Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Joe Gatlin Oral History
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Male Speaker: Hard question first, please say your name and spell it.

Joe Gatlin: Joe Gatlin, G-A-T-L-I-N; Joe, J-O-E.

MS: Joe, what year were you born and where?

JG: I was born in 1945, San Pedro, California.

MS: So, what did your folks do that brought them to San Pedro?

JG: Well, they came during the war.

MS: My parents.

JG: Right. My parents came here in 1941 during the war. We have a port here, and there were jobs. Jobs in the South didn't pay any money; jobs here did. So, there was a huge migration, and our family is a part of that.

MS: What kind of jobs did your father and mother do here?

JG: My father and my mother, they both worked on the docks, on the ship, as riveters. We had a shipyard called – gosh, I'm sorry.

MS: Todd?

JG: Todd Shipyard.

MS: Start again.

JG: Okay. My mother and father, they both worked in San Pedro at the shipyard, naval shipyard. It was Todd Shipyard. Also, there was a naval shipyard. They worked as riveters and any other jobs they could get. But the jobs were plentiful. It was a good time.

MS: What are your earliest memories of growing up in San Pedro as a little boy?

JG: There was a project in San Pedro where we used to have a drive-in, right off of Gaffey called Banning Homes. I remember being 4 or 5 years old. It was the projects across the street from the refineries. I think one of the first memories I remember is a refinery blowing up and our family panicking and where to go. No one was hurt or anything. But it's one of the first memories I can really clearly remember. I remember that.

MS: Well, tell us more about the projects. What were they called? Where were they? How many people lived there? Describe it.

JG: The projects at San Pedro were on Gaffey. I would say at least 1,000 families lived there. We stayed there until 1950. So, we stayed there for five years. We moved in. The family

bought a home right after the war. The numbers, my mother's side of the family was huge. There were 18 in her family. My father, there were 12 in his. They all stayed there. So, it was a family affair.

MS: But there wasn't a particularly large Black population in San Pedro. What was it like as far as who lived here?

JG: The Black population in San Pedro stay pretty constant. It's about 3 percent. It hasn't changed much. But the people who lived here, you've got to realize it was a huge migration from the South, and the majority – now we have family members that go back as far as 1919 here in San Pedro. But those are family members we've married into. But my mother and father came to California in 1941.

MS: These were grandparents who lived here before?

JG: Well, there was a small population in San Pedro of Blacks in our community. So, everyone knew everyone. There were only a few areas where we lived, Banning Homes, the projects called Rancho, which is right off between First and Fifth Street on Harbor Boulevard. There was another group in Channel Heights. So, everyone knew everyone. Again, remember, there was only one high school, one public high school. So, there were families that were – when I was going to school, we weren't family. But over the years, maybe half a dozen members of our family married into their family. Now, we're family, that type of thing.

MS: So, aside from that, that refinery explosion, what are some of the early memories you have as a kid growing up here?

JG: Well, we moved to a place called Black Hill in San Pedro. It's a place now that's gone. The freeway took 75 percent of it. But it was a small community. It was a hilltop community. We had a great view of the harbor. Everyone knew everyone in this community. It was a community of probably three or four thousand. Again, only 3 or 4 percent Black but everyone got along. Next door to our house was a big open field. So, we could play baseball. We could play football. It was just a fun place to be.

MS: What were the neighborhoods that were around? I'm not sure whether it still is there; there was a Mexican neighborhood called Mexican Hollywood. Was that still there? There was another neighborhood called – not El Rancho but something like that that was written in there. Then there were neighborhoods that were Slavic, and there were Italians waiting for the [inaudible] to go by. How was the community San Pedro divided up?

JG: Well, San Pedro, during the [19]40s, though we had a community here before then, but the big influx was in the [19]40s. It was a great time for San Pedro. Groups from Eastern European nations were all coming here. The Croatians, the Slavs were coming to Pedro. The Blacks from the South were here. Japanese who were already here in a good part of our fishing fleet, they were here, and they came again after the war. They settled here. We had the Spanish. We had the Italian. It was a period of time where most of these populations were being persecuted somewhere. If you can imagine their descendants, which I was one of them, going to the same

high school and our junior high school, which was Dana, which touches the high school. So, for six years, all of us just were in the same place and got along. So, yes, there were communities set aside, but we all came together. I lived in a community called Black Hill. There was another community right below us. If you know where the Gaffey Street Bridge is, right in that area, was called (Mudville?). The Rancho projects, which are still – 850 homes – still sitting there. They were different homes. To give you an example, when our Black Hill was taken away from the freeway and 70 percent of it was gone, we weren't allowed to move all over San Pedro at that time. Even though I didn't know what racism was, we weren't allowed to go past Seventh Street to buy a home or west of Bandini. But there were populations – leaders like the Papadakis family, Ante Perkov family, who are leaders in the Greeks or the Croatian community. They stood up and said, "This isn't right." So, it made it really easy for us to assimilate in this community. We didn't know any problems because it was so much work. We worked in the canneries. There was work here. If you wanted to work, you could. So, it made it easy. So, it was a fun place to be.

MS: As a little kid, how did you relate to the harbor at all?

JG: Well, the harbor was a great place. I mean, I didn't ever go out fishing. I wasn't a fisherman. But everyone fished. I mean, everyone fished. Everybody's family somehow was attached to the fishing industry. If you can imagine, we had a newspaper we don't have now, called *The News Pilot*. They called it the fish wrap because every day, someone was giving you a fish inside [laughter] this fish wrap. I mean, our freezer was full of fish. To make it even worse, my father was a fisherman. He would go out fishing and bring in more fish. We also had something that was really exciting. At one time, we had, we felt, the largest – and it probably was the largest – celebration in California, was the Fishermen's Fiesta. I worked that when I was a kid to 8-, 9-, 10-year-old, working at booths, setting them up, being part of that. But it was a great time. I also worked on the fishing boats, in the (holes?), throwing tuna out of the boats, 13-, 14-year-old kid. I was a scrawny kid. So, at that time, those tunas were bigger than I was [laughter]. But it was a good time. I miss those.

MS: Let's go back. What was the Fishermen's Fiesta? What was that? How did you get involved with that as a kid?

JG: Well, that was a festival –

MS: The Fishermen –

JG: The Fishermen's Fiesta was an event that happened in San Pedro during the summer. It lasted a week. The fishing fleet would parade up and down the canal. Then we'd have booths there. The governor would come in. I mean, this was this was the event. Tens of thousands would show up. My job was pretty simple. I was a kid. I helped put up a booth or be a runner or whatever they needed me to do. They were paying me, I remember, at that time, almost 50 cents an hour. I was feeling pretty important [laughter]. It was a good time.

MS: What do you remember about any particular floats or things that are memorable about the ships in the harbor back then?

JG: The ships in the harbor, there were so many. That's what I really remember, not so much individually which ones, but there were so many. I mean, we had the largest fishing fleet in the nation here. It was just beautiful to watch. Everyone felt part of it, even though I wasn't a fisherman, and I didn't like fishing. I ate so much fish as a kid; I don't even eat any fish today. But you felt like you were part of it no matter what you were, if you were a fisherman or if you were helping them tie up the nets, if you were throwing tuna out of the holes, whatever you were doing. It was a good time.

MS: As a kid, you did get some jobs because your dad was a fisherman. You did work sometimes on the fishing boats. Tell me about that.

JG: My father was not a commercial fisherman. He was a fisherman by – he just went out whenever he could. He'd go to Mexico. I mean, there's so many different ways to go out fishing. My father initially had a janitor service after the war. We had one of the largest janitor services from Redondo Beach on. But we had a lawsuit against the longshoremen. They ran for nineteen years. We won that lawsuit in the mid-[19]70s. Prior to that time, was a sponsorship. If you had a son, you'd sponsor him, and he'd be a longshoreman. Well, it wasn't really fair for some of the new communities coming in. That was the Blacks. We didn't have a chance to work on the docks. In the [19]70s, mid-[19]70s, we won the lawsuit. My father and all his brothers and family members got (A-cards?), monies, and that's how we got on the docks. But it also opened it up to casuals. For a long time, if you can imagine, we're a small part of the population, and my mother and other (boomers?) were really afraid that we will be persecuted for stopping the sponsorship. So, we didn't talk about it much. It wasn't except for maybe the last five or six years that it really became public now that most of the longshoremen now working down on the docks have gone through this casual hauler and not through the sponsorship. So, now we're looked at differently than we were, say, thirty years ago.

MS: This is really an interesting story. I'm going to go back and explain that then. What was it like before with the union? How did the challenge to the union start? Tell me that story.

JG: Well, what it was, the unions – in 1934, Harry Bridges formed the unions. It ended up being a sponsorship type of thing. So, all those who are part of that, part of the initial group, as it grew, they could sponsor in family members. So, they got family members sponsored in, one or two a year, depending on how much work there was. It worked great if you were part of that group. But after the war and they still had so many there and going on, there were only very few Blacks that could go in. Now, because they were always someone willing to sell a sponsorship, they were selling – if you can imagine, in those days, houses cost $20,000. They were selling sponsorships in those days, for 2- or $3,000, which was a lot of money. Cars cost that much if you can imagine. So, a lot of us couldn't afford to pay the thousands of dollars for the sponsorship. My father and his family did the lawsuit. It ran almost nineteen years.

MS: Let's go again. How did that happen? That's a pretty brave thing for him to do. Why did he do it? How did it start? What do you know about that?

JG: Well, yeah, the family got together, and a lot of the family he had – again, he had a big

family. A lot of the brothers, kind of, pushed my father to the forefront on this one, said, "John, you take this. John, you do this." Dad is just fearless. He said, "Okay. Let's do it." We also – it happened also because we had community support. They were the Perkov families and the Italian families who weren't against us. They said, "Do what you have to do." So, when you didn't feel persecuted for doing this, you're willing to go a little further. So, for 18, 19 years, we thought nothing was going to happen to something that ran that long. As a second thought, we almost gave up on it. Then all of a sudden, we won.

MS: When did it start? What year?

JG: Jeez, we're talking about in the mid-[19]50s, and it ran till about [19]74, [19]75. Then if you can imagine, the first time they gave out applications for a job on the harbor was in the mid-[19]70s now. The story, you'll probably hear from a lot of different people. If you received an application prior to that time, that meant you had a job. You're not applying for a job. You had a job on the waterfront that you know now pays between 80- and $100,000 a year. Well, the word got out there. They were going to give out applications. Now, we had a drive-in theater on Gaffey. They were going to give out these applications on a Saturday. The line started in cars, and it ended up going around San Pedro, if you could imagine. It was one of the most scariest things you'd ever want to see, people lining up thinking, because they had an application – because that's how it was before – you had a job. But what it is, they only had a job for maybe a small percentage of those who actually got applications. Even the last time they did applications, there were 400,000 applications for three thousand jobs.

MS: That's amazing. That's an amazing story. So, after this case was won, the suit was won –

JG: Yes.

MS: – now, anyone could apply for a job. It was open.

JG: It was open.

MS: So, you have to explain to me how that changed and then what happened when that first set of – just go over it again and put it into context.

JG: After the lawsuit was won, they started up what they call a casual hall, which meant you put in an application, and you weren't a regular longshoreman. If you get accepted, you become a casual, which means you get the overflow of work. So, you would go down to the casual hall. Let's say the regular longshoreman, and there were four thousand jobs – we'll just give it as a number. 3,500 of them were taken by the regulars. That will leave five hundred for the casuals. They gave us a letter and a number. They just went by that. So, it worked out really well. Right now, there's probably ten thousand casuals. So, the numbers have really exploded, and the harbor has exploded. It's going to multiply three times in the next year. So, it's needed. But it's a very special thing right now. They did an article on the *Random Lengths* about a year and a half ago, and they had me on the cover. It was the first time many Blacks and Hispanics had ever even heard about the story or even knew that – they always thought it was always a casual hall. So, they saw me on the cover, and then they read the story. I went down to the casual hall.

You would have thought I was a rock star. I was signing autographs outside and things. People were clapping me on the back, like I did it. I didn't do it. My father did it. So, we're really proud of that.

MS: So, tell me about you becoming a casual. What was that experience like?

JG: Well, in [19]76 – I mean, by that time, all my family was – all my father's brothers were in longshoreman. We had an opportunity to give it to one of ours, because that was part of the lawsuit. My brother was a Teamster. He loved the docks. I mean, loved it. Though he's my younger brother, I gave that card to him. I mean, it made more sense for him to have it than for me, because that's what is his dream. But I ended up getting a casual card simply because I was around in the mid-[19]80s. I got it in [19]83. So, I've been a casual since 1983, which is – I'm the longest running casual there is. Takes about 4, 5 years and you're a regular. But because I don't work regular, and I haven't gone down there regular, I'm still a casual, [laughter] which just really boggles a lot of people's minds. Because it's a great job and it's a great opportunity.

MS: Now, you have to maintain a certain amount of work to be a casual, don't you?

JG: To keep your casual status, you have to work one day, every six months. So, that wasn't very difficult for me. I could be anywhere and come back, work one day. How it works, which is a really great thing on the waterfront and probably like no other place, if you become an (A-brick?) or a regular casual, you can work whenever you want. You come to work Monday. If you don't want to come to work Tuesday or Wednesday, nobody cares. Then you can come back Wednesday. You can work Thursday. You want to work a double shift. You can do whatever you want. This flexibility is just amazing and great benefits, great retirement, to get this job on the waterfront that pays between 80-, 100-, 120,000 a year, work when you want to work. If you decide you want to take four weeks off, take it off. If you want to take six months off, take it off. No one says a word. Come back to work the next day, never have to check in, and you go to work. I mean, it's an amazing job.

MS: What kind of work did you do as a casual or do you do as a casual?

JG: When I first initially got my casual card, it was a little tougher in those days. We weren't containerized really yet. Steel jobs would come in, and that was dangerous, dealing with steel. Banana boats would come in, and we're actually going in and grabbing bananas. Sometimes spiders or snakes might be in there [laughter]. Plus, nothing was there that wasn't hard work. Most of the jobs during that period of time were really tough jobs. But now, there are container jobs in the last 10, 15, 20 years. You can be a checker, which means you've got a pencil and paper, and you're just checking off what's coming in. Or you're just doing jobs that require very little strenuous work. So, now we have a lot of females on the docks. We have schoolteachers, people who have given up professional jobs with degrees, to come on the docks. Because it's a good paying job and also allows them flexibility.

MS: Let's go back to your youth again. You went to Dana, and you went to San Pedro High. Right?

JG: I was really fortunate. I went to Barton Hill for six years, and I went to Dana. It was quite an eye opener for me because Barton Hill was my whole world. I've only seen this part of the world. So, we went to Dana, which was a huge campus and thousands of people there and three-story buildings. I was meeting groups that I've never seen before. I had never really seen that many Slavs or Italians. You didn't know how well you were going to get along. But everyone got along. It was amazing. I ended up doing leadership classes and different things at Dana. I went to high school, ended up being track captain, and I was in this different office or this thing. So, it was a real good time. Also, during that time, we had a boy's club, which was right two blocks away from the campuses. We had incredible football teams, just incredible football teams. So, it was a good time. Also, during that time, we had a – there was a place called Toberman Settlement House, which is First and Grand, which is now, they're redoing. But it's been here 100 years. It's one of the oldest nonprofits in California. They had these clubs. So, we had a club in high school called The Players. We thought we were pretty cool. We got our jackets with Players on it and our name on it. If you can imagine in the early [19]60s with your own jacket with your name on it, yeah, it was a real good time.

MS: Tell me more about the Toberman Settlement. What was that? Describe it.

JG: Toberman Settlement House, as I was growing up, I had no idea all the things that it did. I had no idea. I had no idea they did gang prevention. But there weren't many gangs in those days. They helped people with food assistance. If you needed food, you can go to Toberman Settlement House today. Every day, they're giving out food, or they're giving out clothing. If you need to buy a home, they have programs to help you buy a home. Anything you can possibly need, they do it, and they take care of the community inside of there. But for us, it was a place to party. Every Tuesday, our club meetings, we met there. They had a gymnasium. We could play. We lifted weights. There'll be three or four hundred of us every Tuesday. They're just socializing, and the age group was phenomenal. It'd be a six-year range. If you're anywhere in that six-year – if you're from Dana, the high school, you're accepted. You had a place to be. It was a lot of fun.

MS: Do you know anything about who Toberman was, anything like that?

JG: When I was growing up, I didn't. Now I'm currently on the board of Toberman.

MS: Give me the history then from what you know.

JG: Well, it's a Methodist – Toberman is a Methodist-owned organization that did nonprofit, to go out and help those who are in need in the community. They do a great job with that. But when I was growing up, all I knew was the things that supported me and the kids. So, they would have counselors to work with the kids for teen pregnancy or to keep us out of trouble or keep us in school. By doing that, we ended up having dances and parties during my teen years. Now, I'm giving back. I'm on the board member at Toberman. We have programs that they just finished. In fact, they're going to have a grand opening, the 28th of this year, 2007, $7 million dollar revamp of this community. They're doing so much. Right now, it's a program that I don't believe we could have done without because it's also kept the peace in our community. When I was growing up, we didn't know what racism really was. I mean, I didn't know what it was. But

now, these are different times. There are gangs, and there are different things. Right now, Toberman is rated as the number one gang prevention unit in Southern California, in a community that doesn't have many gangs. So, you can imagine how hard they're working and what they're doing.

MS: Were you around for Watts, [inaudible]?

JG: I actually was there that day that was started –

MS: Tell me of the experience you had then.

JG: Well, my cousin who was from San Pedro, in the early [19]50s, when the jobs kind of dried up on the docks, and people came back and got their jobs from the war, a lot of families went in a lot of different directions. Compton was one of those. So, my cousin and his family and a few other cousins moved to Compton. Well, as a teenager growing up, again, San Pedro wasn't a community that there were a lot of Blacks. But when I went to Compton, it was like, wow [laughter]. Centennial High School, when I was growing up, it was two thousand Blacks, all these girls wearing these tight skirts. I thought it was just heaven. Well, anyway, I was there. My cousin who just graduated from school, he was working at McDonald's on El Segundo. All of a sudden, we saw all these police cars – I'm sorry, it wasn't police cars, motorcycles going down the street. We're talking about 50, 60 motorcycles. So, we kind of followed them to see what was going on. They want to this apartment building to arrest this guy. I said, "Why would they need so many policemen to arrest this one guy?" I'm trying to figure this out. I'm trying to figure it out. They all took him away. By that time, there were maybe three or four hundred of us just sitting there, just trying to figure it out. Next thing you knew, there was – a TV camera came in. Next thing you know, the crowd turned it over and set it on fire. I said, "Oh, boy, I better get out of here. [laughter] This is getting crazy." Then cars started going down the street. If you were Black, they let them through. But if they were white, they were throwing rocks at them. I didn't understand this. There was a radio station, KGFJ, and they had a DJ called Montague. His saying was, " Burn, LA, burn." But he wasn't saying it before the riot. It was just one of his sayings. But they were playing that loud, "Burn, Los Angeles." The next thing you know, we were sitting there throwing rocks at people coming down the street. I ended up seeing myself grab a rock. I didn't know what I was doing. This is getting really out of hand. Now, this went on for about five or six hours. Not a policeman came by. Crowds got bigger. It got noisier. All of a sudden, we got surrounded by three or four hundred policemen, ran us into hands up, that type of thing. Then it got crazy. It just got crazy. Even though we were part of it, we were there, we never really felt that you were in any danger. But we really were. But we should have – I mean, I was too young to know any better. But this was, what, [19]64, [19]63, [19]64?

MS: [19]65

JG: [19]65. Because I went into the military in [19]65. So, it was the summer that I went into the military. Yeah.

MS: A lot of middle-class Whites were stunned by this. You were surprised because your

background is San Pedro, that all this suddenly flared up. Or were you not so surprised?

JG: I was very surprised what happened there. But I'm going to tell you, those living there were surprised, one, about – first of all, why it even happened, why so many policemen even came in into community. Then they called it the Watts Riot when it really started not in Watts. But that's another story. We ended up burning most of downtown Compton. Watts didn't have a downtown. So, [laughter] I don't why they called it the Watts Riot. I remember I was trying to get on a bus to get back home. No buses were running, so I was staying at my cousin's. My mother was panicking, seeing everything that was caught on television. "Get home." But no one was going to come to Compton to get me [laughter]. You couldn't leave. We remember hearing policemen going up and down the street saying, "If you've taken anything from the stores, put it out on the lawns." I mean, believe it or not, you looked out there the next morning, and there were TVs and couches [laughter] and stereos all on the lawns. I'm saying, "These people must be crazy. They're going to go to jail." But [laughter] I don't know what happened to some of them. But I mean, you wouldn't believe, everyone was taking something from somewhere. It was about three days before I was able to get home when the buses started running again.

MS: It took you about six days for the whole thing [inaudible].

JG: Yeah. It was an amazing time.

MS: You went into the military.

JG: Yes.

MS: You were stationed at Fort MacArthur for twelve years?

JG: I was stationed – I went in the military, December 28th, 1965. How I got in there was just a miracle in itself. The Vietnam War was now in full swing. Everyone was trying to find a way to get out of it, right into Canada, joining the National Guard, anything they could to get out of it. I had already taken my physical downtown. I already had been in a building where a sergeant said, "Everyone here is going to be in Vietnam in six months." So, I was prepared to do all that. But our family had friends, and one of them was a colonel who asked me, did I want to be in the missile program? Well, yes [laughter]. Yes. The missile program was stationed at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro. All I had to do was pass a few math tests, which I majored in Math, so worked out very well. I ended up being stationed at the Upper Reservation on Paseo del Mar, which was part of Fort Mac. It was a Nike Hercules missile site. We had two magazines, twelve birds, six in each round. It was a good time. I stayed there for four years at Fort Mac. Now, Fort Mac had a huge facility at a radar section and also a missile section. I was in the missile section for those four years. Then another great thing happened. There was a general, part of the Tuskegee Airmen, general. He said, "Why aren't there any Blacks in the Nike missile program?" Well, there weren't any. So, they opened up, and they said there were going to be seven openings in California. They didn't say for Blacks, but seven openings. I remember going to my mother and telling her, "Now I'm going to be a Black officer in a missile program." She said, "Son, you must be crazy." But I looked around. I mean, there were only half a dozen of us in the whole program. So, I wasn't really competing against the hundreds who were in the program.

I felt I was only competing against the other Blacks for one of the spots. That's what I figured. Sure enough, I did well on the test, and I became an officer. They had a missile site in Palos Verdes, right above – we had a place called Marineland in those days. Right across from there on Hawthorne Boulevard was a missile site. I ended up finishing my last eight years at that missile site.

MS: That was Benjamin Davis, the general?

JG: Yes.

MS: Yeah. Senior, Junior, I met them both.

JG: Yeah. I really appreciate him saying what he said because I ended up getting a job out of it.

MS: He was a tough cookie. Both of them were tough.

JG: Yeah.

MS: Let's go back. So, you didn't really leave San Pedro. You were in Fort MacArthur, which isn't that far away. So, you had some, still, connections with the town. What was the town like in the [19]60s and the [19]70s? How was it changing, and how was the town of the port changing as you saw it?

JG: San Pedro in the late [19]50s, early [19]60s, we had a great downtown. This was before malls were everywhere. So, most of the people, if they wanted to do any shopping or whatever they needed, they went downtown. Plus, we had local stores. We had a great downtown. But all of a sudden, say from the mid-[19]60s, [19]65, on, we slowly saw our downtown drying up. We also started losing some of our major businesses, our naval shipyard. We lost Todd Shipyard. The fishing fleet kept getting smaller and smaller. The canneries started hiring fewer and fewer. Next you know, we'd lost the canneries to Mexico. We lost most of our fishing fleet. It really impacted our community. There were a lot of people thinking that we were going to become a ghost town. Then all of a sudden, this containerize thing, LA took the lead on it. We got lucky. Next thing you know, our port was the port. Longshoremen jobs were good jobs even in the [19]50s and [19]60s, but they weren't the main job. I mean, they weren't the job. But after those other jobs dried up, everyone was looking to the port for jobs. Fortunately for us, the port exploded in size. Now we never really lost a beat. But what really hurt us was our downtown, which is hasn't recovered yet, 30, 40 years later. We're trying to do a change on that. But that was the biggest change.

MS: Now, you've come back after traveling, many different jobs, and a wide range of activities. Now you're back in the community again, and you're very much involved in this community. Tell us, what are the issues that you're dealing with? What are you trying to do to make San Pedro a better place and to help the community today?

JG: I had the privilege of doing a lot of traveling, especially in the military. I took on a position and saw the Middle East and other parts of the world. I came back home and realized how much

I missed home and how great this community was. This is a multi-generational community. We're on a peninsula. When I was growing up, there was no cross-town – I mean, you lived here, or you worked here. If you didn't live or work here, there's no reason to be in Pedro. You can leave your door open. Everyone knew everyone. It's not changed too much. Now, because of the size of the port, we have a lot of people who live out of town working at the port and because of ports of call and other reasons. But it's still a multigenerational community, and trust means a great deal. So, you can come into San Pedro and try to do some community work. If you don't have legs here where you've had family here for a long time – and we have family who has been here one hundred years – it doesn't mean a lot. But if you've gone to school with them, you've known them. You know their cousins and whatever. So, when I got back, there were a lot of community things going on. Everyone had a job. Everybody was working on the docks or had their own business. I came in as a community advisor working for myself, making my own hours. When you work for yourself [inaudible], you can do it. I mean, you're not doing anything [laughter]. I'm trying to survive. You're not doing anything. Can you make this meeting, make that meeting? Five years ago, they started a neighborhood council, which started here in the harbor. Wilmington and San Pedro, one of the first. So, my mother who was very active in the community, she won Harbor Woman of the Year in the early [19]80s. Because she was president of the Republican Club, which was an amazing thing because she was a Democrat. She was president of Church United, Toberman, the YWCA. She was very active. So, when I came on the scene, not only I had legs because our family had been here for so long, but my mother had done so much work. It kind of opened a lot of doors. So, they said, "Well, we need someone to be on this board. Well, we're going to ask a Gatlin. We need someone to be on this board. We better ask a Gatlin." It just started exploding. Now we've had a Juneteenth Celebration in San Pedro for twenty-seven years. Now, we had it consecutive, but prior to that time, our family had a Juneteenth Celebration. Then I ended up traveling, and it kind of fizzled out. Then 27 years ago, it started again. Well, when I came back, and they asked me to chair the picnic part of it, we were averaging three to four hundred people for our celebration. My mother says, "Get Joe involved get, get it bigger." Because she always felt that I didn't have a job either. So, I could give it a lot of time [laughter]. Well, the bottom line, we were very fortunate the ILWU has a social outreach called Harry Bridges Institute, named after their leader. They said they wanted to get involved with Juneteenth. So, the same year I got involved, now I'm chairing the ILWU's Harry Bridges and also the San Pedro committees. We went from three to four hundred, last year we had almost four thousand people in Pecks Park. They're all local. We're not talking from LA or Long Beach. This was all Pedro. Two years ago, I decided that we needed to have fireworks. This is our Fourth of July. This was when we were freed from slavery.

MS: Explain what Juneteenth is. People don't know what it is.

JG: Juneteenth means a great deal to our community. Because this is when we were freed from slavery. In 1865, June 19th, General Garrison [sic] went to Texas to free slaves. It was during the 19th of June. So, anytime a teen day in June comes up, we celebrate it. Now, why did he go to Texas? A lot of the slaves from Louisiana, Mississippi were hidden in Texas just in case the South lost the war or won it. They wanted to come back and get their slaves. Well, we won the war, or the North won the war. The slaves were free. So, now, 100 and, what, 40 years now, 142 years now, we've been having Juneteenth celebrations all over the country. We'll probably

have 100 in California on the teen – weekend of Juneteenth. We feel we have a very special one here because this is peninsula, this community of San Pedro, and 99 percent of the Blacks who ever lived in San Pedro, come back. My sister lives in Ohio. She flies in for Juneteenth. We have families coming in from Canada, from Jamaica, who used to be part of San Pedro. They come back for that one day. We don't have to advertise it. We don't have to do anything. They're going to come back for that day. So, two years ago, since I was so involved with so many different committees and working with the councilwoman's office, working with the longshoremen, which gave me a lot more legs, I decided we were going to have firework because that's our Fourth of July. But we have our picnic at Pecks Park which outlawed fireworks twenty-five years ago. So, I knew I had an uphill battle. But persistence and also a little luck and since we had been here so long, we ended up getting fireworks two years ago, celebrating our – and we had it again last year. So, that also brought more people to our celebration. So, now, it's the place to be. So, the 16th of June this year, it'll be packed. They will be getting there as early as 5:00 a.m. Same families have been there for twenty-some years, setting up the same thing. It's just a good time.

MS: Let's go back. I'm trying to switch back and forth. But I want to go back to when the suit was first started. You said that there were allies here in San Pedro. Can you name some of those allies? But there must have been opponents too. When you started to do that, what was the response in the community to it? Because it wasn't an easy thing to achieve.

JG: When the suit was finally won, we had support from certain families that really made a big deal; the Perkov family, the Papadakis family, the Trani family, which covered a lot. But again, this is a community from father to son, so there was some resentment. It was a great deal. To even fire that a little more for almost, jeez, almost thirty years, on every pay stub of the longshoremen when they got paid, it said $2 to the Gatling Fund. So, they want to make sure they didn't forget where the money – what was going on and why we were – they could not – no longer go from father to son. So, it was a real tense time, even though I'm saying it was – it worked out well, 20, 30 years later. That's one of the reasons why a lot of people in the community didn't know what we did. Even though a lot did, we did not talk about it. We didn't put it in the newspaper. We were real cautious about it. It was just, they did an article on Dave Arian, who was the president of ILWU worldwide, and randomly sent an article on him. He mentioned – and they were talking about the history of the union and everything else. Dave mentioned our family, what happened. So, they ended up calling us and putting me on the cover the next month. But if Dave probably wouldn't have spoken up, I don't know if they've even known it today. Because our family was so quiet about it. We didn't do much talk about it. But then it went public.

MS: You started talking about your mother. Tell me about your mother. She sounds like a remarkable woman.

JG: My mother, Thelma Gatlin, was quite a lady. She was so hard-nosed that no one ever gave her any problems, which amazed me to this day. Most of the organizations that she joined were primarily White in this community. It was the YMCA, which is White; Church Women United, which is mostly White; Toberman Settlement House, and we can go on. She ended up becoming president of almost all these organizations, won Woman of the Year – Harbor Woman of the

Year in the early [19]80s. She was just very, very active. But the one organization that really confused a lot of those in our community is when she decided to join the Republican Club which was just starting. She ended up being president of that, which was amazing because she was a Democrat. But she wanted to see what the other side was doing. She said, "For us to know what's going on, we've got to check out both sides." So, this was an interesting time. In the early [19]60s, there was a lot of redevelopments in San Pedro. We belonged to a Black church, a small Black church, on Fourth Street, which was taken away, and now is (incompetent?). So, they moved in the early [19]60s, about the same time we lost our home, and we had to move. So, my father who had a janitor service, we cleaned up one of the churches on 19th and Western called Ocean View Baptist, which was primarily White. But my father loved that church. My mother decided that the whole family was going to move to this White church. We were the only Blacks, believe me, there for probably 15, 20 years before other Blacks started going there, now maybe 10. So, we're not talking about a big number [laughter]. But it's a great church. We always felt welcome there. I received certificates of thirty years of service. That was in the [19]90s. I'm not a big church goer, so I haven't received any since then.

MS: Were you received well? I mean, the Baptist churches, it's divided. Many cases, there are Black Baptist churches and White Baptist churches. There are not too many integrated Baptist churches, even today.

JG: At this church, we were received very well. I mean, we were family. So, we were treated so well, it was hard not to go to church every day. One of the things we really liked about it is that it was so structured. We knew what time church was over with. My father had a janitor service. He was working around the clock. On weekends, every minute made a difference. So, when you knew the church was over at noon, he can go back to work. Where in a Black church, you never knew what time it was over. So, I think that had something to do with my father [laughter] wanting to go to this church, so he could work more. So, that had a lot to do with it.

MS: So, why did your mother – I mean, was that her way of just quietly saying, "We're all equal here," the fact that she joined some of these White organizations? Or was she an outspoken kind of activist?

JG: My mother was an outspoken activist. But it was also, she felt very comfortable going to Ocean View Baptist, because we were received so well. Reverend Steward at the time when I was there, he was just such a good guy. They also had a strong youth program. So, my daughter, she ended up going to church there. A youth program that travels states, singing and putting on plays. It was a great program. So, we felt very comfortable and reasonably. Now, we still got involved with the Black churches here in the community. I'm currently the Black advisor, community advisor, for Mount Sinai Baptist Church, which is the largest Black church in our community. I recently joined the board there. So, I kind of play both sides. But I never thought about it being Black against White. It was just family here. So, I felt comfortable.

MS: Was that your mother's attitude overall? What did she think about this whole situation of Black and White? What was her attitude toward it all?

JG: There were racial – in the [19]60s, I'm sure there were racial problems, in the [19]50s, that

she had to deal with. Coming from the South, we heard them, all the stories, believe me. But we didn't – I didn't even know what racism was until I got in the military. I mean, I had never felt it in school. Come to my house during the week, there would be White or Black. We gave a school party, might be more Hispanics and Whites and Croatian than Blacks there. It was never a Black or White thing. We went to a White church and never thought about it, never gave it too much of a thought that it was White or Black. It was just a church. It wasn't until I got in the military and really felt the racism and also the [19]60s when a lot was going on. I had the privilege of going to Mississippi in [19]65. So, a lot was going on. I take it back; that was [19]64 when I went to Mississippi with three of my friends from college who lived in Mississippi.

MS: [inaudible]

JG: Well, we went back there simply – went to visit our family at home. So, we took a Greyhound bus to Mississippi. That was a really an eye opener for me, really was, when I didn't know what racism was. We never talked about that type of thing at home.

MS: You've spent a good deal of your life in San Pedro. You certainly grew up here. You're back here now.

JG: Yes.

MS: Can you tell me what this place means to you? The town or the harbor, the combination, what are your feelings about it?

JG: San Pedro is such a unique place. It has so many cultures, talking about a melting pot that got along. I mean, the melting pot in this community is just amazing in itself. I have three daughters. They all live here. Grandchildren live here. I have my daughters, I remember they were growing up, they just couldn't wait to leave Pedro. Because everybody knew everybody. It was like a small town. But as you grow older, you just fall in love with this place. You fall in love with – you have a beach. Most of the communities worry about fires. We don't worry about it, or earthquake. It seems like it doesn't happen here. Like, we're just a community all to ourselves. We know everybody. It's something that means a great deal when I can go to a store and community, bond, sit there, and I see a little old lady or gentleman my age, I can sit and talk to him. I've never seen him before. At ten minutes, we know somebody or whatever. I was at a meeting this morning. Captain Lou Roupoli, the captain of the Fire Department down the harbor, he comes up to me. We've seen each other many meetings, but he went to school with my brother. I mean, this is family here. We have a Croatian market on Pacific and 11th. I go in there just to hear the Croatian sounds and start talking to someone because you know everyone in this community. So, it's special. I really enjoy that, that you can feel part of something. We've been here a long time. So, this is home. For us to leave our family, leave, I can't even imagine it.

MS: Anything else I should talk to you about? Any questions or any stories that you have that I should ask you about? Anything you want to share at this point?

JG: I think you pretty much covered some of the things that were Pedro. Some of my crazier stories were in other parts of the world.

MS: Yeah.

[laughter]

JG: This is a feature.

MS: I keep going back to this, to the suit. Give me some stories. You said they were friends, the Perkovs and the Tranis. Who is the third family? The Papadakis.

JG: Papadakis family.

MS: Give me a story that shows what they did, how they supported you. Any kind of incidents that showed their support for what you were doing?

JG: Well, I'll give you an idea of Ante Perkov, give you an idea how loved he is in his community. I don't know if you remember about ten years ago, Malcolm X, they want to do a Malcolm X Boulevard downtown. The whole community, you would have thought it would have been an easy thing, and it was a fight that never happened. At that very same time, we voted almost unanimously to have an Ante Perkov Way in front of his restaurant in San Pedro. No outcry because he's so loved and the community. This is a man who gave back. I think my mother almost mentored from this man because he was just always giving back. He would do things at the Boys Club. It wasn't a Boys and Girls Club then. It was a Boys Club. He would put on dinners and pay for it all. He would bring in Blacks who weren't really – wouldn't have been felt welcomed there except that he did it. So, now, not only we were there, eating there, we were serving, or we were all committees. When you now go to certain places, if it's a Boys Club or wherever it was, he made us feel welcome. When you have families who were the big sticks in the community opening up those doors, it made a huge difference. So, now, it made it easy for my mother to go out and join this board or be part of this and feel welcome there.

MS: What about Papadakis?

JG: The Papadakis family is such a unique family. They've been here one hundred years, as you probably know. John, in fact, a unique story in itself, that restaurant is probably the most unique restaurant you'll ever go to. It's Greek. It's a Greek family, and it's extended Greek family. They speak Greek. They dance. It's Greek. The only Black working there is my daughter [laughter]. She works there, and she loves it. John, I remember when John – how he said, "Joe, you know me. The Greeks, we talk –" he talks to my daughter like it's his daughter. He chews her out, and he screams at her. Now, my daughter comes home some nights. I say, "How was your night at work?" She's not how much money she made or who came in the door. "I didn't get screamed at today, Dad. It was a great day." [laughter] But John, he's such a loving – you walk in there, he'll grab and hug you and break your ribs. Because he's such a great guy. But if you do something wrong, he's going to jump all over you. But you're family. He immediately, when my daughter started working there, he says, "Joe, I'm going to treat her like family." I

appreciated that. So, when she first got there, I prepared her for it. "This is John Papadakis. He's going to treat you like family. They're not going to treat you like an outsider. Because that's who he is." His son, Taso, the last I don't know how many years, he's a photographer. He's our photographer at our Juneteenth. I mean, I could have brought in a Black photographer, but he's like family. So, you don't even think twice about it.

MS: What about the Tranis?

JG: They were like three major families. They all owned restaurants in San Pedro, the Greeks, the Croatian, and Italian. The Tranis and I, we all went to school together. We all played football together. So, when the Tranis – which were also in the real estate, besides other things. So, when our families were trying to pass Seventh Street or pass Bandini, there were certain companies we knew we couldn't approach. But we can go to Tranis and get treated fairly. Word gets out, you know what I'm saying? Oh, we can go to the Trani restaurant, and we have a reservation. We know it's a good one. It's not going to be, well, it's a Black couple come in, they're not going to get treated – I mean, there are places outside – I've been going to Redondo Beach and other places. I had reservations, and I sat there all day and never got waited on. But in Pedro, that never happened. Right now, if you go into Ante's restaurant, I tell everybody, "My picture's on the wall." Well, it's been on the wall since the [19]60s because I was on a football team when I played with Marion Perkov who's on the same football team. So, it's a sports picture of all the football players with his family here. I use that –

MS: Do you still see Tony Perkov?

JG: Oh, yeah. Tony Perkov is a great guy. In fact –

MS: I'm trying to get him to do an interview. Next time, you tell him to come and do it.

JG: Oh, Tony is a special guy, and he's so low key. I'm president of the Neighborhood Council here in San Pedro. If you've got to think about what that means, again, we're percent. So, for me to be president. The reason I was president because the union put out a letter stating that they're supporting Joe to run. So, the union people supported me. Now, if you could think back to the lawsuit we had 30 years ago, that wouldn't have happened. But there's been a change and a three-sixty since that time, or one-eighty, I'm sorry. But the bottom line, Tony Perkov – our Neighborhood Council is center of San Pedro, downtown, the port. So, what I wanted to do was to show off our great restaurants. The first restaurant I went to was Tony's or Ante's. I said, "Tony, I want to have it here." He said, "Joe, whatever you need. If you want it for free." I said, "No, Tony, [laughter] I don't want it for free. The city's going to pay for it. So, I could write the check." But Tony would have done it for free. I mean, he's just a super guy.

MS: Go see him. Tell him we want to talk to him. He's, "Oh, I don't want to be interviewed and everything." Tell him.

JG: Not only that, one day I was there – and I didn't get to be part of this, but to give you an idea of who Tony is. I mean, who's who will go through that restaurant, and he said, "Joe, you wouldn't believe. He's in the back room." I said, "Who's in the back room, Tony?" "Mr.

Gaffey." Now, we have a street called Gaffey. I can't even imagine it was someone named Gaffey. I mean, it goes back that far. They're telling stories, and they're doing this. He was sitting back there just being a fly on the wall, listening to all these old timers do whatever.

MS: I think he's still alive, Mr. Gaffey.

JG: Well, this was only like six months, a year ago.

MS: We're talking about getting him in touch.

JG: So, Tony, is a tremendous resource.

MS: Well, tell him.

JG: I'll tell him that.

[end of transcript]