform to share more content with you all in the future.

Lis:

Now Heather, to kick off this series, you had a very intriguing and insightful dialogue with Frederick Murphy. Please share some information about who he is.

Heather:

Yes. Frederick Murphy is a licensed professional counselor by trade who attained a master's degree in transformative leadership; he is also a documentarian and historian. In 2016, he founded History Before Us: a project centered on capturing, preserving and advocating influential history. His first film, The American South As We Know It, has won several awards. It explores the lives of survivors of Jim Crow, the courageous individuals who didn't make the headlines. His second documentary is, The Other Side Of The Coin: Race, Generations and Reconciliation. This film is a collection of experiences and thoughts addressing the complexities of race in America. What you'll be hearing next is our discussion on his views and experiences, with regards to race and historical trauma; as well as the background story behind his documentary filmmaking.

Lis:

Let's check it out.

Heather:

We have Frederick Murphy here with us today. How are you doing?

Frederick Murphy (Guest):

I'm doing good. Thanks for asking.

Heather:

The first question I'm going to actually start you off with, you yourself have a possible Melungeon connection. Tell us a little bit about that.

Frederick:

Yeah, so I was raised in Tennessee; family came out of Virginia down through Tennessee and Montgomery County, which is in Middle Tennessee is where the family settled. I don't know if settled is the right word. They were enslaved and they were brought down through Tennessee. And I have a great, great, great grandmother that left a memoir for us, and her name was Isabella Jones and her first cousins were Collins. And in the memoir, she talked about them coming through the mountains of Tennessee and that there, "Weren't many slave owners there," so they continued on to Middle Tennessee where cotton and tobacco was of abundance.

And when we look back on the census records, majority of the Collins were mulatto, and of course that's a term that was used historically for mixed race. And not only that, but my Tally family, who the Collins were staying with, again, first cousins, they were listed as mulatto as well. Some of these individuals along the journey, well, when they left the mountains, were buried up there in the mountains as well. So, there's definitely a possible connection in viewing my DNA results, there's a nice hodgepodge of a lot of different races that are somewhat synonymous with the possibility of being Melungeon. So, I guess being in that Tennessee, Virginia Valley, that area, having kinfolk from that area, makes it a possible connection, as well as the Collin's last name.

Heather:

Now, Frederick, was that the first time that you ever heard about the Melungeon people from the stories of your great, great, great grandmother, or have you heard about the Melungeon people before that?

Frederick:

I didn't put two and two together. I've always been a student of history and early on Tennessee history because that's where I was raised. And I had come across some articles back in 2000, and there was this gentleman that was in Nashville that was discussing the Melungeons through research at the Tennessee State Library, I believe at the time. And I started looking at some of the surnames, such as Collins, I want to say Jones was one, I'm not 100% sure on that. So, I started looking at some of the surnames and I started kind of tracking some of our own family history to Middle Tennessee. And I said, "Well, wow, some of these names are kind of lining up." And then when I pulled out the document, the memoir that my grandmother had left us and her discussing the mountains, I said, "Well there's possible matches there." And then after that, we did the DNA test and I got my great aunt, who was the granddaughter of the specific individuals of this grandmother. And she took a test and there's Native blood, there's Portuguese blood, there's African-American, there's white, there's just all these different ethnicities. And I think that there's some Asian blood there as well; a small 2% or something like that. I have to look at it.

But I didn't necessarily think Melungeon at the time. And it wasn't until I visited Collinsville again, historic Collinsville, which is in Montgomery County, Tennessee. And I was like, "You know what, didn't I read something on this last name, Collins and Eastern Tennessee, Virginia, like that corridor, et

cetera, et cetera?" And then I kind of just put two and two together that there is a possibility that was there. So Melungeon is still technically a new word for me. Within the past 10, 15 years, I've been kind of just delving into it a little bit more, not as hard as I have been my family genealogy research, but definitely something I'm keeping on the radar. Specifically because we were all immigrants to this country, and I just find it fascinating that in that little small space up in the mountains in Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, et cetera, et cetera, that there could be these specific individuals that were once a staple in those communities and almost virtually advantaged at this point. So it's all interesting to me.

Heather:

It really is Frederick. And what you were just mentioning, sounds just like my family and our DNA, so it's all interconnected.

Frederick:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Heather:

The Melungeons, being a mixed ethnic group of people who were either too white to be black or too black to be white. Frederick, can you discuss more about historical trauma and its relation to African-Americans and mixed ethnic groups of people like the Melungeons?

Frederick:

Yeah. So historically, this country race is what drove the policymaking, lawmaking, the hierarchy of where a person's place is in society. I mean the word race in itself, it's not an actual thing. It's something that was created in order to create a divide amongst humans. And unfortunately, that has been the moral injury of this country and also others, ever since the inception of the word, because it was created of course, to divide. Historically, you had the one drop rule, to where, if you had one drop of African, Native; any blood outside of white blood, then of course, you would be considered a person of color, a Negro, et cetera, et cetera. So that's kind of our starting point with what that is, based on this ideology of white is always right, or white supremacy ideology. And not necessarily always coming from a space of hate, but just coming from a space of division, of what's better and what's not.

So, when we look at life over the centuries and over the decades, with regards to how a person's race has been negatively perceived with stereotypes, with classism and things like that, it still sticks with us today. It's stings, but it's something that's very real. And based on the one drop rule alone, those individuals in Melungeon communities were treated no differently than black folks or Hispanics or Native, who did not fit the quote unquote status quo of being white.

So, from a historical trauma standpoint, the same adversities and the different challenges, the transgressions that some African-Americans, Native Americans, et cetera, et cetera, had to experience, the Melungeons would have most likely experienced the very exact same thing. And I think that that was noted in some of the clips that I've seen for your documentary. So it's deeply lodged and embedded in our DNA, that if a person never gets the opportunity to have a break, with regards to having to pay attention to the color of their skin on a daily basis, then that brings up all kinds of different challenges, as far as anxiety, depression, substance abuse disorder, and the list goes on and on. So yeah, it's something that's very real and it's something that we have to definitely pay attention to. But more importantly, it's something that we can't forget. Because how some people show up in the world today, is directly related to their ancestors in the past.

Heather:

Frederick, how does this trauma, this historical trauma affect us today?

Frederick:

It affects us today because it's a reminder. Sadly I saw the video this morning of the gentlemen in Minnesota that passed. He was laying face down and handcuffed and there was a police officer, a white police officer, who had his knee on the gentleman's neck for seven minutes. And you hear him gurgling and you hear him saying that he cannot breathe and things like that. Well, that's a form of modern-day lynching. And if you're an individual that's steeped in history and you have seen some of those traumatic pictures in the past, in where individuals of color were hanged, and there were literally watch parties and some people paid five bucks to get into these parties and watch these bodies being hanged or burned, those images never leave. The images of people from all races that were freedom riders and campaigning against racism and in wanting equity and quality down in states like Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, all these different places that had dogs sicked on them, being beaten with the police billy clubs, or images of the Klan disrupting certain events. Those things are very traumatic and those things are very real. And because of the simple fact that people have that memory, let me back up, whether it's something from an oral history standpoint that was passed down from one generation to the next, if there hasn't been an opportunity for individuals to tell someone something different than what it is that has always been historically put in place, that has manifested itself and manipulated itself in many forms, it's got a direct link to what it is that we feel and what we see today. And what I saw today in looking at that video, was the modern-day scene of lynching. And that's traumatic for me as an African-American male that has to walk out of my door on a daily basis and be very cognizant of what I look like before I have to be cognizant that I'm human being.

Heather:

So speaking on that Frederick, I did see the video as well, and I was going to also mention the book, Slavery By Another Name and there's a documentary called Slavery By Another Name, that talks about police brutality against people of color; the African-American community. And that's what people don't think about with historical trauma. I mean, that is historical trauma at its greatest. And in speaking to that, what are some things we can do today in teaching anti-racism?

Frederick:

I think that one of the most humane things to do, is to actually just call it what it is. I think that people find more comfort in the truth. I think that people can better empower themselves with knowing what it is that they have experienced. And it extends so much further than quote unquote race, it also extends itself in sexual assault, rape, classism. It extends itself in so many different ways and forms, but a person has to be able to be comfortable enough to call it what it is. And I think that from a humanistic standpoint, that we all have to galvanize around each other and say for ourselves, "This is what you're experiencing," or, "From my purview, this is what it is," and then sit down and deconstruct that and see how and allowing people to just be them. I think that growing up in the South, I've lived in the South all

my life in various different Southern states. It was so very black and white for so long. A person could have been Melungeon and they were just considered black or they were considered Hispanic or we'll call them Hispanic. Everyone was either you're black, white, or Mexican, that's what the South has been for a while. You either black, white, or Mexican, and that Mexican quote unquote, could have been from Cuba, or they could have been from Puerto Rico, but in the good old South, it was just black, white or Mexican. And I think that one of the things that we have to do is allow people to make sure that they are in tune with their cultural heritage, allow them to practice their cultural heritage without any type of pushback. There was a young boy in Utah and he was Native American and he came to school with a mohawk and they sent him home. I think of some of the African-American kids that were wearing dreadlocks or braids, and they were threatening to not allow them to graduate or allowing them to be in school because they had those different hairstyles.

So, when you're doing that, then you're telling people that from a cultural standpoint, they shouldn't be practicing what is innate for them. They should assimilate to this standard that is more acceptable and more palatable to the macro community. And when that happens, then you're chipping away at a person's independence. You're chipping away at a person's ability to develop a sense of self-discovery and to develop a sense of pride, with regards to being confident in who culturally that person is. So, I think that we have to keep having conversation around these things, so individuals can know what is offensive and what's not. But more importantly, create action steps and create safe spaces for people to be able to flourish being who they really are. So, I think it's a call to humanity to accept people for who they are, to ask questions and to give yourself permission to be ignorant when need be and ask questions on how to become more competent in what is a cultural norm from one race to the other. So that's my suggestion, with regards to how to make this thing more palatable for everyone. So we can kind of get past some of the silliness that goes along with racism.

Heather:

Excellent; I completely agree. And this is a great point in our interview where I would like to go into your documentaries, and we'll start with The American South As We Know It. Just give us how you came up with the idea and a brief synopsis of the documentary.

Frederick:

So with The American South As We Know It, I've always been a student of oral history, of just sitting down with my elders, having conversations about things that have happened in the past and some of the challenges and some of the ways they've been able to be resilient. I grew up around my aunt and my great aunts and my great, great aunts and uncles, was blessed to have my grandmother, my great grandmother and my great, great grandmother in my life before she passed. So, sitting down at the table, at those big family dinners and family reunions, being nosy about individual's experiences in the early 1900s, while I was told to go outside and play, I'm just hanging around; just kind of eaves dropping and getting as much information as possible. And as I got older and older, I think I mentioned to you when we first started communicating, that I found a well, I saw a picture of my grandmother, Isabella Jones Tally, and my grandfather, Amos Tally. And that kind of stuck with me because she looked like a white lady and he looked like an African-American man. And the picture was taken in the late 1800s or the early 1900s. And something said to me that this wasn't supposed to be taking place because of segregation, Jim Crow and black codes and things like that.

So that kind of jump started this whole journey of asking questions, with regards to how society was, what people remembered, et cetera, et cetera. So, as I got older and older, I've always kept a tight connection with some of my older family members, as well as people in the communities, in which I live.

So I'm a therapist by trade; a mental health counselor, and like anything, if you don't keep certain things fresh, you kind of get burnt out. I was getting kind of burnt out and I said, "How can I merge my passion with what it is I've learned technically from school?" And this oral history project was, I felt the best way to do that. I was able to combine the best of both worlds and use the tactical skills of asking questions with these individuals, who experienced certain things during Jim Crow. So, I traveled throughout the South for a year and a half, interviewing individuals about their specified experiences during Jim Crow. And out of that, came the documentary, The American South As We Know It, which fortunately, has won some awards and been screened well over 100 times in various different places throughout the South. And with that screening, I provide the presentation utilizing film to better understand historical trauma in the African-American community. So that's kind of how that documentary came about.

Heather:

All right, wonderful Frederick. So let's move on to your second documentary, The Other Side Of The Coin: Race, Generations and Reconciliation. Was this documentary more of an extension from your first one, The American South As We Know It, or did you want to take this into a different area?

Frederick:

Well, I was at the Charlotte Hawkins Brown historic site, which is in a Gibsonville, North Carolina. I believe it's in Gibsonville; It's right outside of Greensboro. And I was screening the American South As We Know It and this white lady had come up to me afterwards, and her eyes were just full of tears. And mind you, that the American South As We Know It had only been out for, I want to say three months at this time. And she waited until everyone left and she comes up to me and she just says, "I just want to give you a hug." And I said, "Sure, absolutely." So gave her a hug and she says that, "Your documentary brought up so many things that I have held suppressed," in relation to her picketing and marching while she was attending college in Greensboro, North Carolina Women's College, because her African-American classmates weren't able to shop at the same stores that her and her other white friends were able to shop in. So, it brought up these different types of feelings. And I said, "This is powerful." I've come across so many individuals who are allies, but they don't necessarily know how to approach the space of being an ally on a bigger level. So I said to her, her name is Susan Marshall, and she's featured in the new documentary. I said, "Hey, if I stuck a camera in your face, would you tell me that exact same thing?" And I laughed, because I thought it was funny. But she kind of gave me this stoic look of fear. And she said, "I don't know if I can do that." And I said, "Well, if you were able to march and picket and do all those things when you were a teenager, I hope that this is something that can help expound upon your efforts, even still to this day." So, she said, "Well, let me think about it. Shoot me an email." And about two weeks later, I was in her house. And she broke out all of these documents of her father writing to her, telling her to be safe. And if anyone messes with her, to make sure that she's with groups of friends. And he didn't necessarily 100% agreed with the cause for her picketing and sitting in for her African-American friends, but he understood her wanting to, and he would be supportive of that.

So, when I had that first interview in, and I'm one of those guys to where, if I get an idea, I got to run with it, I just kept going. So I owe a lot of this second documentary to her, because if it wasn't for her coming up to me and uttering those words and being brave to do such, and this is someone 40 years, 30 some odd years her junior, and us having that connection, which we still have today, I'm not quite sure The Other Side Of The Coin would have come out or would be in the process of coming out. Because my next film, I was focusing on the Chitlin circuit in the South during segregation, which of course, is centered on African-American entertainers traveling throughout the South, playing at joints and all these other places just to get a name for themselves because they weren't able to go into white

spaces. Susan Marshall, she's the reason in which why I got started with The Other Side of The Coin: Race, Generations and Reconciliation.

Heather:

So, The American South As We Know It, that's out, that's completed. Now The Other Side Of The Coin: Race, Generations and Reconciliation, it is completed. So do you have a date of when you're going to release it?

Frederick:

Yes. The film is completed, we're just finishing up on a couple of editing things before its 100% complete. We were supposed to have our live screening at the Full Frame Theater in Durham, North Carolina; that was going to be the premiere of it, or for it, rather. But of course, with COVID-19, that has pushed into the back burner with regards to the release date. I'm a type of person that likes to be in front of people, because I think that the dialogue is so important and so influential and impactful, that I'm trying to figure out right now, if I'm going to release it now on multiple streaming services, or if I'm going to kind of hold tight and wait until it's at least 90% safe again, for people to congregate with each other. I was fortunate enough to be selected with the exhibition copy of that film in the Longleaf Film Festival, which is in Raleigh, North Carolina, and that was a virtual film festival. But I don't have any problems with virtual film festivals and things like that. I just kind of like to be there, because I think that the dialogue afterwards is so much more important and being able to be in the midst of other humans physically, so you can share that energy and work collectively on trying to develop some type of objectives to keep the conversation going, as well as different types of suggestions for people to take back to their own community.

So, I think that the documentary, with everything that's going on right now, and that has always been going on, I think it's going to be very timely of course, but I want to be very strategic with regards to how I release it, so I can maximize on it as much as possible with regards to exposure and getting it into the right hands for people to learn about people's perception of how race has affected them over various different generations, as well as what individuals believe from a subjective standpoint, what's needed for reconciliation. So, I'm at a coin toss right now. I kind of don't know exactly what it is that I want to do with how I roll it out, but I'll definitely let you know something really soon.

Heather:

All right, perfect. So my last question to you is, was there anything that surprised you and, or that you learned for the first time while you were working on your documentaries?

Frederick:

For The American South As We Know It, I think having to understand the resilience of individuals that lived during Jim Crow, I always knew you had to be tough, but I didn't know you had to be that tough. I didn't know that every time a mother sent her child out, that she would have to pray that her daughter didn't get raped, or her son didn't get murdered, or that their house didn't get bombed in the middle of the night. I didn't know the disrespect that would happen for African-American service men who would come home from fighting for our country, to be told that they couldn't drink out of a white-

water fountain, the cold-water fountains. I didn't know that the teachers in some of these schools, I didn't recognize how much they weren't just teachers, but they were mothers. They were aunts, they were grandmothers, they were everything to these kids in these Rosenwald schools, in these colored schools. It's very tough to fathom those things, being a kid that grew up in the 80s, that didn't necessarily have all of these different restrictions. Of course, I've read about them. I heard about some of these things, but to sit down across from someone who tells you these things and they haven't talked about them in over 30, 40 some odd years, because someone didn't ask, that makes it a little bit more impactful. Even being a therapist, it's still tough to hear those things, because I just want to wrap my arms around them and say, "I hate that you had to experience those things." But the toughness, it was there and it's still there, and that's what keeps these individuals going.

So that was something with the very first documentary, The American South as We Know It, that was very new to me. And with the second documentary, I had the opportunity to interview a gentleman by the name of, well two gentlemen; one by the name of Bill Sizemore, and he's a white male, and an African-American male named George Sizemore. Well, it wasn't until about five minutes into filming that I found out that George, they call him Uncle George, his father was enslaved. And Uncle George is 101 years old now. I spoke with him the other day and he's still in good spirits and doing well. But that was my very first encounter with someone whose parent was enslaved, and Uncle George was 12 years old when his father passed. So, here's someone who represents the bloodline of direct one generation relative removed from the institution of slavery. So that was a very powerful moment, because of the simple fact that the information that was imparted by Uncle George was something that a lot of people may not ever experience. And even meeting him is something that a lot of people won't even be able to experience, because there's not very many of them that are left. So that was very powerful, getting direct information from the child of a formerly enslaved person. So those two things, amongst a whole lot of other things, really stood out to me.

Heather:

Wow. That last one is incredible. Well, Frederick, it has been an absolute pleasure having you on our podcast. Is there anything else you would like to add or to say?

Frederick:

Yeah. I love what you all are doing. I think that it's so important that we have torchbearers with regards to keeping all different ethnicities, cultures, race, religion, et cetera, et cetera, keeping them alive. And it takes brave souls to do it because there's a lot of research that's involved, traveling, questions and that good stuff. But I just appreciate what it is that you all are doing, with regards to keeping the Melungeon name alive, making it valid, vouching for individuals' history and not allowing it to kind of be lost in the frays. So, I just thank you all for what it is that you're doing and thank you for having me on the show. And if individuals want to follow me and find me, you can find me at History Before Us on social media platforms. Again, that's History Before Us, and my website is www.historybeforeus.com.

Lis:

You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA Executive Committee, we'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at melungeon.org. That's M-E-L-U-N-G-E-O-N. O-R-G. The information, views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode, do not