

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**TYKEE JAMES**

Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures

Transcript of a Research Interview  
Conducted by

Roger Eardley-Pryor

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

on

2 August 2017

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history is one in a series initiated by the Chemical Heritage Foundation in partnership with PennFuture, PennEnvironment, the Energy Coordinating Agency, Citizens Climate Lobby, and Planet Philadelphia on G-Town Radio. The series, titled “Imagining Philadelphia’s Energy Futures,” documents the personal perspectives of Philadelphia citizens interested in impacts on their city from energy use and climate change. The series records individual histories and then asks participants to imagine the future of Philadelphia, particularly with regard to energy production and use.

The “Imagining Philadelphia’s Energy Futures” project is made possible, in part, through funding from Philadelphia’s Climate and Urban Systems Partnership.

<http://www.cuspproject.org/>



# Climate & Urban Systems Partnership



THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION  
Center for Oral History  
**Release Form for Research Interview**

**Title of the Research Study:** “Imagining Philadelphia’s Energy Futures”

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#### Participation in the Research Interview

You, **Tykee James**, are asked to participate in an interview with **Roger Eardley-Pryor**, representing the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF), on **August 2, 2017**. If you participate, your oral history interview will be made part of CHF’s collections and will be available for educational, non-commercial use. This document is intended to inform you fully of what you are being asked to do and of your rights as an oral history participant. If you choose to participate, your recorded oral history interview will be transcribed and used in an educational workshop exploring storytelling, future visioning, and deliberation; possibly included in a local Philadelphia radio show and podcast featured on G-Town radio; and stored on a public website documenting the project, which will remain online as a model for local educators to host classroom workshops envisioning Philadelphia’s energy futures.

The Chemical Heritage Foundation will maintain the recordings, transcripts, photographs, research materials, and memorabilia (collectively called the “Work”) and will make them available in accordance with general policies for research and other scholarly purposes. You hereby grant, assign, and transfer to the Chemical Heritage Foundation all right, title, and interest in the Work, including the literary rights and the copyright, except that you shall retain the right to copy, use, and publish the Work in part or in full until my death. The transcript may be read and the recording(s) heard online by the general public. You understand that the Chemical Heritage Foundation retains the rights to all materials generated about my research interview and may post information about the interview on their website, including the full audio and transcript, as well as excerpts, clips, and quotes.

#### The Research Interview

If you choose to participate, this interview will be recorded within the period of time previously agreed upon by you and Roger Eardley-Pryor. Should Roger Eardley-Pryor feel that more time is needed to

complete the interview, arrangements can be made to extend the interview at your convenience. Once the interview is complete, it will be transcribed and edited for readability in accordance with the Center for Oral History's policies and procedures. No one outside of the Center for Oral History, its affiliates, and Roger Eardley-Pryor will be able to access the interview until the final transcript is finished. Once work is complete, the interview transcript and audio will be made available for scholars' use.

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As a participant, you have the right not to answer any of the questions asked during the interview should you consider them uncomfortable or inappropriate. If you need to take a break from the interview or if you have a question or points for clarification during the interview, you can ask that the recorder be turned off temporarily. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw consent and cease all participation in this interview at any time.

#### Risks, Benefits, and Costs

CHF knows of no risks or negative consequences associated with participation in this interview, and you may not receive any direct benefit from your participation, but you are aware that others may benefit from the knowledge you provide in this interview. You understand that there is no cost to participate in this interview and you will not be paid for your time; you will, however, be contributing to an educational project engaged at the intersections of energy and climate change.

#### Support for this Oral History Project

"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" uses a narrative approach that encourages deliberation, storytelling, and creativity to imagine a future where Philadelphia uses, produces, and relies on renewable energy. The project is made possible by through the Climate & Urban Systems Partnership (CUSP).

#### Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in the creation of this oral history before or during the recording of the interview, or about the processing of the transcript, please contact the Director of the Institute for Research at the Chemical Heritage Foundation.

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Agreement

After you have read the information contained within this release form, and Roger Eardley-Pryor offered to answer any questions or concerns about this document or the interview, please consider whether you would like to sign this agreement. If you are interested in participating in this research interview and consent to the process as described above, please sign below.

(Signature)  \_\_\_\_\_  
**Tykee James**  
(Date) 8/2/17

(Signature)  \_\_\_\_\_  
**Roger Eardley-Pryor**  
(Date) 8/2/2017

(Signature of Parent/Guardian of Interviewee if under 18) \_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian of Interviewee

(Date) \_\_\_\_\_

This research interview is designated **Free Access**.

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Chemical Heritage Foundation  
Center for Oral History  
315 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106



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## INTERVIEWEE

**Tykee James** was born on January 21, 1994 at Temple Hospital in North Philadelphia. He soon moved with his parents to Fort Irwin military base in the High Mojave Dessert of California. In 2000, after his parents' separation, he moved with his mother and brothers to Racine, Wisconsin, where Tykee began Latin dancing. In 2009, his family then moved to northwest Texas. In Texas, Tykee played football, competed regionally with a Latin dance team, and argued on the debate team. In 2011, just before his senior year of high school, he returned with his family to Philadelphia. Upon arriving in West Philadelphia, Tykee suffered a severe asthma attack that forced his hospitalization and ignited his concern for clean air. Upon recovery, Tykee attended Motivation High School and, as a subcontractor with the Philadelphia Water Department, became a public educator and naturalist with Cobbs Creek Environmental Center. Now a student at Temple University, Tykee is pursuing a degree in communication with a focus in rhetoric and public advocacy. He also works as a legislative aid to the Honorable Donna Bullock, who represents Philadelphia's 195th district in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

## INTERVIEWER

**Roger Eardley-Pryor** is a historian of contemporary science, technology, and the environment. His work explores ways that twentieth and twenty-first-century scientists and engineers, culture-makers, and political actors have imagined, confronted, or cohered with nature at various scales, from the atomic to the planetary. Before earning his Ph.D. in 2014 from the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), Roger was a National Science Foundation graduate fellow at UCSB's Center for Nanotechnology in Society. After earning his Ph.D., Roger taught courses at Portland State University, at Linfield College in Oregon, and at Washington State University in Vancouver, Washington. In Philadelphia, Roger accepted a postdoctoral research fellowship in the Center for Oral History at the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF). Roger co-designed, earned funding for, and managed this place-based oral history project titled "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures."

## PROJECT

**"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures"** is an oral history and public education project about energy, climate change, and the future of Philadelphia. The project uses a narrative approach that encourages deliberation, storytelling, and creativity. It asks the following questions: As climate change reconditions our lives, city, and planet, how do Philadelphia citizens imagine using and producing energy in the year 2067, or 2140, or 2312? And how might the personal histories of these citizens shape the ways they imagine Philadelphia's energy futures?

The project consists of oral history interviews with a small but diverse set of Philadelphia citizens. The oral history interviewees were selected in collaboration with the project's partners: the Chemical Heritage Foundation, PennFuture, PennEnvironment, Energy

Coordinating Agency, Citizens Climate Lobby, and Planet Philadelphia on G-Town Radio. The majority of each oral history interview records a participant's personal history. Next, interviewees share their visions of energy use and production in Philadelphia by imagining three time periods in the future. The future time periods are the year 2067, fifty years from the present; the year 2140, nearly one hundred twenty five years from the present; and the year 2312, nearly three hundred years from the present.<sup>1</sup> Content from the oral history interviews then serve as the basis for further storytelling, future visioning, and deliberation in a public educational workshop held at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in October 2017.

"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" is based on the idea that discussing visions of the future can help individuals and groups construct and articulate meaningful stories about the current challenges they confront, identify potential solutions to those challenges, and reflect on how these might influence themselves and their community as a whole. Research on ways to enhance societal capacity for governing complex energy transitions reveals that narrative and storytelling helps facilitate improved engagement and decision-making among mixed groups. Stories and narratives enable the incorporation of contributions from different groups of people to build collective frames of reference. In light of our need to transition to renewable energy sources, narratives offer communication strategies and practices that can help promote broader engagement and participation in energy choices, more diverse kinds of policy information and input, and greater capacity to imagine and invent new energy futures.<sup>2</sup>

Imagining and discussing Philadelphia's energy futures allows city residents to imagine—and inhabit, in their minds—multiple, alternative visions of the future that may result from choices made today. Energy plays a powerful role in any city's techno-economic systems, yet energy use and production is also inseparable from a city's social systems and environmental relationships. When Philadelphians imagine renewable and distributed ways of using and producing sustainable energy in the future, they are not just imagining new techno-economic systems. They are also re-imagining the ways social relations and political power works in their lives. And they are re-imagining interrelationships to our local, regional, and global environments.

"Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" was funded, in part, by Philadelphia's Climate and Urban Systems Partnership (CUSP). The CUSP approach to climate change education emphasizes local, relevant, and solutions-focused methodologies. The oral history interviews and public education workshop for "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" takes place in Philadelphia with local Philadelphians. The project is relevant in wake of the recent failures by Philadelphia's energy industry and the city's environmental activists to find any compromise on a vision and framework for Philadelphia's energy future.<sup>3</sup> Collaboration to

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<sup>1</sup> The years 2140 and 2312 were selected to complement Kim Stanley Robinson's science fiction novels. See Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140* (New York: Orbit, 2017); and Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312* (New York: Orbit, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Clark A. Miller, Jason O'Leary, Elizabeth Graffy, Ellen B. Stechel, Gary Dirks, "Narrative Futures and the Governance of Energy Transitions," *Futures* 70 (2015): 65-74; Rob VanWynsberghe, Janet Moore, James Tansey, and Jeff Carmichael "Towards Community Engagement: Six Steps to Expert Learning for Future Scenario Development," *Futures* 35 (2003): 203-219; Jana-Axinja Paschen and Ray Ison, "Narrative Research in Climate Change Adaptation: Exploring a Complementary Paradigm for Research and Governance," *Research Policy* 43:6 (2014): 1083-1092.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Colaneri, "Philadelphia Fails to Find Common Ground on 'Energy Hub,'" *StateImpact Pennsylvania*, March 11, 2016: <https://stateimpact.npr.org/pennsylvania/2016/03/11/philadelphia-fails-to-find-common-ground->



achieve Philadelphia's systemic energy transition to renewable sources must be broad-based and inclusive. This project seeks to produce and re-produce, on a small and manageable scale, efforts to build a shared vision of that renewable energy future, from the bottom up, with local Philadelphians. "Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures" is solutions-focused in that formulating and sharing visions of the future can help individuals and groups make meaning of contemporary challenges they confront; it can help determine possible solutions to those challenges; and it can help individuals and groups consider ways that certain solutions might impact their lives and their community as a whole.

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[on-energy-hub/](#). See also the minutes of the meeting of the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission Board Committee from January 28, 2016, <http://www.dvrpc.org/Committees/Board/2016-01.pdf>, accessed February 25, 2017; "Philadelphia Energy Vision Working Group," *Raab Associates, Ltd.*, last updated January 13, 2016, <http://www.raabassociates.org/main/projects.asp?proj=134&state=Services> (accessed February 25, 2017).

**INTERVIEWEE:** Tykee James  
**INTERVIEWER:** Roger Eardley-Pryor  
**LOCATION:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
**DATE:** 2 August 2017

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** All right. This is Roger Eardley-Pryor and I'm here with Tykee James for another of our interviews with the Imagining Philadelphia's Energy Futures project. We are at the Chemical Heritage Foundation. Today is August 2, 2017. Tykee would you mind spelling your name for me?

**JAMES:** Yes. T-Y-K-E-E and then J-A-M-E-S.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** All right. And Tykee, where were you born?

**JAMES:** I was born in North Philadelphia.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** When were you born?

**JAMES:** The twenty-first day of the one hundred and ninety fourth year. Okay, one thous—nevermind. [Laughter] Nineteen ninety-four. January 21.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Nice. Jan. 24. All right.

**JAMES:** Twenty-first.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Twenty-first?

**JAMES:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Cool. And you said North Philly?

**JAMES:** [Yes].

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Where in North Philly?

**JAMES:** It was just off of Ninth and Diamond. I was born at Temple Hospital.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh.

**JAMES:** It was a Friday. I remember it fondly. [Laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** You remember it fondly. [Laughter] Beautiful day it was.

**JAMES:** Yes, great, great winter day.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Awesome. So how would you describe yourself to somebody who hasn't met you?

**JAMES:** Charismatic. I would—the first thing I would say is probably charismatic. And if I'm eccentric, it's because it's probably on purpose. I'm an undercover strategic thinker, but I like having some fun with words.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Cool. Have—is your family from Philadelphia as well?

**JAMES:** Yes. My dad went to Northeast and I believe my mom went to Albany.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What are your parents' names?

**JAMES:** Jewel Felder James is my mother, and Woonel Edward James is my father. I believe his middle name is Edward.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Woonel?

**JAMES:** Yeah. W-O-O-N-E-L.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Cool. Tell me about how they met. How did you come into this world and what's their story before you arrived.

**JAMES:** Well, I'm one of three. I'm second born—or after the first two. Yeah, I'm second born from him [my father]. My oldest brother comes from a different dad. You know, we love each other all the same. Second from him and I have one younger brother.

The story goes that they met because somebody must have done something rude to my mother and my father spoke up and beat him up.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Chivalrous introduction to each other.

**JAMES:** Yeah. That's what I—that's the story that I was told. And I always roll my eyes because I don't know if it's true or not. But that really started their relationship. Him showing a humbling amount of courage, whether it be hilarious, and then her, in some ways, conceding to his humanity just to start a basis of a relationship in North Philly.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Nice. Have they lived in Philly their whole lives? Are they from Philly?

**JAMES:** Yeah. They were born and raised both in Philly, and when they got married and had four kids—three kids—well three together, then moved to California. My dad was in the military.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** When was that? How old were you?

**JAMES:** I was alive. [laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** You were a baby though?

**JAMES:** Yeah, I was a baby. So I don't directly remember getting on a plane to go to California as much as I remember after California, getting on a plane to go to Wisconsin.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Huh. Well how long were you all—where in California were you?

**JAMES:** Military Base Fort Irwin.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Fort Irwin? I don't know where that is.

**JAMES:** It's out in the middle of the desert. When I say California, everyone always thinks L.A., but really—as I'm understanding at this age—it was a spot that they used weapons and tactics in case they ever were to go to a part of the world similar in having desert-like storms present. So it was interesting that that's where I was during that time—early nineties, mid-nineties, leading up to 2000 is when I think my parents divorced. And when they divorced, I moved to Wisconsin. Lived there for nine years.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Where in Wisconsin?

**JAMES:** Racine, 262.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So your parents separated in 2000, and that's around the time you all moved to—

**JAMES:** Or—I feel like it was 2000 or 1999. Between one of those two dates—I don't necessarily remember who I spent New Years with or how my birthday was spent, because normally those two are coincided. Wherever for New Years, and then a couple of weeks later is my birthday. So where was I during those times? I don't exactly remember. But when I came to Wisconsin, it was cold. I know that for sure. And I don't know if it was cold because I was relatively warm living in California. A lot of—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Wisconsin is straight-up cold in the winter.

**JAMES:** Yeah. Or is it just like, that is a brutal, brutal welcome. <T: 05 min>

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Well tell me about—so you spent a good six years of young childhood living in California in the desert there with your family. What are some of your memories of being a young child?

**JAMES:** Well, we lived on the military base, so everyone's house looked the same. Everybody went to the same school and everybody was from somewhere else. I could tell that we all weren't born here. I can—immediately everyone knew that. And my friends were diverse in complexion and diverse in nationality—or not—ethnicity I'll say. We would always try to find ways to be different. I would see that my mom would arrange the pebbles in front of our house in a star or a circle so that there's a uniqueness to our house. Something we can recognize on our way home from school. We would play in a park that was, you know, like a regular old park. I don't have a lot of memories of it.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** I'm having a hard time picturing it. So the desert? I'm picturing like the Mojave.

**JAMES:** Oh, okay. Yeah, so imagine there's a utopia I guess, because none of the grass was actually real—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** But there was grass?

**JAMES:** — but it was basically plopped, like a liveable...something. A place that for about maybe two miles, people wouldn't complain about. Nice houses, one floor, I think it was adobe style—or if that's a style. Adobo or—let me think. I'm trying to remember here. Each car had a driveway. Each member of the house was probably a member of the military. And everybody's kids would want to play together, because it's just like the wives would really be at home all day. I realized after the fact, you know. I learned that you just really stayed at home, did things, and then go to work and the earth would shake. And that wasn't an earthquake. That was them dropping a bomb or something.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Wow! You remember that as a kid?

**JAMES:** [Yes]. We would just be chilling, eating dinner and then everything would shake and mom would be like, "Oh, that's just dad at work. Don't worry about it." And we'd be like, "Oh, okay." And we would buy things in bulk. I remember twenty boxes of Kellogg's Frosted Flakes.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Why?

**JAMES:** Because I guess the military store, that's how they sold it. And also it's probably convenient, because the military store is not like Walmart or it's not like Target where you walk in and there's all these different options. You walk in, and you get that or that or that. A, B, or C. Buy it all now because you don't want to go back here. It's not, like I'm saying, it's not like Walmart. I don't have a lot of memories being there or customer service, but I would just imagine it's not really spruced up. Or you wouldn't have the same expectations of the military shopping places as you would Walmart.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Well you mentioned a park you would play in.

**JAMES:** Yeah it was—we were one of the closest houses to the park, so we would frequent—go to the park and take pictures, stand on things. You know, like what you do as a little person. You don't have that much, you don't move too fast, you don't climb on things all that well. So most of what we would do—me and my little brother would do things, and just to take pictures. You know, “Oh, that's good. Let's call it a day.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How much age difference is there between the four of you all?

**JAMES:** So Kyle, the oldest, he is twenty-four now—no, no he's twenty-five. Because then Woonel, my immediate oldest, he's twenty-four and I'm twenty-three. And my youngest brother Marquis, he's twenty, turning twenty-one in October.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh, right on.

**JAMES:** Yeah. He was—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Pretty close in age there.

**JAMES:** Yeah. My brother and Woonel—Woonel and I we're closer than that. We're only ten months apart. So when it's my birthday, we're the same age for about a month. And we're not twins officially, but we always—when we were old enough to do the math, we figured out how bad that was. Or not bad, maybe weird. Like, wow really?

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** It happened quick. [laughter]

**JAMES:** Like I feel like for the people who knew my mom, like “You’re pregnant all the time.” I feel like that was their impression. “You’re pregnant 24/7, 365.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So when you’re—your brothers are all pretty similar in age, so were they mostly who you’d play with?

**JAMES:** Yeah at the time. I mean, I wasn’t the one who liked playing tag and running around a whole lot. I was the one who would like, “Hey look at that. Let’s investigate. I have questions. I have questions that have answers that my parents can’t necessarily satisfy. So maybe I’ll look at that, and then I’ll try to find that in a book.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Really? Even at a young age, to research that kind of thing?

**JAMES:** Yeah, but I—it was like, “Huh. My parents are not the leading authority on all information. They know—they definitely know things, but they don’t know everything. So maybe I should consult a different source.” And then that’s when it started with the whole idea of science.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Really? For you?

**JAMES:** [Yes]. Because I would look at the stars, and I’d be like, “What are these? How did they get there? What do they mean?” And <T: 10 min> living in the middle of the desert in California is one of the most beautiful night skies you can see. I remember when my mom said, “Oh, it’s not an earthquake.” Well what’s an earthquake? So—I thought the earth quaked when dad’s at work, so I don’t really understand. How does lightning and thunder happen? There were so many questions that were fundamentally part of my life. Fundamentally part of my day that I would want answers for. I mean, maybe not so fundamentally or not so persistently. But still, it was like, that exists as a question. I can recognize that there’s an unsatisfied response that I have for that right now. And I would hope to relieve that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yeah, even as a young dude. So when your parents separated, did all of your family members come to Racine?

**JAMES:** Yeah.



**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Why did you all go to Racine?

**JAMES:** My mom had a sister there. Yeah, my auntie, I guess.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Was that aunt originally from Philly?

**JAMES:** Yeah.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So what brought her to Racine?

**JAMES:** I think her husband, my uncle. But I'm not sure because they—my auntie—that auntie and that uncle were both in the Navy. So they did a lot of moving around themselves. My cousins were born in Hawaii, I believe, because they just moved around so much. But they also lived in Philly. So I don't know really what brought them to Racine, if it was like, you know. They were both retired, I believe, at the time. They weren't active duty or anything, because hanging out with them at a young age, nothing would make me think they were in the military like my dad. Because my dad would wear camo. I would see his boots around and all that. And with them, they wore more just regular clothes, basically had regular jobs, and I was just like, "Okay." And I would see a picture of them with the red, white, and blue and they were in uniform. And I would make the connection, like "Oh yeah, you did that." I was just like, "Oh, this is regular. This is regular life."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yeah because that's just what it is when you're a kid.

**JAMES:** Yeah, not a lot of investigating besides the scientific investigations I guess, for me.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So you moved there, you were about six or seven, somewhere around there. And that was around the time you were starting to really get into some schooling. So what was school like in Wisconsin for you?

**JAMES:** I went to Wind Point Elementary School, and that's when I met my first best friend, Xavier Griffin. His birthday is Cinco de Mayo. There I lived at Shelbourne Court, unit number 103, and then unit number 75 I believe. I moved twice in that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How long did you all live there?

**JAMES:** We lived there for nine years. We lived there for a while.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Okay. Until about 2009?

**JAMES:** Yeah.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And that's when you all moved back to Philly?

**JAMES:** That's when we moved to Texas.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh, whoa. So 2009. So tell me—let's go back to 2009 in Texas. No, let's go back to Wisconsin for a bit because that's a really—it seems like a rich time period. Yeah, so tell me—

**JAMES:** I really found about—what I was really fond of in Racine was Main Street, Piggly Wiggly, and the fact that the YMCA was right next to the library, which was right near the beach. Now it's Wisconsin, so it's not like California beach where the water is warm or anything like that. But it was still scenic. It was still nice. And it—the space had a lot of opportunity for thought, and I definitely appreciated that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** In what way? Tell me what you mean by “it had opportunity for thought.”

**JAMES:** I feel like could just, I mean—not that I had my own agenda at the time. But I feel like I could just walk around and just think. And it wasn't like there was an interference with that. There wasn't a lot of external factors that would negatively effect anything I would think about or anything I would do. It would just be like, as long as I didn't mess up in school, I was good. I can go to the library. My mom was in college at the time, so she would go to the library and sometimes I would go with her. She would pick up a book and study, and I would just pick up a book and read next to her or something.

And then there, at the library, is where I figured out a lot of answers to things. Because I would be like, “Oh. Book on storms. I don't know that much about this. Let's see where this takes me.” I was mostly looking at the pictures, but I got—I would eventually get the more profound things, like lightning is very hot. Lightning—the air around lightning is twenty times

hotter than the sun. How is that possible? How hot is the sun? And then, I'd go to an astronomy book and like, "Look at this, the solar system. How is everything so big? Why is everything so big? How did the planets form? What is the Earth made of?" And then a geology book would come next. And more questions would come and more books would come.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How did your mom respond to this inquisitiveness? This little boy who had all these questions for her?

**JAMES:** She was like—she always thought that I would be the perfect college kid. I mean, she at the time in college had that same thirst. And she was studying art, and really was heavily involved with art history and when—even in the discipline of art. And I think in the same way she would see, "Okay, <T: 15 min> well this very interesting way this was arranged, this speaks—this is a signature, a motif of a certain artist. This artist at the time was actually different from the rest of this period for this reason." And she would really look at the history of decisions in art, and look at, sometimes even a more broad sense, this was the tone at the time. She was interested in that. I could never wrap my mind around it. It was really impressive.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** That's really cool.

**JAMES:** Most definitely.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So was—the separation, also. You're there—I assume your dad stayed in California, or was elsewhere?

**JAMES:** He stayed in California, I believe. He did come back into our lives a few times. So it would be an episodic kind of thing. "Oh, dad's back." And then no more. They hate each other. So it was in between them analyzing, "It's good for the kids, to stay together," versus "No, I can't live with you." And there was, at a time, some visitation trialed out, where it was like, "You guys hang out with your dad every other weekend. You guys hang out and see what he was up to."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What was that like?

**JAMES:** It was more boring there, because I didn't feel as inquisitive. I didn't feel as free to do anything. He would just sit us all in a room, and we would watch TV. I'd be like, "This is the least interesting thing we can do." Every now and then, we would go to the park, which I would

really enjoy. Every now and then, we would fly a kite. And in Wisconsin, I don't know what, but flying a kite is just the thing. It's just the bees knees, man. Different kites and all that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Wisconsin has—

**JAMES:** And just like as a kid, to watch a piece of paper fly. It doesn't make any sense. You don't learn about drag and lift until physics.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Wisconsin has a really rich history in America's environmental history. John Muir spent his childhood there, and a number of writers have come out of there that have done a lot for thinking about human-and-environment relationships. I'm wondering, as a kid there, would you guys go exploring in the woods? Was this kind of a—was there a nature experience that you had there? Or was it more confined to the city world? The city of Racine?

**JAMES:** I would say that it was mostly in Racine, because we would walk every day to Jerstad-Agerholm Middle School—home of the Jaguars. And although we couldn't see a lot of trees and mountains, they environment was also for us, climate. Because there would be weeks that we could look at the weekly forecast, the high would be 9 degrees. The low would be negative two. And the rule is, if it's negative 11, they have to close schools. So if it's negative 10, negative 9? We're walking to school still. So it definitely made me tough to cold weather because I was just like, "Ah, this is fine. This is what it is." But every now and then, things would get sort of strange. Why is it 50 degrees on Christmas? Why can we go out grilling on my birthday? This is sort of strange things that I'm recognizing as—I understand that climate—the climate of this place is like this.

There's a Wisconsin geography class that I took in elementary school, and there was a lot of understanding on how the lake effects the weather. So there was a huge talk about—I guess a communal understanding in Racine—about how Lake Michigan effects the wind, effects cold wind mostly, and brings rain. That was, I think at the time, what a lot of people understood, and what I would gather I guess.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** You mentioned in California at the—this kind of implanted suburb in the middle of the desert, that you all lived in—

**JAMES:** Yeah, it was really an implant. That's a really good way to say that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** —that there was a good bit of diversity and ethnicity in the families and people that you were hanging out with. What was this experience like in Racine? Were there other black families in the—aside from your aunt?

**JAMES:** Well, we lived with the aunt for a little while until my mom found a—[phone ringing] wow, how is that possible? And so my mom found a place on her own. Where we lived was Shelbourne. You know, that's when she had her own place. And that place—I would just—I know for a fact was a mostly minority community. And the reason was it's affordable. But even then, I saw that I would select friends that didn't necessarily look like me, or sound like me, or came from the same place. I mean, no one came from the same place.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Part of that inquisitiveness about who you're being with, too?

**JAMES:** Yeah exactly, like, “Oh, where are you from? How are you different? That's unique and let's celebrate that.” I had a friend named AJ who loved drinking milk. It was like his thing. Born and bred in Wisconsin.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** He's a dairy man through and through.

**JAMES:** Yeah, yeah right? Like he was the man, Mr. Wisconsin himself. Leshawn Hamilton, he was very nice. He taught me how to do backflips. I mean, I was the tallest of the group, so I was least likely to do it. <T: 20 min> But I did it a few times. We had Chris Avil, Arvil? I forgot how to pronounce his last name. But his sister's name is Jordan. And the first time that I met her, he was like, “All right, my sister's name is Jordan. I know it's a guy's name, but don't make fun of her.” And I was like, “No man, that's cool.” I was immediately the one to be like, “That's fine,” and everyone else was like, “Ha ha!” Anyway, at a young age I understood the—I'm not going to say understood, but I had at least a grasp on names aren't gender binary. It's not a girl name, guy name. It's a name you could give a girl, it's a name that you could give a guy, but you don't have to.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Speaking of names actually, the name Tykee is so unique. Where's that—what's the story behind that?

**JAMES:** I was told, you know, my dad—imagine this is like Congress. Or the House and the Senate. Dad's the House, mom's the Senate. From the House, you first introduced Tai Chi. Spelled exactly like you think it would be spelled, Tai Chi. That was shot down. It was like “Don't call anybody Tai Chi. That's setting them up for failure. We are a black family and that's just—you know, you're asking for problems that he's not going to be able to handle when he's a

little older.” And he first was like, “Okay, let’s change it to Tiki [pronounced ty-kee], but spell it T-I-K-I.” And she shot that down too, because she was like “That’s Tiki. No matter how you want to read it, that’s Tiki.” That was shot down. And then T-I-K-E-E, then T-Y-K-I. A lot of different versions until they finally found a bill that they could compromise on, and that was T-Y-K-E-E.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Why Tykee?

**JAMES:** I have no clue.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** It’s really cool. It’s a great name.

**JAMES:** There’s not that many. I know I’m not the only, but there definitely wasn’t that many in the nineties, in North Philadelphia. Woonel—I can understand my older brother because that’s his [my father’s] name. And then Marquis is a pretty common name. So I don’t know exactly—I’m glad that they fought about it and came up with that because it’s a unique name. Even though I have the initials TJ, no one ever calls me that. Yeah, so it’s very strange for me.

[Mumbling, checking cell phone.]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Do you need to take a call?

**JAMES:** No.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Okay.

**JAMES:** I thought I turned off the alarm, but I only set it on snooze. I was like, “Oh, that’s going to interfere with me in a couple of minutes.” And now it’s off.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So in Wisconsin, you were there until you were about twelve or so.

**JAMES:** Yeah, I would say closer to fourt—to thirteen because I didn’t finish middle school. The last day I had in Wisconsin, I was acting up in my English class. I don’t know exactly—Oh! I was acting up because it was my last day. And [my teacher] was like, “You know what, Tykee? You’re staying after class tomorrow.” And everybody in the classroom started laughing

because they knew it was my last day, but she didn't. And so I was just like, "I will happily see you tomorrow at four o'clock. I will happily see you then." And, you know, I never—I would serve the detention if she ever contacted me because—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** She's still there today waiting for you to show!

[Laughter]

**JAMES:** I would still serve the detention if she ever contacted me, but that was my last day there. Not the best impression, but I had a lot of great memories, so. I think Jerstad is when I first started dancing. We had a new school.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Is that important? Is that an important part of your life?

**JAMES:** Yeah because from then on, that's one of the few things I've been able to carry with me everywhere I've lived. Because I don't remember a whole lot from Philadelphia; I was very young. I don't have a lot to take with me from California because we left so abruptly, but from Wisconsin, I lived there for nine years. And for me especially, you know, when you're young it's like a huge majority of your life. And I can remember more obviously and I can make more of my own decisions. Some of those decisions weren't the best, but that's part of growing up.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Do you mind me asking about what things come to mind?

**JAMES:** Oh, I probably have some—you know, I got suspended for fighting. I probably did something stupid with one of my brothers, breaking stuff. But I learned very quickly that I should not do bad things because the consequence of doing that bad thing far outweighs—just don't—I just hate getting whooped. It was just the worst thing. I was like, "Man this is bad. I don't want to end up like this." You know, because yeah, I don't like it. I don't like the whole lead up to it, like "Pick out a belt." I don't like that part, I don't like the after part of it, I don't like any part of it. My friends can hear me outside screaming. It's the worst. I'm going to do the best I can to stay away from this kind of trouble. <T: 25 min> So I tried to—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Did you and your brothers get up to some trouble together?

**JAMES:** Mostly them. I started separating from them because of my interests, and because of my—you know, I would always seek differences. Like, "This is all the same, that's predictable."

But you know, “You’re not from here, where are you from?” Trying to make connections that are unique. I found out about that. I know, what was it, one of my—not one—yeah, yeah, I guess one of the girlfriends I had while I lived there, her name was Corina. She spoke Spanish and for me that was like, “What? You speak a completely different language. Can you speak Spanish to me all the time?” She did it until we broke up, but it was still a good relationship. I’d take her out if she called me. [Laughter] Mrs. [Middle School teacher] and Corina—if they ever need anything, I’m in Wisconsin. I’ll come through. [Laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Were you sad when you had to leave Wisconsin?

**JAMES:** Very. But I kind of got used to it, because even in Wisconsin, I moved around a lot. Well not a lot, but I moved around a few times, different neighborhoods, small stints though. And for me, I became really good at meeting new people. Because for me, everybody was new and everybody had a unique thing, and I was like, “That’s so unique. I want to get to know you. I want to connect with you, should you accept me.” You know, middle school is a hard time for anybody to find friends.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** That’s the truth. You mentioned a buddy named Xavier?

**JAMES:** Yeah, he actually introduced me to football. He introduced me to Michael Vick. At the time he was good. He’d show me this cover of Michael Vick, half football gear and then the other half, I think he’s in regular clothes. And he was like, “You should be like him. You’re left handed, right?” and I was like, “Yeah, I am.” But I throw right handed, so, close enough. [laughter] And that’s really when I started to think, “Man, if I could play football, I would.” Little be known, I later moved to Texas, where I did play football.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh is that right? I was going to say, football is a pretty big scene in Wisconsin, for the Packers. That’s Packers country.

**JAMES:** Yeah, yeah. But we were far away from Green Bay. I can’t even—I don’t—I think the most north I went was Milwaukee. And even at a young age, I understood beer and cheese. Brats were—that was the thing. My view of alcohol at the time wasn’t negative, I just knew that there were Mothers Against Drunk Driving. I knew that existed, but I also knew that alcohol was just like social. You’re around your friends, you’re at the Brewers game, you’re at the Green Bay game, and you just drink a little bit.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** The “Brewers” game even, right?



**JAMES:** Yeah, yeah. Mr. Vassal even, a great teacher, split us into different groups because it's easier to manage a class and my group was called the Brewers for some reason. I never understood that until I got older and then I was like, "Oh, brewery." And then Milwaukee, the baseball team. I just never understood it.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So the experiences, up to that point, seem to be in smaller communities. Did you ever take trips to the big city like Chicago nearby? It's a huge city.

**JAMES:** The closest we came to Chicago was Glendale, I think, in Illinois, to ride some horses. Like and that was about as close.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Not a city experience. [Laughter]

**JAMES:** No, no, no, not as you would imagine, but there are horses in Philly. If I wanted to combine the two. But no, I never could say that I lived in a big city at that point. I could say that I lived in an isolated suburb, and then moved up to a small town. When I moved to Texas, I first moved to Canyon. And Canyon is basically a village.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Where is that in Texas? Like west Texas? North? South?

**JAMES:** Yeah, it's west—northwest Texas. It's forty-five minutes south of Amarillo. And Amarillo is the only—like, outside of that then you're talking like maybe an hour and a half to Lubbock, three hours—four hours to—not Los Angeles, but—oh man, I forgot the name of it. It's going to come to me, but –

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What brought your mom to Canyon, Texas in 2009?

**JAMES:** She graduated from college, on Mother's Day.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh, that's awesome.

**JAMES:** Yeah, it was. We danced to the Boyz II Men "Mama" Song. Like "A Song for Mama". That was really special. I'll always remember that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** She is a Philly girl isn't she? [Laughter]

**JAMES:** Yeah. And in Wisconsin, I mean the graduation ceremony was in Kenosha because she went to UW-Parkside. And so when we moved to Texas, I believe it was based on the reason that, "I want a new life, I love my sister, but—" She also—I think she, yeah, I think she moved to Texas first.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Your aunt did?

**JAMES:** Yeah, I think she moved to Canyon, Texas first and then we did. Yeah, I believe that's what happened. She moved there first and was like, "Wow, it's actually pretty nice down here. <T: 30 min> It's a really good change of scene." And my mom was—outside of college she was just like, "Well, I'm just raising my kids and every now and then the dad would come back into our lives, and I kind of don't want that anymore. I don't like that, and I don't like the chaos." And the neighborhood wasn't always great because people would get evicted if they had a bad relationship with the property manager. She did a lot of nonprofit work, even though technically, she didn't work at a nonprofit. We would hold baking classes for the community. I would be her little teaching assistant.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** At your home—this is in Racine?

**JAMES:** Yeah. This was—because Shelbourne Court was basically a bunch of apartments all surrounding a single office that was the landlord's office, but it also had a community room. And in that community room, we would do stuff, like bake cakes or—that was mostly what I remember, because that was delicious. I don't know if we ever did anything educational, but I do remember we did a lot of things that were based off of home ec. And that was a lot of fun.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** That's cool. And then other families would come participate, kind of?

**JAMES:** [Yes]. And other kids, younger than me, would come and participate. And I would be like, "Okay, well let me help you because I'm older than you." But then, "My mom said I'm in charge," so that's how that's going to work. [Laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Cool. So from Racine, your aunt moves down to Canyon, Texas and your mom moves her family down there too.

**JAMES:** Yeah, I think maybe a year after or something like that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Okay. And she did art history as her undergrad?

**JAMES:** Art was her undergrad. I just always emphasize art history because that's what I've seen her do and that's what I see her continue to look into. And a lot of the books that we have in the house, if they're not sketches or sketch books, they're art history books. Things that literally explain, "Well, this kind of brush stroke explains all of this." And I'm like, "Wow. Sure it does. I'll take your word for it."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Were you also into art? Were you or your brothers doing art projects at home?

**JAMES:** No. Actually, no my older brother Kyle, he had a hand. He could sketch a little bit. And then I started playing piano then, and I started dancing then. So I at that art, kind of.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Tell me about dancing. Was this just dancing with buddies and putting on some music? Or were you taking classes somewhere?

**JAMES:** I was. I was taking—so we had a new principal, Dr. Cintron. He came in and I think one of his first or second days he—during lunch, "Does anyone want to learn dance Latin dances? I'll teach you salsa. I'll teach you bachata. I'll teach you merengue. It's just forty-five minutes after school. Don't worry, you can call your parents and let them know, you know, whatever the deal is. Or if you need a bus, maybe we can organize the bus to make another loop." I raised my hand and then my ex-girlfriend also raised her hand. So I tried to put my hand down, but then he saw me, and I was also a trouble—a little bit of a troublemaker. So he was like, "Tykee, no I see you. You're going to—I'll see you tonight. Either I'll see you after school or in detention." And I was like, "Well, you got me beat." So no matter what, I'm going to learn. And then some fifth graders raised their hands—or wait, I was in sixth grade, so some seventh and eighth graders raised their hands. And I was like, "Oh man, this is serious. We've got seventh and eighth graders here; they're basically grown."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And this is the principal who is creating this program?

**JAMES:** Yeah and then after school, just like he said, I began learning the basics: one, two three; five, six, seven. A little bit of bachata, and a little bit of merengue. I think the salsa that

we did was cumbia because what I remember wearing was like a straw hat, there were things on the ground and—if I saw a picture of it, I'd remember. But I remember—I believe it was cumbia. The style of salsa was cumbia. He could have been Mexican, so that would make the most sense. Like if his ethnicity and nationality was Mexican, he would naturally go to cumbia. But I don't necessarily remember.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What role did dancing play in your life for you?

**JAMES:** Well, it was like my thing. It was like—okay, my family life, my school life, then there's dancing. And that's just me and whoever I'm dancing with. But I wasn't that good, so it wasn't something that I developed. Also I wasn't asking people to dance often, so it wasn't something that would come up. When I was in Texas, I took a Spanish class and was part of a Spanish club by taking the class. And they wanted to have a dance team. I was on the football team at the time, and I was like, "Ah! Dancing is cool. And it's a way, not only to be well-rounded, but I'll be better on my feet. I'll be better on my feet because dancing—you know, that's what happens." And that's exactly what happened. I was only—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So you did football and did the dance.

**JAMES:** Yeah. It was nice, it was a good time. I was—we did cumbia. We did cumbia all around the region, and we won all these nice awards. We were a pretty good team.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Tell me about "we." Who's this team you were on?

**JAMES:** It was—my dance partner, her name was Cody. There was also <T: 35 min> Trevor Schols, so cool. He was the lead with Patricia, who made up every—all the choreography.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How did you find these folks? Was this something that was advertised at school? How did you transfer your dance experience from Wisconsin to also finding it in Texas?

**JAMES:** Well, it was the availability. Somebody once said, "Hey, there's a dance team—there's a Spanish dance team. Is anyone interested in joining?" And like, in the coolest way possible, I said "Yes, of course." You know, I was like, "Maybe," you know? And I leaned back in my chair because I was also a football player, so there's a little bit—and I was also on the debate team and in FFA, so I had a bit of clout at the time.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What's FFA?

**JAMES:** Future Farmers of America.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh, right on.

**JAMES:** So at the time, I learned everything you could ever learn about a cow. How to cut it, where the steak comes from, everything. And actually, lately I've been relearning it, because now that I eat a lot of steak, or have the ability to, I like to know where my meat comes from. I like to know how it's cut. I was even considering going to a butcher, but that's a lot of work.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So was Canyon an agricultural community? Or a ranching community?

**JAMES:** Oh, I'm sorry. When I first moved to Texas I did live in Canyon. And while I was in Canyon, I finished middle school at Canyon Junior High. And that's where I first started playing football. I wanted to be a quarterback, but they wanted me to be receiver because I was a tall, fast, black guy. And Canyon—like I'll talk about in Amarillo—hasn't seen a black quarterback in a very long time, so they're not trying to. Yeah, that was my first interaction with, "I'm different and that's a bad thing."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** In Canyon?

**JAMES:** Yes.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So an experience of prejudice there?

**JAMES:** Yeah. And I was just like—and you know, talking to the other black people, we would be like, "Yeah, I know it kind of sucks." And I would be like, "But why are we tolerating this? I will burn this whole place to the ground." Not really, but—I didn't have any power either, but I was just like, this is a huge issue for me.

I remember one time, the principal took me aside and was just like, "You might find school difficult here. Not because of the teachers, because they love you and they support you. Or not because of some of your friends, because they also love you and support you too, but

because you're—” And then I was old enough to know and I was like, “Because I'm black.” And he was like, “Yeah.” And I was like, “Cool, man.”

And different things would happen, like this girl lied and said that me and my Mexican friend Alex, you know—he and I were very much on the same page of, “I don't like tolerating the small comments or the prejudice from all these folks.” So we'd try not to beat people up. That was our thing. Like, “If you don't fight, I don't fight.” That was our pact. There was this one time that this girl said to the bus driver that Alex and I were saying all these really rude things to her. We weren't saying rude things to her. We were saying rude things to each other. She was just hearing us. And so we got suspended [from the bus]. And living in Canyon, Texas, our house was I think 20 miles—it wasn't really 20 miles, maybe not, but it was a long ways away from the school. And my mom had to work every day. And his mom had to work every day. So that small—“Oh, they said that”—there was no judicial system, there was no review, they were just like, “You two are suspended for two weeks.” Walk or get a ride or don't go to school. It was like, wow it's that easy. It's that easy.

And sometimes people would give me and my brothers racial slurs. And if we raise a fist, we are suspended twice as long as them. We would talk to the parents, and the parents would be like, “Eh, it's not a big deal, they're just kids.” And my mom would be like, “This is actually damaging to them. Not just to their reputation, but to how they perceive themselves as different in this community.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yeah, what impact did that experience have for you then? What were you internalizing then?

**JAMES:** I was in between a few things. One was questioning, “Why can't you just love people for who they are and not what they look like?” And then another thing was, people should know me for what I do, not who I am. And if I do well, I don't have to worry about being personal. So I wanted to do well in football. I wanted to do well in dancing. I wanted to do well in anything I put my hands on. When we left—when I finished middle school, we went to—then we moved to Amarillo.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Was part of that, the hostilities that your family was experiencing there, was that part of the reason to get out of Canyon and move to Amarillo?

**JAMES:** Very possibly. Very possible. I mean, Amarillo was also a better city. And I don't know if we had a house, but it was around the time of the bubble—the housing bubble thing, and I never asked questions about it. But we were—we used to live in a house and then we moved back to an apartment. When we moved back to—not back, but when we moved to

Amarillo, that's when I went to high school at Tascosa. <T: 40 min> I played football there, was on the dance team, Spanish club, FFA, debate team. I think that was the bulk of it.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So were you—did you—you were learning Spanish throughout this whole time.

**JAMES:** Well...yeah. [Laughter] Así así. And acutally, because I was a football player, I got a few privileges, which was nice.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What do you mean? What do you have in mind?

**JAMES:** So you have to take Spanish one and Spanish two in order to graduate from high school. I thought I was going to graduate from high school in Texas. I didn't. I graduated from high school here.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Here in Philly?

**JAMES:** [Yes]. Now it was the second semester—either way, the math didn't add up that I could take Spanish one and Spanish two comfortably to have an easy senior year. So they created a Spanish one and a half, where they would give me the credits of Spanish one and two, but the work of—I mean, I'm telling you the work—I did nothing in that class. I mean, we did a few things now and then. Our teacher was incredible. He fundamentally changed what I once separated from language and culture to connecting them. And so I really did appreciate that. But I could do anything in that class. Nobody cared. [Laughter] As long as I wasn't beating up anybody or deliberately ripping tests up, I was okay.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Tell me about debate team. What was that—

**JAMES:** The debate team was important because that's where I found my voice. I went to—I started high school in 2009, and 2009 was a good year for a few reasons.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Why? Tell me.

**JAMES:** The day after my birthday in 2009, this guy—I don't know if you've heard of him—on January 22, he was sworn in as President—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** That's a pretty big day.

**JAMES:** —forty-fourth President. The world stopped. Everybody was watching the TV. I remember I was in Miss—oh I forgot her name, I feel so bad. I also had a crush on her. I forgot the name of her. But we were in her class to start off the day and everybody—the lights were off—and every classroom was watching the TV, listening to him get sworn in and watching the speech. Then after the speech, everyone was just like, “Wow, this is okay.” But it was still Republican country. So some of the kids were like, “Nah, everything he said was a lie. He's a great speaker, but everything he said was a lie.” And I'm like, “Whatever. I'm too young to argue about this with you. I'm on the debate team. I know what I'm talking about.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So did you—tell me about the debate team then. So 2009, clearly an important year for you then.

**JAMES:** Oh, yeah, that was just to say that the debate team and, I guess the alignment of that event made a lot of people put me in the Obama-era at that school, because in some ways I guess I sound like him. Or he sounds like me. [Laughter] And when I would wear a suit, the resemblance I guess would be easy for people to make if they've only seen six black people in their lives. So it wasn't one I would argue, but one that I would take with some grain of salt.

But the debate team is really where I figured out that speaking is a skill, and I could be good at it. I took Lincoln-Douglas debate really seriously. I took extemporaneous speech and—whew—there was another one that involved me. It was like contemporaneous—extemporaneous, excuse me. And then there was another one that was just me coming up with stuff off the top of my head, and I was really good at that at the time. And also I did prose, where I just read poetry. Or I read just a few lines, and I'd perform it and have some fun with it. So that was really where I practiced my speaking skills. And that was where I started to be—started to connect, “My brain thinks this, and I know that I can say it this way. But in order for it to have a certain effect that my brain wants, I have to say it this way.”

And that's when I really saw it—myself codeswitch. I talk differently around black people than I do around white people. I talk differently around my mom than I do my friends. It's obvious. But I realized that was a skill. And then I could use that—methods of persuasion. That kind of started that avenue of, like policy, looking at what people argue. Not necessarily what they're arguing, but more—not *what* they argue, I should say, but *how* they do it. What is your methods of persuasion for this purpose? I became really interested in that, so I would watch a lot of Obama's speeches. And I would kind of reflect on that and think, “Man, that's pretty convincing, but it's convincing in a way that I feel comfortable with. That I feel familiar with.” And that's something that I've, in some ways, adopted, that method of thinking of cause



and effect. I'm always <T: 45 min> trying to illustrate the relationship of this and effect—cause and effect. And then just, you know.

And also encouraging people to have more well-informed opinions whenever I disagree with them. Because I found out that you can disagree with me without being stupid. I can disagree with you without being stupid. Like, there's no prerequisite for stupidity. Nor is there one for disagreement. And I honored those kind of things. So I loved debate. I would see different things we can debate on, like should immunizations be compulsory? Should we get rid of standardized tests? Those are the kinds of questions I would like to debate with people. And then like sometimes it would be interesting because they would just be like, "No!" And I'd be like, "Why?" And they'd say, "Tests are stupid." And I'm like, "Well, that doesn't give me a lot to work with man." And so, that was one of the annoying things.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** An avenue for that inquisitiveness.

**JAMES:** It was still there. It was just taking different forms.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And in the meantime, you're doing dance and traveling—it sounds like you were traveling with this team and competing?

**JAMES:** Yes. I was traveling with the team, competing at different places. We had so much fun. You know, we would meet so many people. Like to see Mexican people—Mexican families—look at us dancing, yes, like, "That makes me feel like home," or, "That's something I want to do or do that with you guys." That really warmed my heart. And also all the food, because we would get so much free food traveling. Everyone just loved us dancing. I mean, I've never seen us dance. I had seen people watch us dance, and they just enjoyed it. So, I don't know if we were really good, or if they were just really supportive. But it was just a lovely experience all around.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And also football too.

**JAMES:** Oh yeah. Football? I didn't have a lot of playtime in football. I was a developing quarterback. The last black quarterback for the varsity team was 1982. And you can see the wall of all the quarterbacks and their faceshots, and there's just that one black guy. And I'm like, you know, I'm thinking I'm going to graduate from that school. And I'm like, "That's going to be me in 2012." Two thousand twelve: Tykee James. I didn't—well obviously I moved, so I couldn't do it, but—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Was that vision of being the first black quarterback in quite a long time related to also having our first African-American President? First black President?

**JAMES:** Yeah, because it was just like, well if he can be president, that's a milestone. And that's a milestone that can be achieved, knowing that it starts from a certain point. And that has to start somewhere, and I was like, "I'm not going to wait for someone else to be the first black. I can be the first black if I really try, if I really show up, and if I can dedicate myself to this. If I can have focus on that." And I didn't get it, but it was still something that I reflect on. Just like, I almost got that, but there's always going to be situations that I can push myself towards, a milestone, or help push other people.

Because I was also on the track team. The track team was mostly black athletes. And so we kind of felt like we ran that sport. That was our sport. We had so much fun with it. And we would always kind of think about football. It's kind of different, like how the coaches would treat us during football season versus track season. Track season, we are superstars. Track season, they would take us out to eat. Track season, they would buy us things. I mean, the lines of legality are there, but nobody did anything that—versus football season, I understand that there's a bigger pool of people. Football season was just a little different. For good or for worse, we recognized it.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What kind of things were you interested in, in the classes you were taking? I mean, you talked about debate and interest in prose and—

**JAMES:** Yeah. All that was—none of those were classes. All those were extracurriculars. I was very interested in all my classes. I loved asking questions, even if I was wrong, just so I could learn. I had a great math teacher, Mr. Gordino. Everybody loved him. I learned a lot about geometry. But I think the class that I'm mostly going to take away from Texas was Black History, taught by a Native American man, Mr. Porter. He was so literal, and sensible, and direct. He was also very conscious, which was like, "Oh my gosh. Okay." This was the world before I understood, not just people being racist and prejudiced toward me, but understanding it as a system of oppression against a people for the purpose of white supremacy. To understand that, walking out of that class, was one of the most valuable things that I got from Texas.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How did that influence your interactions with your friends, with family? I mean, what kind of conversations was this inspiring?

**JAMES:** I don't think it did as much as it helped support my growth. Because my growth was, you know, toned from how it was prior, <T: 50 min> it was based on finding unique connections. Finding, even in the unique connections, similarities. Finding—seeing that diversity and celebrating anything that can unite us, because you didn't ask to be born that color.

You didn't ask to be born identifying with that gender. You didn't ask to be born liking the same sex. But what about you can you love, and what can I appreciate about you? Because I can't like you if you don't like yourself. And so I would always find things in people to like.

So my friends group were always ranging from the super popular kinds to the weird people that picked their noses. I'm like, everyone has something unique. And there's a connection that I have, and I could walk around that school and everyone would say hi to me, because I would say hi to them. I would just want to get to know them. I'd see people sitting by themselves or people wearing the same shirt color as me. I would just be like, "Hey, we should—we're in a conversation now. What are you going do?"

And also all the extracurriculars, I would meet people that—I was the only person on the debate team that was on the football team. But there was also someone on the debate team that was on, you know, softball. Maybe there was someone on the debate team that traveled the world, was a military brat like me. I wouldn't say I was much of a brat. I only moved one place, but still. And it would just be interesting to be like, "We're all here for this purpose: debate. We're doing different events maybe or we have different interests, but we're all here for that and it's interesting how we all came here." And I would explore that through relationship building. And for me, that was interesting.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** You watched your mom go through college as a young man—as a little boy. Was college something that you knew you wanted to do? Or was that something that was really, kind of—In high school, I'm wondering, what was your vision for the next step of your life?

**JAMES:** In high school, I was a little immature. So I was thinking, "I'm going to go straight to college. Play football, D1. I'm going to go to University of Texas. I'm going to be the next Vince Young."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** That's the Texas culture down there, right?

**JAMES:** Yeah. So I was definitely—it was definitely bred through me. And I was like, "I might study a little bit, in case I get injured." That was the only thing stopping me. [Laughs] Getting injured, not that I wasn't good enough. Because I was definitely far from adequate [laughs] to the Vince Young level. But I thought I was going to be at—it wasn't until I moved to Philadelphia that I was like, "Wait. I need to think about a future!"

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So, tell me about this move to Philly then. You moved in your senior year?

**JAMES:** Yeah. It was definitely—it sucked.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** That sounds like it was wrenching.

**JAMES:** Yeah because nobody—I—my mom told me in November of my junior year. So when football season was ending, we're moving back to Philadelphia. And I was like, "But,"—I remember—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** "I'm going to be a senior next year."

**JAMES:** Yeah, but everything I've done is my legacy. And my legacy ends in 2012 in Texas. No, we're moving back to Philadelphia.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So when did you all move? That summer?

**JAMES:** We moved the following summer. So at the end of junior year, it was a lot of goodbyes. I did not service a single one. I probably said goodbye to three people.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Why?

**JAMES:** I didn't know how to say goodbye. I was like, "I built all of this stuff, and I can't complete it. I can't answer any more questions. I have to walk away." So I just left. I mean a lot of people learned that I left Wisco—I mean Texas, from hearing that I was in the hospital when I came back to Philadelphia.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What?

**JAMES:** When I came back to Philadelphia, the air was so bad, so humid, so not what I was used to, that it retriggered my asthma. I had asthma when I was a little kid that I never knew about, because I grew out of it. I lived in California: clean air. I lived in Wisconsin: clean air. I lived in Texas: clean air. I came back to Philly, it was humid. As soon as I stepped off the plane, smelled cigarette smoke, and I coughed. And that first cough was like, "Ooh. I don't do that. That doesn't normally happen."

And right before that—it was in May—a few weeks prior, I was competing in a regional track meet in the 400-meter dash and the 400-meter relay. Those are hard races. You have to sprint the whole lap. And so I'm thinking, "I don't know how, but I must be out of shape."

I started breathing, like breathing seriously heavy. I would walk up a single flight of stairs and I would be like, "Whoa man, I'm tired. I'm going to sit this out. I'm just going to sit down for a while." And then I would continue to breathe heavy. Seeing my chest going in and out, and I was like, "What is this? This is just strange. I'm going to ignore it." I still went out for runs, I still played basketball with my cousins. My speech was even affected, where I wasn't able to complete a sentence because I would constantly breathe in and out. It was about two weeks of that—I think it was a Thursday night or something like that—I wanted to make sure my mom didn't have work, because I realized how important that was. We're not <T:55 min> moving to Philadelphia for me. Or we didn't leave Texas and then like, I'm punished. It's not about me. It's about what she can do to provide for the family, and how I can not be an obstacle for that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And you knew that then?

**JAMES:** Yeah, I mean, I was seventeen.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What year was that that you all moved back to Philly?

**JAMES:** Two thousand eleven. Yeah.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And it was for your mom's work? Opportunities for your mom?

**JAMES:** Yeah. And opportunities for me, because she said, "You're going to go to Temple University." And at first I rolled my eyes. I'm like, "They don't even play football there." [Laughter] You know? They do play football. [Laughter] They had a pretty good year the year I came there, so—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yeah, I was going to say, "pretty good." These days.

**JAMES:** It was like, "All right, all right, you got me on this one." And I realized I didn't—football was no longer my passion, because there were other things. But—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So you're mom moved to Philly for what kind of work? What was she doing?

**JAMES:** I think the first job she had was at the Salvation Army. She's been in the nonprofit world for as long as I can remember. So, for me, nonprofit and government work is the only thing that I know. My brothers have worked in private industry places, but I never have and never has she. And that's just something that I've followed.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Hmm. So that's a big move. That's a big move from Texas to Philly.

**JAMES:** Huge, because I'm now in a city. I'm in a huge city.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Huge city.

**JAMES:** And I'm in a city where more people know my name than not, because a lot of my family lives there. So everybody was like, "Hey Tykee," and I'm like, "Hiiii...I don't know who you are. [Laughter] I don't remember you, but they're telling me that you're my auntie, so hello."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Ah. So your mom's family was still all in Philly?

**JAMES:** [Yes]. And my dad's family. So everyone was in Philly.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What role is your dad having in your life around this time? Is he kind of in on the scene?

**JAMES:** I haven't spoken to him in a long time.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** But I mean when you all moved back to Philly.

**JAMES:** Yeah. Even then, it was still a long period before I heard from him. I mean, I heard that he tried to get in contact with me when he heard that I was in the hospital. Because I mean, everyone—this is what a lot of people knew: I moved from Texas to Philly. Now I'm in the hospital. So they're just like, "What happened?"

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So I'm—I'm sorry, I've been steering you away from that—

**JAMES:** No, no that's fine.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So tell me the story of what happened then. So it was a Thursday—

**JAMES:** It was a Thursday night, and I didn't—I believe my mom didn't have work the next day, and I think it made sense to do it. I kept coughing instead of going to sleep and I was like, "If I'm coughing on my back and I'm trying to sleep, there's either fluid in my lungs, or I'm suffocating." One of the two means I should stand up.

And I saw my mom outside, and she was just talking. And I was just like, "Mom, I can't breathe." And she was like, "Okay. Drink a cup of coffee." I don't know why. But she said, "Drink a cup of coffee"—I think I do know why, because it would increase my heart rate—"Drink a cup of coffee, sit on the couch, let's see what happens for the next six hours." So I didn't sleep that night. It was like eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock in the morning, everyone starts waking up. I was like, "Yeah, I'm not any better." She was like, "Okay. Well, let's go to the hospital." I was like—when she said that, I could see that something shattered in her mind. She was like, "Oh my God. I took him from Texas, where he loved—he had his legacy. And now he's in Philly, and now I'm telling him, 'Yes, we have to take you to the hospital.' So from taking you out of what you loved, I'm now taking you to the hospital." I could tell that a glass shattered. But I was like, "Oh, so I have to be the calm one. Immediately.

So instead of calling 9-1-1—we didn't have healthcare, couldn't afford it—so we asked somebody to give us a ride, and I was being silly. I was like, "Oh please, come in first," And they were like, "Well, you're the guy that's dying." And I was like, "Well, it's debatable." And on our way there, the guy was smoking a cigarette in the car, and I was like, "This is fine." And he was like, "It's my car." And I was like, "That's a good point. It's my lungs, but you know, go ahead buddy." He eventually opened up the window a little bit. He didn't want to let the AC out. You know, bittersweet. [Laughter]

We got to the hospital. You know, they, "What's going on?" "He's having trouble breathing." "Does he have a history of asthma?" I say, "no." She says, "yes." And I'm like, "What do you mean?" So I was an athlete for three years, and those three years I developed a lot because that's what teenagers do. And I was really—I was much bigger then, and I could run all these laps. I was unstoppable. In fact, they even called me Tyk-easy because I made working out look easy. There like, "He does all that work. He makes it look so easy." Tyk-easy. So I'm thinking in my head, "That's impossible." I didn't have asthma. It didn't exist. I did all this work. My brother has asthma. You know, he has an inhaler. I don't. She listened to my lungs,

she was like, “Ooh. How long has this been going on?” I was like, “Two weeks.” <T: 60 min>  
She was like, “Yeah, you got to get to the thing.”

So immediately we get nurses coming in. They did a very terrible job at the IV thing. I had five tries here, two tries here, three or four here, two more here, and then they eventually got one there. I was like, “It’s not that hard. I don’t know what you’re doing, but I don’t feel like it’s that hard.” But I was in the room, you know, cracking jokes with the nurses while they’re like—I could see that they were moving urgently.

The doctor comes in and says, “Tykee, I think you should stop talking.” And I’m like, “I think, you know, blah, blah, blah.” And she’s like, “No, I think you should stop laughing, too. You could have had at any point, even right now, a cardiac arrest.” And I was like, “What’s a cardiac arrest?” I gave a facial expression, because I had stopped talking. She’s like, “Your heart is a muscle. And you’re familiar with muscles, you know? You look like it. When your muscles are tired, what happens? They give out. If your heart gives out, you have two minutes. Luckily, you’re in the hospital now. But at any time in those two weeks, the way your heart rate—how high your heart rate was, for those two weeks, you could have collapsed. And then that would have been it.” And I was just like, [silence]. You know, like jeez. I came back to Philly. My home. Even though this is my home, I left my entire life—in Wisconsin, in Texas, in California. I left all of that, just to come back here and die. This sucks. You know, I was like, “This is a little less than ideal for me.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What was triggering it? Was it where you lived in Philly? Was it just the air quality in general?

**JAMES:** The air. It was the air quality in Philadelphia.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Where did you all move to in North Philly? Where did you move back to?

**JAMES:** When we moved back, we moved back to West Philly.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh, West Philly?

**JAMES:** Mm-hmm. We lived in Mantua, at the bottom. Off of thirty-sixth and Aspen, with my auntie—another auntie, a different auntie. It was so strange. And I was like, “My home. This place that I call my home almost killed me because of the air.” The air is not an enemy you can see or touch. It just gives and takes away.



**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So what was the next step with you with that experience?

**JAMES:** Everybody was scared. So after I got out of the ER, they had me on watch for twenty-four hours. I couldn't eat anything, and they gave me this drug that kept my heart rate and lungs going because they were like, "We can't just stop it. If we just stop it, that's bad." That's what they explained. It's just bad for some reason. So, I was like, "Fine," you know? I had no room to debate either. When they got me into a regular—I can kind of chill, I had the oxygen mask on, and for me it was still just so strange.

I took a picture of me on my mom's phone that I later deleted. It was a picture that I never thought I would see. In the hospital, gowned up with the things, and the mask, and distressed. And I was like, "I've never seen myself at this point of weakness." And I've lost fights, I've been hit on the football field plenty of times, but never had I seen myself so weak in a place that I should be so strong. And my little cousins would see me, and I'd be like, "Oh, we've never met, but I'm your big cousin that might die because he came back to Philly and the air is so bad." And so a lot of people visited me in the short span that I was there. I was only there for maybe forty-eight hours, maybe seventy-two. And when I left, nobody wanted me to move. They were just like, "Tykee, you can't run. Don't do anything athletic." And I was just like, "What is going on?" Like, that was the only thing that I had! I can't dance, I don't have friends, I don't know where the library is, I can't do anything here. So I was pretty depressed going into high school because that was the beginning of my summer. That's how my summer started.

So the rest of the summer was me calling schools and them telling me, despite my high GPA, despite my good standardized test scores, they do not accept seniors. Central, Northeast, Boys Latin. I can't remember all the schools, but I know those were the first three I wanted to reach out to. Those were the first three that I liked. And I was like, "Okay. So now I'm going to schools that I don't like; that I wouldn't prefer. Schools that people are telling me, 'Don't go to.'" And those schools even said no.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So what did you end up doing?

**JAMES:** I went to Motivation High School eventually. Someone found a way to get me to go there. I had to take a special meeting with the principal, and the principal had to like me. So I didn't feel that I was myself at all. I felt like I lost everything when I came back.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How did that change what your plans were for after <T: 65 min> high school?

**JAMES:** I was just thinking, “I’m going to be happy when I’m at Temple.” I didn’t visit campus once—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So Temple was still part of the vision?

**JAMES:** Temple was 100 percent part of the vision. It just wasn’t—I didn’t know how soon that would be achievable. And I remember the school [Motivation High School]—you know, it’s a predominantly black school that has a super large focus on getting into college. They pride themselves on the people they get into college.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** At Motivation?

**JAMES:** [Yes]. It was a graduating class of fifty-five.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Cool. So you got to know people?

**JAMES:** They got to know me. And I’ll be honest, when I came there, I was not in the best of moods. I was not the charismatic Tykee that was inquisitive, that loved debate, or anything like that. I was angry. Because I was like, “Everything that is here is part of something that was taken from me. This will not be able to replace the happiness or the delight that I had in being successful, or even in failure, that I had when I lived in Texas or Wisconsin.”

So I’m here at this school and the content seems remedial to me. I was like, “This is not challenging to me at all. You guys are looking at these issues as if they’re big, and they’re not.” So I was just like, “I hate this.” I had to wear a uniform. I didn’t like that. I always wore in high school—I always wore the color red. Everyone knew that. Every single day I wore the color red. And here they were just like, “No. You have to wear a white shirt and khakis.” And I was just like, “Excuse me?” I didn’t—it was really hard for me.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Philly was a shock.

**JAMES:** Huge, huge. And despite being the new guy—the girls were like, “Oh, the new guy is cute! He’s from Texas. He might have an accent.” I wouldn’t talk. I would just sit there and be angry in class. At times, I would open up. Like when the professor or when the teacher asked, “So after the 9/11 attacks, what was the Congressional response?” No one had an answer, and I was like, “The Patriot Act. It passed unanimously.” And then they were just like, “He talked! He

knows things! He's angry, but he talked!" You know, and it would be small stints like that where I would find it to be entertaining to me to share or to be more open.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Tell me about why Temple was still part of the vision. If it's in Philly and Philly is kind of this different emotional space for you, why stay?

**JAMES:** Well everywhere I moved, there were things that I didn't like about it. So I had to adapt. And I took this in the same way. Came here to Philly—almost killed me, but I'm going to learn to adapt. I'm going to learn that my past shouldn't define my future. I'm going to learn that I can selectively have parts of my past that help guide my growth. But it doesn't necessarily have to be my future.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So tell me—take me from—because I want to transition into the second part where we're going to get to the visioning, soon. But take me from the time of that final year, senior year in Philly, surviving, up to the present. So what's the trajectory been for you from then to today?

**JAMES:** I knew that I was going to go to Temple. I didn't know what I was going to do there. I didn't know that there would be so much to do there. Because when I got there, I did a whole lot. I started with—as a business administration management major—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Why?

**JAMES:** —but before I even took a class, I changed it, because I realized that I couldn't answer that question. [laughter] I changed it to math, computer science, and teaching.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Interesting. Why that?

**JAMES:** Not enough black teachers. Not enough black, male, math teachers. And I had the skills to speak. And outside of understanding math, I could also inspire people by telling stories with numbers, and telling stories with functions and equations in ways that not only could they grasp, but play around with. And I think that my style of teaching is something that people would have admired and would have changed some lives.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** You say would have been.

**JAMES:** I stopped being a math teacher and went into strategic communication with a focus in rhetoric and public advocacy.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** When did you make that transition?

**JAMES:** When I got a job at the [Pennsylvania] state office. So that's about in August. So right around September.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Okay. This past August?

**JAMES:** [Yes].

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Oh. So are you also still taking classes at Temple now?

**JAMES:** Yeah. Because I changed my major, I had to be there a little longer. I thought the major was going to be a little more relevant, and it would make a little more sense. But I didn't—the reason why I didn't initially take that major—and I looked at it before I had the math—I looked at that because I was like, “This is perfect for me. This is me, but I didn't come to college because I feel like I'm an expert in something, and I want to further that expertise. I came to college because I want to learn.” And my best opportunity to learn will be in math and computer science, and with teaching. Because not only do I know nothing about computer science, I can get a lot better at math, and I do <T: 70 min> want to teach. So that combination of things is what I was very passionate about, and so I changed my major—I mean, I'm still passionate about it. It's just not a passion that I'm working towards right now.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Did—I also understand that you did some environmental education work. How did that start?

**JAMES:** Yeah. Out of high school—my senior year of high school—one of the opportunities that I found was at the Cobbs Creek Environmental Center doing public education as a subcontractor with the [Philadelphia] Water Department.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How did that—I mean, you were just kind of at the library and—

**JAMES:** No, I was in my environmental science class, and this guy Tony walks in and asks, “Who wants to watch birds, and learn, and get paid?” And I was like, “Learn while you earn? Okay.” And I was like, “Wait, I’m actually really interested in this.” Like, this is answering so many questions. That bird is different from that bird and it’s different from that bird. That bird came from Nova Scotia and that bird came from Brazil, but they’re both here. This is so interesting. And this bird can mock other birds, but it’s a blue jay, not a mockingbird as you would assume. This bird looks like this, but the female version looks completely different.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Had you ever done any kind of that study before? Of birds and ornithology—is that ever something you were interested in?

**JAMES:** At the time, I had almost picked up a dead bird [laughter]—and that was frowned upon, to say the least—but I would say that was my closest.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So was that working like after school? Was that in the summer after you graduated from high school?

**JAMES:** It was weekends mostly. And the weekends would consist of us going to an environmental center. Our leader, Tony, or Dan, who was also a manager, giving us some type of lesson, and then we would take a hike. We would look at things, we would identify plants, we would learn about the history of Cobbs Creek, the natural history, that included the people and the environment, and the connectivity of both. And that was really—that was a very enriching experience.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** In what way?

**JAMES:** I never connected people to the environment. I just thought that the environment grew and people grew separately. Or people, being people, could get rid of the environment, and there was nothing the environment could do. But I realized that there was a very strong connection between the two. At Cobbs Creek at least, I know that that story included crime. I know that that story included drug use and gangs, even the murder of a police officer.

And now, the future has brought some change. I was part of that, that brought, you know, “Hey, at Cobbs Creek Environmental Center, it’s a public—you should see environmental education as a community service because learning about the environment is appreciating your community. You guys are right off the block from the park. There isn’t any reason that you shouldn’t know the difference between a sycamore and an ash tree. There isn’t any reason you shouldn’t know what a blue jay is, or how a cardinal sounds when it’s chirping,

versus a chipmunk.” I mean, I’m a little bit too passionate about it sometimes. But I think some people should know some things because it’s right outside their doors.

And I love encouraging that engagement, encouraging ecological interpretation for your own good. Like knowing, for your own good, how to put things in your own words when it came down to the environment. Because it’s not this—the “Environment,” you know, Sierra Club, the North Face, something that white people do when they go to Colorado or in the mountains somewhere. It’s like, “No, it’s down the street! It’s in West Philly. It’s in Cobbs Creek. It’s part of your history, your parents’ history. It’s part of the history of the city.” And I think that if you’re going to be—if you’re ever going to consider yourself a proud Philadelphian, you have to consider yourself a steward for the environment, and that includes the city and that includes the natural history of it. The green and the grey.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So Philly is where you had your environmental awakening?

**JAMES:** Very much so.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** You came to the city to find nature.

**JAMES:** And that’s what’s incredible. Everywhere else I had a lot more access to it and more—but less appreciation. And I think just part of that comes from me knowing that this is my hometown. And Philadelphia has a lot of green spaces. And the diversity of those green spaces really is interesting. I know that I’ve had time to really enjoy Cobbs Creek, Wissahickon, and now East Fairmount Park. I hope to enjoy a lot more of Philly.

You know, as me living here, I’m learning more about environmental leaders. Because, for me, it started with environmental education, very basically. And then, from environmental education as a curriculum, you’ll see principles of environmental justice. And those principles of environmental justice kind of helped grow my passion in the field, so to speak. And that passion gives me opportunities to grow some skills that lead the way for environmental jobs, <T: 75 min> like working with Audubon, and going to events with PennFuture and PennEnvironment.

And then understanding my place in advocating, understanding my place in educating, and understanding my place in sometimes agitating—to quote Jeremy—when necessary for causes that would include having the air quality so that there’s not another kid that comes from Texas, that comes from a clean air state, that comes here and almost dies because they can’t breathe air. If I could do a little bit of work in advocating, or educating, or agitating to make sure that doesn’t happen again, I’d be happy. That would be ideal.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What kind of social networking opportunities has the environmental education world—what did that open up for you?

**JAMES:** Oh, a lot. The first thing I realized was that not a lot of black people do it. So every room that I would walk into would be like, “A young black man? About the environment? He’s so well spoken.” That well spokenness led me a very long ways because, from debate, like that was—from debate in Texas, that’s where I really learned to speak and articulate. And now I’m here and people would say something to me, and I’d be like, “Hmm, there’s a better way to say that. There’s a more persuasive way to say that. There’s a more profound way to say that.”

And how you understand it won’t be a way that people who look like will me grasp it. So your understanding provides—will be a disconnect, no matter how passionate you are about this. The way that you’re explaining this thing that you’re very passionate about, unfortunately, will be—your judgement and your intent will seem different to someone. So that disconnect—you will lose the trust, you will lose that connection, and it’s unfortunate.

But I can champion this cause. I can understand it my way. And I can work this—in some ways, be an ambassador to this idea—this new idea that we can protect the environment. Because solutions in environmental justice are some of the same solutions in social justice and economic justice, and people just need that first step to realize that. And I think that first step is sometimes just environmental education. Teaching them about birds, teaching them about storm-water management, teaching them about the natural history of their own neighborhood.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** When did the justice component become something that you were able to grab on to? I mean, it was the experience with the birds at Cobbs Creek and understanding some of the natural cycles in that area. But when was the justice piece added to that, to your understanding?

**JAMES:** We would learn things and sometimes it would be like, “Well, that’s pollution. And these things pollute. This is what a pollutant is. This is a greenhouse gas. This is this, and that is that.” And I would be like, “Well, why do we have it. Why are they there? Why are we learning about this? Why aren’t we learning about—well yeah, that doesn’t exist anymore. Yeah, we found a solution to that. Or everybody recycles,” you know, things like that. Like why in environmental education are we learning about the bad things that happen to it? How are we going to be stewards if basically the thing we are learning is basically anti-stewardship things? And they were like, “Well, that’s just the way it is.” And I was like, “It shouldn’t be. There should be some method against this. There should be some justice.”

And I started to watch some documentaries. Mr.—former Vice President Gore would come up every now and then. And I was like, “Who is that guy?” And I learned that he was one of the highest positions that led the fight on climate change, that led the fight on environmental issues. But I understood environmental justice. From that big picture, I understood it as it

disproportionally hurting people who don't have the ability to be like Al Gore. <T: 80 min> Who don't have the money to live in a better place. Who don't have the voice to say, "Don't put that in my neighborhood." And environmental justice meant advocating for those people and finding solutions for those people. Those people mostly being poor, people of color, immigrants. Finding ways to help them first, because it's not often that people want to help the people that need the most help for whatever reason, especially when it comes down to environmental issues.

We've seen—right after Forty-Five [President Donald Trump] was elected—the Dakota Access Pipeline going through predominantly poor neighborhoods and cities. Predominantly people of color. Native people. And it's like, "Wow, that would make a perfect amount of sense for someone who has no agreement with the idea for environmental justice." That, "Oh yeah, it makes sense because the rich people don't want that in their neighborhood, and they pay more taxes, or they fund my campaign, or they vote, or they look nicer, or I identify with them. So let me bring you these poor people who will move anyway <T: 80 min> because their houses are worth not that much, their rent is only so much, they can afford to move," or whatever their idea is.

That lack of justice, that lack of principle and that idea of justice is—I've been finding to be prevalent in positions of power. So environmental justice really grew on me as I've seen people in power, either on my side or against my side, *not* talking about it. For everything that is good with Gore, I don't see him as the leader for environmental justice. I don't see him as the leader for the people in Chester County. I don't see him as the leader for people who turn on their sink and [can light their water on] fire. He is absolutely against that, I know he is. But he's not the leader for that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Tell me about how you became involved in politics. Because currently you work with Representative Bullock [of Philadelphia's 195th district in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives].

**JAMES:** Yeah, I work for the State Representative right now. She's amazing in a lot of ways. She also serves on the Environmental Energy Committee in the House.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And this is Representative Donna Bullock?

**JAMES:** Yes sir. She's amazing.

I ran for class president my freshman year of high school and that also helped the cause for people calling me Obama. I mean, even on Facebook, they'll still call me that to this day. I never had an interest in politics because I always thought—I think I got this quote from [the television show] *Parks and Rec*, "Politics is about winning, and government is about service." If I can get a job in government, like being a teacher or being someone who can educate—an



educator—that’s what I would want. I saw a teacher as someone who was in the classroom all the time. And that’s good. I mean, as a math teacher, I would expect to be in the classroom all the time—at the whiteboard, or something like that. But the idea was that I was still serving. And if I’m not serving people, I’m not passionate about it.

I had an offer to be a manager—to take a class to be a manager at Walmart, one in South Philly. I met one of the guys, one of the top CEO people or whatever. He was really impressed with how I presented myself, with my resume, and what I wanted to do in life. And he was like, “You should be a manager.” And for me, I took that as a bit of an insult. I’m like, “I want to serve people. And you want me to work at a place that doesn’t pay people a decent wage. You want me to work at a place that doesn’t respect, on reputation, their employees. And you think that I’m after this paycheck.” Because he gave me a number, like “This is how much you’ll make through the training. And after the training, you’ll make this much more.” I was like, “I don’t care.”

If I’m making enough money to serve people, that’s all I need. If I’m making so much money that I start serving myself, it’s going to—it’s going to create disharmony in the purpose that I’m serving. So, you know, keep your six-figure whatever-whatever. Up your nose. I’ll be cool at my thirty-thousand-[dollars]-a-year job, because I’m working for the people. And I’m serving the people. And these is the people of my neighborhood, people of my color, people of my history. Not all of them are my color, but it’s people, regardless, that are disproportionately effected by bad things. I’m in that same pool.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** This seems like a good place for us to take a little break before we transition into our future visioning. Does that sound good?

**JAMES:** Yeah. Most def.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Great.

[END OF AUDIO, FILE 1.1]

[START OF AUDIO, FILE 1.2]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Alright. So part two of our continued discussions here. Transitioning into thinking about the future and energy in Philadelphia.

Because energy is sort of an abstract thing, and the future is definitely an abstract thing, we’ll start off with a few abstract questions. What are some of the things that you value most? That you love?

**JAMES:** Diversity. Unity within that diversity or even without it. I also value justice. I also—you know, I value answers to questions, solutions to problems, and rights from wrongs. I value puns and alliteration on an unrelated note, but something that I still very much appreciate. And I also appreciate art, whether it's motionless or it requires motion. So that's dancing, that's sound—through the piano—I like the things that can sometimes help me bring about a new world. Dancing was a new world for me. Playing the piano was a new world. And it's a different world <T: 85 min> than politics, than environmental justice talks, and different from wearing bird socks. I like all of those different things coming together in some way or fashion—fashion, literally. And then just appreciating it. Appreciating the ability to appreciate all these different things that individually are good by themselves.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Great. What are some of the things that scare you? That you fear?

**JAMES:** Well, I'm always scared when there's not a lifeguard around and I'm at a pool because I do not know how to swim. So whenever I see that, I think, "Whew man, this could be it." And I always think about the headlines: "Black Man Dies In Pool Because He Doesn't Know How to Swim." And it's just like, so embarrassing. So many better ways.

I'm also scared of being put in situations where no justice can be made. So that could be something, as in the air, as an interaction with a police officer—where I know my story is different than your story, and you could be acquitted and I will be a hashtag. Sometimes those situations are me in a big group of people, where if something were to happen, it doesn't matter who I am in that. Your mission is—if it's malicious, you wouldn't discriminate so far on the harm that you're trying to cause. I know that I also fear—have you ever seen that movie *Purge*?

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** [No.]

**JAMES:** It's this idea that—this political group called the Founding Fathers created this new law. Every whatever day it was—maybe it's April 12—for twenty-four hours you can commit any crime. All crimes. You can do whatever. You can kill people, basically. And that's what people do.

I'm scared of that in three different ways. One, that someone would think that was a good idea. Two, that it continued to be an idea that people were like, "Okay, let's come back next year. Let's do this again." And then three, because it disproportionately affects poor people who can't afford to defend themselves, which is really a metaphor for environmental hazards, which is really a metaphor for social hazards and other economic barriers.

I see that movie and I'm like, "People really think this way." This could happen or this is happening, just in a smaller form, not in a so dramatic form where crime is legal for twenty-four hours one day out of the year. But in the fictional world of the *Purge*, part of the fear that I have is seeing people have the rhetoric of, "Well, crime is at zero percent. No one commits a crime. All the crime is committed at the Purge. Poverty has gone down. I don't see homeless people, that's pretty nice. Nobody is walking around hungry. Everybody who has money buys food." It's just like, wow.

That movie really—it scared me in a profound sense in that people think like that: "I'm not being disproportionately affected, and the consequences are actually benefits. So, you know, if that oil—if that pipe goes through this poor community, my energy bill goes down and there are more jobs." It's just like, wow, that movie illustrated that to an extreme, but it illustrated that in a way that I reflected on it with a lot of fear. And there's not a moment in that movie that I can't look at because it's not actually a scary movie. It's just the idea of the movie itself was just—it's frightening.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What are some of the things that you would work to protect or even fight for? What are the things that you do fight for?

**JAMES:** Yeah. I fight for history in some ways, in that I want to remind people that, as humans, we are good at taking care of the environment. And so we lose our humanity, we lose the definition—the historical definition of humanity—when we are doing things against the environment.

I want—and I have been fighting—to tell people that racism is a huge, systemic, oppressive force that doesn't necessarily exist with a store owner saying a racial slur, <**T: 90 min**> or a store owner giving you an extra eye when you walk in. It doesn't just exist in those forms. It exists in housing. It exists in healthcare access. It exists in educational access. It exists in the professional world where you want to develop, whether there is a glass ceiling based on your gender or a closed door based on your skin color.

Fighting against that is really hard, but it requires a lot of social and rhetorical tools. And those tools are the tools I'm trying to build. Those tools are the tools I'm trying to share with other people, because I can't fight every battle and there will be a time where I'm done fighting. And so I want to make sure that, while I'm fighting that, I'm also giving out clues, giving out hints, giving out the idea that people should fight with me.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What are some of the things that make you most hopeful?

**JAMES:** Bad things, as ironic as it sounds. When Trump was elected, I was like, "Okay, so really anything can happen." A black guy was before this guy, and if you asked anybody in

2000, even 2006, they wouldn't believe you. They would laugh in your face. A black guy, and then this other guy? So if something bad can happen, I think something good can happen. I just think that on the basic principle of math, if it can be negative, it can be positive. There is an absolute value to this action, to this event, to this occurrence, to this phenomenon. And I think it should be positive. So whenever something bad happens, I'm like, "Okay, that's fine. You know, you got that win. You can celebrate that year."

And obviously this is more political wins and losses and not tragic wins and losses, of natural disasters and things that result in a huge financial loss that you can't recover from. But part of the game—and we talked about this earlier—is winning and losing in politics. But that's some of the reason why I like it, because it gets you away from the service. But I do get hopeful in seeing some of the more solemn things. Because I think that can either serve as a reminder of what we fight for and what we will continue to fight for, or it's really something to work opposite against. To be like, "Well this is now what I'm fighting for. This is it. This is—okay, let's go."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Another abstract question. When you hear the word energy, what comes to mind? What do you think of when you hear energy?

**JAMES:** Turning on the lights and the lights turning on. When I hear energy, I also think about light. So there's the practical level of energy means I have the privilege to—at any point in time—walk into any room of my house and the light will turn on. But it also—I immediately also go towards, "Is energy a wave or a particle?" Maybe both. Probably both. I think it's both.

So my science and physics and mathematic mind never leaves me. If you look at my desk in the state office, and you'll see that I've written out kinematic equations. I—one of the interns asked me what a derivative is because I was like, "This word derives from this word and—well, not like derive in the sense of math, but like derivative." Then they were like, "What's a derivative?" **<T: 95 min>** And then I went tangent from that point to explain what a derivative is. I was like, "See? It's not about change, it's about the rate of change. And that's what's important, just like with the difference between velocity and acceleration." I had this whole lesson. And I still keep the piece of paper just to remind me. It's like, "You can still do that." You know, I can turn my Bill Nye on, so to speak.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yeah. Well, let's move into the future visioning portion here. And the first step forward for [our] visioning is to think about fifty years into the future. So that's going to be the year 2067.

**JAMES:** I'm glad you did the math. [laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So fifty years in the future, 2067. Just as a reference point, thinking back, fifty years in the past from today, was the year 1967. So America was a very different place. Movie tickets cost \$1.25.

**JAMES:** We couldn't go to the same movie theater. Probably not.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yeah, in some places, it certainly was discouraged, and continued.

**JAMES:** Yeah, "discouraged," to say the least. [laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Yes. Yeah, it was a very powerful time. America's fighting in Vietnam. The Black Power Movement is emerging and developing a different kind of consciousness. And feminism is really kind of starting to take off. The environmental movement is beginning to emerge. So that was fifty years ago.

I want us to think fifty years in the future. What changes will happen in Philadelphia in the year 2067? What does Philly look like and feel like? And what sort of energy role is played?

**JAMES:** Well, more people are smoking pot, but in a good way. Fifty years ago, pot was the enemy—public enemy number one. Fifty years later from here, pot will be as meaningless as—I can't even think of something that is so casual, meaningless, and cool. You know, I really can't. Maybe being on your—no, there's hazards to everything. Smoking pot is just one of those things that doesn't have those same hazard, in any circumstance. You could do the stupidest thing, but then that's just you being stupid. That's not marijuana doing that for you. You know? So—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So in 2067, more people—

**JAMES:** So more people, at any time, will be like, "Do you want a glass of water and some pot?" "I would love some, yes. What strands do you have?" Like, that would be the regular whatever for the people that do. Because not everyone has to, and that's fine.

Fifty years from now, we'll still be able to turn on the light switches. Whether that's by our phones or by our minds, but we'll still have the privilege of access to turning on things, having energy, having the ability to—"I want to be in this room to turn on this light, to turn on the TV, to watch this." I feel like that connection still won't be lost—that privilege. Because when those things don't happen, it's not—I don't think a lot of people can think of a time when

they walked into a room and the light switch didn't turn on, or they tried to turn on the TV and it didn't work.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Where's the power coming from to make those lights go on in 2067?

**JAMES:** That's a good question.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** In Philly?

**JAMES:** I would imagine PECO [formerly the Philadelphia Electric Company] either got smarter or got defeated. And they're finding better ways to get electricity to our houses.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What does better mean? What do you mean by that?

**JAMES:** They don't need physical infrastructure. If there was a way that electricity—energy, information—can travel in a wave, then we don't need power lines. If there was a way that we could have energy be in one place, like an electron being in one place, and then appearing in the same electron—the same information—in another, [then] a lot of that energy infrastructure is broken down.

I know that scientists have already made a way for an electron to teleport from one place to another. They just copy informations and then that information, it appears. Hopefully that becomes more abstract in the sense of energy. Like we can literally send that to some type of energy core from PECO to your house. You pay your bill, they make sure that energy—that information of that energy, that electricity—goes to your house for power. You could pay your bill.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Do you think that will happen in fifty years? There'll be wireless electrical?

**JAMES:** Yeah. Yeah.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How are people moving around in Philly? How are they getting places?

**JAMES:** I still think walking will be a popular choice. You can't change the fact that we—Philadelphia is a pretty walkable city. I think what you might find is a different emphasis on public transportation and cars.

There's going to be a different emphasis on cars in that—they might be seen as, "Okay, I'm going to need a car if I'm going to Chester County," <T: 100 min> or "I'm going to need a car if I'm going to go up to Croydon. I'm going to need a car if I'm going all the way over there, and public transportation can't help me." But if you're not walking, taking a bike—or whatever a bike will be in fifty years—or public transportation to where you're going, then you probably don't have that many places to be. And that's okay.

So as far as traveling, I would imagine, in a practical sense, it's just more convenient. It's either that everyone is using Lyft or Lyft-like services, so the need for a car for you is not necessary. Or Lyft will be that public utility in some way—not that the government has to take it over, but where the government will subsidize it in some way, where everyone has access to that service, of door-to-door service of travel.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How are the cars powered? Are they running on gasoline still?

**JAMES:** A few. A few old ones. The classic cars. In fifty years, those cars, "Oh, you've got a Ford Mustang? Whew! A classic!"

If they're not powered by hydrogen or solar, then maybe it's something that I don't know yet. Because I can see a compromise in fifty years of—let's say, the city of Philadelphia looking to Lyft, saying, "Hey, we're going to pay your employees more. We are going to ensure that you never fail as a business if you work with this other company—like Tesla—so that all of your drivers drive cars that are better for the environment, using this type of energy." Using either solar or using electricity, you know, electric cars, whatever it is. And then Lyft will agree, and then Tesla will agree, and then Philadelphia will agree. And that's just like, you'll use the Lyft, and that car you're getting into? Zero emissions. The car that you're getting into is going to go somewhere cleanly and nice, in luxury hopefully.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Will turning on those lights or—so cars are hydrogen or solar-electrically charged cars. With turning on the lights, will fossil fuels still have a role to play in fifty years?

**JAMES:** I think fossil fuels will have a smaller role to play. Whether we deplete our resources in fossil fuels and we have to go figure out the secrets of the federal government—because the federal government has reserves of oil that can last us a little while. But if we ever get to those secret reserves, then we're not in a great place. And if we start fighting over resources, then we're looking at a completely different country.

So hopefully the compromises that will be made, sooner rather than later, will be compromises to increase access to resources, and not start a war. Because, you know, there are compromises you can make to fight, and there are compromises you can make to not fight. And hopefully we go for the latter in the compromises that I hypothetically made between the city of Philadelphia and Lyft and Tesla.

Because you don't want them fighting for—because if people start fighting for oil, if people start fighting for energy, we're not doing too good. Because that's where we see other countries—fighting for those resources, fighting for some of those fundamental resources—take away rights. If I don't have the right to clean food because my refrigerator can't keep my food cold, clean water because there's no infrastructure for me to get it, I'm going to fight for it.

So we have to fight for these things on that higher—not higher level, so to speak—but we have to fight for things on a level where we are fighting back and forth and it doesn't include fists, before we get to the level where we're fighting over water. Because if we're fighting over water, we're going to use fists, we're going to use knives, we're not going to play by any rules but our own.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Let's take another step forward and think about, what is Philadelphia like in the year 2140? That's almost one hundred twenty-five years—that's one hundred twenty-three years—into the future. The year 2140.

Scientists—climate scientists—anticipate some major changes for Philly: much wetter, much hotter. Some of the areas east of I-95, down around Eastwick, those neighborhoods could very well be flooded because of the tidal rivers that Philadelphia is based on. But broader than that, beyond the Philadelphia region, there are expectations that some of the climatic changes could lead to some of this sort of fighting that you're talking about. There's governments that could be collapsing, waves of refugees, extinctions that are happening, possible collapse of agriculture—these are all things that *could* happen in the future.

But what is your vision for Philadelphia in the year 2140, about one hundred twenty-three years from now?

**JAMES:** I think it starts with the trees we plant today—metaphorically and physically—will be the solutions of tomorrow. The trees we plant today will give us oxygen in the air. More oxygen in the air means a different atmosphere—a better atmosphere than what we have now.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So more trees in Philly's future?



**JAMES:** More trees. More herbaceous and woody plants, just to cover both sides of that. And that will help in two ways. One, it will help absorb water. I know that when you think about storm water management, instead of buying bigger pipes, you just buy plants that can absorb water. Some of those investments that we're taking to grow plants obviously take time. A lot of time will pass, and we will see a lot of—Philadelphia will look greener. I think Philadelphia's future is very green. And not only is that going to be good to protect people from water, but it will be good because it will also help the air. Trees are filters, and so are plants. They filter air in a lot of great ways. So what we plant today will be what we breathe and live in tomorrow. That's one.

When it comes down to the idea of agriculture completely failing, to be honest, I've never seen that as a realistic option. Because we solved world hunger. We're just not <T: 105 min> going to do anything about it because it's a lot of work. We solved world hunger when we created the 3D printer. We solved world hunger when we started messing around with genetics in our foods and modifying them. Because if I don't have to grow anything, but I can have a ripe tomato at any time? I'm going to go for that, especially if it's cheap, especially if it can be created on demand. And I would imagine that we would live in a future where we don't need miles and miles of crops to be irrigated and watered and pooped on just to have some food for the country—or food that we can give to other countries.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So 3D printers and genetic engineering will create the food for us? So there's really no need for agriculture on the same scale that we do today?

**JAMES:** Yeah, I think agriculture will look different. Agriculture will look more like white lab coats and formulas, and not so much nice overalls and a tractor.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What does that look like in Philadelphia then? I mean, what is the city like? Are there more people? Are there less people? Are the buildings looking different in one hundred twenty-five—

**JAMES:** Well, after we get our fifth Comcast tower, I think the population of Philly will definitely increase. [laughter] I don't know if we'll change our city limits in that wake, but I know things are going to get taller, bigger, more dense.

I know that the pluralistic demographic of Philadelphia will be minority-majority. What we call minority now will be strange to call a majority—of Latinos. I'm expecting that at that point in time, if you know one language, you're part of a minority. And so it's going to be to every advantage of yours to not only be culturally competent, but to have an air of inclusivity of you. Whether that's socially or professionally, because you won't be successful or lead an enjoyable life at that time. If I had to guess.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What's the energy system like in Philadelphia in the year 2140?

**JAMES:** I think that the teleportation of electrons has gotten better at that point, that it's instantaneous. I can put energy there, I can put energy there. We can use the sun for energy, that's always going to be there. We can use wind turbines, as necessary. And I can even see smaller communities having power grids. It's just like, "Well, yeah, that neighborhood has their own power grid right there. They're good."

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So community—communities become like village-style, community grids? Microgrids, put throughout the city?

**JAMES:** Yeah. I mean, that will exist with the issue of income inequality, because income inequality doesn't get better with population. So I'd imagine income inequality will still be a huge issue. We can all have access to the same things, but that access, that quality of those things can be dramatically different. And that will—you know, that can very much be based on your income. And I don't know if there will ever be a timely solution—from when we would fight with swords and horses, to when we get up to the level of spaceships—if a poor person and a rich person can live the same life with quality.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** How are people moving around in Philadelphia in the year 2140?

**JAMES:** I still hope they're walking. I'm a big fan of walking. I think that will—as bipedal humanoids, we will keep our feet going. I think that travel will be more elevated. Because right now, most of the time when we travel, it's one dimensional. We travel on the ground. So I think travel will include elevations, different levels. It would be hard to, but we've never divided the city in tiers of travel—

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** In terms of verticality?

**JAMES:** Yeah. We travel on the ground. Nobody flies to get from Center City to North Philly. So for that to change, I think it would be interesting. And I think that's something that Philadelphia, at the time, would be open to.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So take me from there to almost three hundred years from now. This is going to be the year 2312. We're talking two hundred ninety-five years into the future, the year 2312.

As a reference point, what was almost three hundred years ago in the past, from today, was around the early 1720's. So in the 1720's, North America was dominated by Native American communities and nations. There <T: 110 min> were strong inroads of colonization that were happening in different parts of North America. Philadelphia had already been founded as a city. It was about forty years old at that point.

**JAMES:** Nice. [laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** But the American Revolution wouldn't happen for another half century. The major energy source in the 1720's is, by far, wood is the dominant energy source. But also food and plants that people or animals would eat, and then you'd use the animal muscle to get things done. And then also wind and water were some of the other uses of energy. Coal wouldn't overtake the United States for another one hundred fifty years, and then oil after that. So that was three hundred years from today.

What about three hundred years into the future? In the year 2312, is Philadelphia still here?

**JAMES:** I think so. We're one of the oldest cities. We're the identity of America, and I hope the Constitution will still stand, even with amendments. I think that Philadelphia will look, sound, and taste completely different. And that we will no longer need or have the use for natural resources. Wood, oil, plastic made from oil, mined iron ore, coal. Any product—like none of those products will exist. So a lot of them—we might have fake wood for the aesthetic, because maybe humanity still just likes the aesthetic of wood. Fine, whatever. Hopefully, we get better taste in 300 years. But I think it will either be based off of lack of interest or lack of resource that natural resources will no longer be part of anybody's lives. Any building, any infrastructure, any project won't have wood or dirt or rock or anything like that.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** What will it be instead?

**JAMES:** I think that we can teleport—to the idea of electrons—if we can teleport electrons back and forth one hundred twenty-five, or even fifty years from now, from today, and in one hundred twenty-five, know how to do it on a level that we can provide energy to an entire city, I think that we will get to a point in scientific advancements that we can dictate what atoms do. Now, matter cannot be created or destroyed, but we can change information. We can make our own steel. We can make a new material that isn't steel, that isn't titanium, that isn't something that we would recognize today, but has the strength of what we know as something twice as strong and has the weakness of nothing.

I think in three hundred years, all the food that we eat will just be a benefit to our bodies, and there would be no consequence. Like, “Man, I love this cheeseburger, but it goes straight to my thighs.” Not anymore! You just love that cheeseburger now. Love it up. But I think we will also be responsible in knowing that our taste will be smart. Because now that we don’t have consequences of eating bad food, or of having poor health, we have to be smart in what we identify with as our food.

I think that there will be a huge identity infrastructure—and not one that is based off of what I have and what I don’t have—but it’s just like, “What am I going to be if I eat cheeseburgers all the time? I know it won’t affect my health. But who will that turn me into? Am I a different person?” Really profound philosophical, social ills would be that, because the issue would be, “That person eats cheeseburgers, don’t talk to them. They think differently than we do. We eat carrots.” Just like, “What do the carrot people have against the cheeseburger people? You can put carrots on cheeseburgers. I’ve seen it happen!”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So cultural identity will be a much greater issue, rather than desire for resources, because it sounds like there will be total abundance because of atomic control.

**JAMES:** Yes, we can create our resources. I think that we will figure out a way. And again, we can’t create matter. But we can change information and if we can change information to be what we want it to be, we can do whatever we want.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Where is energy? Where does energy play into this future—this abundant future?

**JAMES:** I think energy will take the role of almost an endowment, in the way that either capitalism can control it or the government will guide it. [Like,] “here’s ten thousand years of energy. If you all leave your lights on for five years in this city, you all will deplete it. If everyone in the city turns every light on in their house, turns the dishwasher on, turns the TV, turns everything on, your endowment of ten thousand years of energy will turn into five. <T: 115 min> How will you use this energy?”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So it will be totally socially derived as choices. But there will only be so much?

**JAMES:** Yeah. If it were to be, in three hundred years, that it’s guided by capitalism or controlled by government, then communities, cities, neighborhoods—from the small power grids to the bigger power grids of cities—are now less with endowments of energy, so to speak. Where we can harness the energy of a proton splitting apart for your entire city, and that, for

your entire city, will give you ten thousand years of energy from splitting a proton. Use it wisely.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Is there any—so there is a limit to it? And that limit is controlled either by capitalism or by the government?

**JAMES:** Yeah, like the government would be like, “We’ll reissue you another ten thousand years.” Or capitalism will say, “You have to pay for another ten thousand years.” But either way, the social conscious of the environment, the social conscious of conserving energy will be one that everyone feels collectively. Because it’s, “Hey, if you leave that light on, the entire city runs out of energy in five years instead of five thousand.” And everyone will feel that. Because it just like, “Your light being on means no lights are on. We all have to be part of this effort because it’s literally all of us or none of us.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** All right, so stronger unity in that feature. How are people moving around in 300 years in Philly?

**JAMES:** I really hope they’re walking. [laughter]

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** I love it!

**JAMES:** But I have less hope that they’re walking at this point because they’re not walking to transport themselves, they’re probably walking for leisure. Which I will accept. But to get from point A to point B, just like the electron, your information can exist here, your information and your consciousness will come back here.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** So people exist as information and consciousness in this future?

**JAMES:** Yes.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** And they can move that at any speed or in any way that they want?

**JAMES:** Precisely. And that’s why identity will be a bigger thing, because they’re thinking, “Yes, I know that I’m information. But I still have this human tendency to be unique, to want to identify myself not as the numbers on the board, but as the face in the mirror. And whatever that

means to me: eating cheeseburgers or carrots, walking places instead of teleporting, I want to be who I am. And I want to find that genuinely.”

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** Is there anything else that you want to add about your visions of the future?

**JAMES:** I hope the Eagles win a Super Bowl! [laughter] Hopefully not in fifty years, or one hundred twenty-five, or three hundred—however long it takes, I just hope it happens. I hope the first black President isn’t our last. I hope that when the population of the majority becomes the minority, or becomes a pluralistic majority, everyone can kind of see we have differences we can celebrate. We have differences that we can appreciate, and these differences are what will help us grow in the future. Because there’s a lot out there that we don’t know. And our flashlight is getting bigger. Our flashlight in this dark room is getting bigger. But that flashlight can get as big or bright as it wants. We’re only learning how dark the room is. We have yet to enlighten it.

**EARDLEY-PRYOR:** I love it. Thank you so much.

**JAMES:** Yes, of course.

[END OF AUDIO, FILE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]