

James Wright

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Michael Nobel Kline: Let's see. Can you say, "My name is."

James Wright: James Wright. My name is James Wright.

MNK: And today is?

JW: Is the--It's May the tenth, I believe. Yeah, May 10, 1994.

MNK: There's a lunar eclipse or something on--

JW: Yes, an annual lunar eclipse, in fact. Now you got me stuttering with that thing sticking in my face like that.

MNK: You'll get over it.

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JW: Yeah, I was watching it from my front porch. I had the pieces of cardboard--

MNK: Oh, yeah.

JW: Opened up. I mean I punched a little hole in it, watched it move right across. It took about an hour for it to make a full ... across the face--

MNK: ... You could see the ...

JW: Yeah, if you watched--

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JW: Yeah, it's--You just like take a piece of paper, a piece of cardboard or something about this size. Just punch a little pinhole in it is all you do. And then you get your back to the sun, do this, and eventually you can focus in a shadow image on the paper of the sun and the moon as the moon's passing in front of the sun. And it's pretty, it's a pretty clear picture too, about had eighty-five percent of the sun covered, I think.

Carrie Nobel Kline: With the light, amazing.

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JW: Um hmm.

MNK: There was a, there was a sort of lune light chill that came.

JW: Yeah. It seemed kind of cool there for a while.

CNK: Yeah, yes.

JW: You know, walking over here after, right after it happened. Forest had to come over and get me. He couldn't find my phone number any place when you guys were coming up.

CNK: Uh huh. I'm glad we--

JW: I walked over and I was freezing by the time I got here. I didn't think it was that chilly out, but I guess ... it seemed like kind of early evening or something.

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CNK: We were on the bike and the same thing. We got on and all of a sudden it seemed like it just dropped.

JW: Right.

MNK: So tell us about community stories.

JW: Like what kind of community stories.

MNK: ... interviews ...

CNK: Talk about anything you want.

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JW: Oh, golly woggles, I don't know. You want to know about West Liberty or the Wheeling area or--

CNK: ...

MNK: We want to know about the work you've done specifically.

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JW: Oh, with, with ...

CNK: History, yeah.

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JW: Okay, you want me to just, since you--I guess you're asking about academic or professional history.

MNK: No, no. Well--

JW: Personal history or--

MNK: History related to doing community ...

JW: Yeah, okay.

MNK: ...

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JW: University of Delaware, working on my doctorate. For one year I worked at the Disaster Research Center out there. It used to be at Ohio State back in the '60s and '70s and it moved to Delaware about 1987 or '88, I think. And I was on there as a research assistant. And whenever there was a big earthquake or a big fire or a tornado hit someplace we hopped on a plane in Philadelphia and as a team we went out and went to those disaster sites and interviewed members of the community. Usually organizations. When I was there it was mostly organizational research. So we'd go and hook up with fire departments and police departments, Red Cross, you know, take your pick. Salvation Army. Community groups who may respond to those disasters providing relief, aid, other types of support to people. That was our job basically and it was one about every couple of weeks we would hop on a plane and go, or did in a car.

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MNK: What did you do in ...

JW: What's that?

MNK: What did you do with those people?

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JW: Basically we interviewed them at length about how they managed to adjust to those situations, how they dealt with it in those cases and how their organizations adapted to those, whatever change in

conditions they had to face. And then we took that data and compiled it, did some analysis on and turned it over to organizations like FEMA and the National Science Foundation. For about six months I was in charge of a mass media thing we were doing for the NSF where after disasters, some other type of mass emergency of that type, we'd hop off and my job was to go and track down the people who were working for the local television, radio stations, newspapers, other media outlets of that sort of thing and find out how they were getting the news out, what type of news they were ... people up on evacuation orders or what things were closed down, what type of problems there were around and that. That type of business was really what we were into more than anything else.

MNK: Why, why was it important to have that kind of information?

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JW: The National Science Foundation wanted that media information to be able to figure out how to better plan for disasters so that the news can get out, so information can get out, whether it's just disaster reports or evacuation orders or trying to get people information where to get food and water, other information and so on. Then they used that type of information for some reason. FEMA, I, I've always had mixed feelings about FEMA. FEMA has the big public image of doing this mostly to be able to plan for disaster relief and dealing with disaster situations, but there was the understanding around the DRC, the Disaster Research Center, the DRC that in fact FEMA was really kind of a, one of those shadow government organizations. Kind of like what the CIA is, national security work, to just more or less keep the masses in line in case of mass civil unrest or disorder. And that used to kind of irritate us. There was some types of studies we would not do for them, in fact, that--

MNK: Like what?

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JW: Oh, there was, especially things to do with nuclear war protest situations or riots that we were occasionally asked to do that kind of work. And the directors usually refused to do it. But I worked with FEMA, meaning myself, back in '86, I guess, I had to give a short presentation to them on some computer work we were doing at the Disaster Research Center. And at some point in the middle of it I realized that most of the type of stuff they were talking about at the meeting, some of the top FEMA brass were in there at this meeting I was attending. And they are saying, you know, okay, we've got all this ripped out that we can pinpoint, you know, a vehicle on a given corner in a given town in a given county anywhere in North America basically. And some of the stuff began to sound almost like more than anything else, crowd control. And that sort of, the whole air of things kind of scary in some

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respects. There were a lot of academic types. There were a bunch of people from Pitt were there at the time. And they were doing a little bit different stuff for FEMA, I think, but the general drift we got was a lot of it was counter insurgency.

MNK: FEMA, FEMA was, was--

JW: Yeah.

MNK: Able to pinpoint a particular corner.

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JW: Yeah, they, they have ... satellite viewing techniques and so forth they're able to pinpoint things, you know, down to the street corner. They in fact have maps apparently, I've seen some of the maps in fact. They, they put some up on the board while we were there that would show intersections and towns. They'd say call something up, and they'd be able to pull out this slide on a computer that would show exactly where there are stop signs and parking signs and lights and street lights and all type, fire hydrants and everything, from these aerial views that they had. Not all, not all were just satellite shots. But a lot were maps they had made, ground level maps that they could use, you know, ostensibly the story was for, you know, dealing with moving people out in the case of mass emergencies. But--So the understanding was it was for something else maybe.

MNK: Oh, how interesting.

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JW: And so we refused to do certain types of work.

MNK: Real sci-fi stuff.

JW: Yeah, yeah. Kind of low budget sense of espionage there too. We kind of got the impression that that was the feeling at the time anyway.

CNK: What was your interest in doing this work?

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JW: I had done the master's in, degree in collective behavior, okay. It was kind of my specialty. And the guy who was the chair of the committee--

MNK: ...

JW: Collective behavior.

CNK: Eclectic?

JW: Collective behavior.

CNK: Collective behavior.

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JW: Collective behavior, yeah. Um hmm. You know, fads, fashions, riots, social movements, disaster response, that kind of stuff. And the guy who was the chair of my committee of my thesis told me, you know, I should hook up with the Disaster Research Center because it would give me a chance to do all types of, you know, field researches. It sounded like a good deal. It was kind of a joke when I got there because I had to do some field research with the people I worked for were really a bunch a clowns when I was there. I've let them all know since then what I think of them. I sent back all the, the surveys they've sent me from Delaware and I've told them what I think of the place, you know. Pretty much since I got the diploma I've severed all ties with that university except for a few friends I still have around there. But for the most part they can take a flying leap for all I care.

MNK: What--

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JW: It seemed like a great deal. It was--It's certainly a very good deal to get some good, you know, field

research background, to travel. There's something very different and a lot of it was just having to sign loyalty ... to my boss month after month. And that was a little bit irritating, so I quit after a year of it. I would like to have stuck around. They have different managers now. It's a much better operation. They do a pretty good job now.

MNK: It sounds interesting. What was, what was the most exciting story you ever heard in the course of your disaster--

JW: Exciting?

MNK: Well, memorable, gripping, compelling.

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JW: Memorable, gripping, compelling. It's amazing how boring actually most of it really was. The most compelling, I think, or gripping, it could actually make a good movie I suppose. Well, probably not a good movie because nothing actually blew up. Out in, somewhere in eastern PA, a small town in eastern--Well, outside Philadelphia there was a gasoline pipeline break. Sunoco Oil, one of their pipelines broke out there. And a, a few hundred thousand gallons of gasoline spilled into a local creek running through this highly developed area. Right, right by Valley Forge. Out there ... Valley Forge area. And flooded a, a number of creeks through there. And so there was huge quantities of gasoline fumes floating all over this highly developed place with high tech factories and a bunch of shopping malls. Don't know if you've ever actually been there, but it's all just extremely developed, touristy, convention

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kind of complex. And one little spark blasted the whole thing up. But I did wind up interviewing a few people who were trying to clean the mess up. And one guy was the head fire, the fire chief, I guess, of King of Prussia, PA. And he was a demolitions expert in the Army. And as far as they were concerned it, it could have blown the whole town up. As far as gripping goes, that's about all I can tell you. That's about as close as it comes. Most of the rest of the stuff was just routine response on the part of those organizations. Some people would occasionally seem to inflate their own importance somehow. There was a strange fellow that ran a radio station out in ... in eastern PA who thought he saved the whole town when there was a train wreck and some toxic chemicals got out. Nobody actually listened to that station though, as I found out later. But he claimed that he was responsible for the whole evacuation. He'd saved

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the day. It was occasionally humorous, but for the most part it was drudge work. You hear a lot of ugly stories too. When I was--That big--January of 1987, I don't know if you remember that hotel caught fire in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Recall that?

MNK: Maybe.

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JW: Apparently after some type of union dispute some of the workers bombed the place and set fire to the casino, and the fire spread into the building and quite a number of people were killed and a lot more injured from smoke inhalation, fire and so on. We were down there after that and I was interviewing, let's say a US governmental official who shall remain nameless and rankless at this point, said that he understood that

there were members of the local fire department going through the rooms and ransacking the rooms, you know, where the tourists and stuff were staying after they had evacuated the place, and taking money and gold and . . . , all kinds of stuff. There was never anything to, you know, corroborate that, but this guy, he was just absolutely certain that that's just what happened when he was there, you know. Nobody else has even supported it, but you hear a lot of that kind of

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stuff too, you know. People coming up with potentially real stories, some of them potentially bizarre stories at the same time. For the most part it was pretty dull work. You spent all your time on the phone chasing people down. Then you go interview them, and they just went through the nuts and bolts and mechanics of how they did their job. It usually wasn't that thrilling, I suppose. You did occasionally catch them telling you one thing and doing something else. When I was still doing that media study for the NSF a TV station out in Wilkes-Barre, PA, I had to plant myself there in the news room for a full week and observe the whole news making process there in the news room. And I had to interview them, and I always had this interview schedule in front of me with a set, a set of questions, open-ended questions I was required to ask and tape just as much as you are doing now. And one of the

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questions was always to the news people, news directors and reporters, do you shoot bloody. In other words, do they go after really gross shots, people getting dismembered or in accidents and, and blown up. All types of grotesque, violent stuff like that. And everyone always says, no, we never shoot bloody, we think that's unethical, we would never actually do that sort of thing. And while I was in the news room the very next day they got information there was going to be a satellite down feed with some footage from an air show in France, I guess. The footage came in on their monitor and this big C-130 transport plane or something does a belly flop on the runway in front of a crowd at this air show in France. And it blows up and kills a whole bunch of people, you know. Flames and explosive gas all over the place, people getting blown to bits. And the news director and the producer is jumping up and down going nuts. "Get that on tape. We're running, starting the show off

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with that tonight." And the news director kind of looked at me and just left the room, went about his business. The next day there was a hostage situation across town. And it was like, you know, some guy with, you know, twenty guns holding eight people hostage in a bar on the other side of the city. "Get two trucks over there right away, a couple of camera crews. Get the whole thing on tape. We want to see the bullets fly if they do." This guy had told me just, you know, a day or two before that, "We don't shoot bloody. We don't go for that type of cheap sensationalism." But day after day and the rest of the week I was there that's all he did. That was his whole job it seemed.

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MNK: Your frankness is totally refreshing.

CNK: It is.

JW: Thank you.

CNK: ...

JW: Some, some people appreciate that, some don't, I suppose.

MNK: So you, now you're in West Virginia with, with all of what this background in, in interviewing and this political sense of how things really operate. And what's happening here--

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JW: Absolutely nothing.

MNK: Nothing's happening.

JW: Nothing's happening here. They haven't done much of any of that kind of stuff since I've been here. I finished on my dissertation. I did quite a few interviews for that.

MNK: And that was on?

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JW: It was on rugby football. It was on subculture of that game and the organizational aspects of the game in the US and overseas. And I interviewed, much as you're doing right now with that tape recorder, about twenty or thirty players. The tapes are in the cupboard over there. And so I got to, you know, keep doing that type of work a little bit for my own stuff. But since then I've pretty much, you know, not had any real opportunities to do that kind of work.

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MNK: Uh huh. Let's take a break.