

Listen to Lionel Harris (b. 1945), son of Charles “Teenie” Harris, talk about learning to drive around the city with his father, going on a Gateway Clipper photography assignment, and the darkroom in the basement of their house. This interview was conducted and recorded by Charlene Foggie-Barnett and Kerin Shellenbarger on April 20, 2011.

Excerpt 1: Learning to drive around the city with his father

Well, I will tell you some things, uh Dad, um- I always liked to go when Dad went out on assignments, and uh, ‘cause I loved to ride in the car, and he- he never had a problem with me going – at all. And I learned a lot about Pittsburgh just from riding in a car with him going to different places. Um, it was really exciting for me because Dad was always away on assignments or making up pictures, so that was my way of having, I guess you could say quality time. And I didn’t realize it then, but I do now, and, and it made a lot of sense to me in years later why he did that, but I really enjoyed just riding with Dad because he had a strange way of dealing with people that- and when I say strange way, uh, he was so open. I was telling some friends of mine the other day that um, my uh, stepchildren basically, that when my dad would, drivin’ down the street, uh, he had a way of sounding like a fire engine [laughs] it was just because he did it uh, he would, he would um, scare kids by acting like he was a fire engine comin’ down the street at them, put his head out the window and did that – people thought I was crazy doing something like that, and I said well I better stop doing that, only Dad could get away with that. But it was just really nice um, when he would go out, um, he hated traffic lights – he just couldn’t stand traffic lights it seemed like. He would go out of his way to go another direction where there weren’t traffic lights, and by doing that, I found that I’ve learned so much about Pittsburgh just by finding these little side streets, and um, various different ways that no one- uh, people today say, how do you know how to get here and there and everywhere? I just, it’s natural for me because I learned so much about uh, this city, um, I spent twenty-five years away from it, and when I moved back here, people said why did you come back? I said it’s home, and uh, I love this city. Dad loved it in a special way, and it showed I think really in the pictures that he took.

Excerpt 2: Anecdote about Gateway Clipper photography assignment

He had a keen sense, um, just like one assignment, I’d never forget, uh, down in Homewood there was a gathering, it was a club I guess. He had a way of setting people up to take a picture that I never could do, ‘cause I tried to do it, I- he just knew exactly where everyone should be. And I, I- and now I understand that because, it’s not just taking the picture, it’s art. It’s the ability to be able to see what other people don’t see. And he had a great knack for that, um, um, but uh, he sent me out on an assignment once, and I’ll never forget that. It was um, on the Gateway Clipper, and it was um, a wedding, no not a wedding, a fashion show. And he gave me the camera and rolls and rolls and rolls of film, and he says don’t worry about it, he said just take pictures – you’ll enjoy it. I did enjoy myself, it was really a lot of fun and he told me I took pretty good pictures too. I didn’t find out until years later why, um, he chose me to do that. Dad couldn’t swim, and he would not get on that

river for anybody or anything. So, and I never knew that, I never – I, I got on him about that years later, I said now I know why you sent me on that assignment to take those pictures, and he cracked up. He says well, he said you did a good job, and I really felt good about that.

Excerpt 3: On the darkroom in the Harris basement

As far as home, when he moved his studio to the home, that was good because we, he was home a lot then. Even if he was just making up pictures or anything, he was home. Um, but he um, I don't know what age it was that he showed me how to take, how to make up the pictures but, um, when we go down into the basement, uh, there was like a pool table there, and then the darkroom, not the darkroom, but the, all his work area was when you go down into the basement, was to the right up in the front of the house, and then there was a little room to the right where that was the darkroom – it was just a small, actually it was a- had a toilet in it [chuckles]. And uh, but it, it was where he- it had a red light in there, and uh, he had a little counter, and that's where he would get all the negatives and all that together to make them up, and then there was a sink in the other part of the basement where he would rinse, uh, negatives, pictures, before he put them on those, those um, boards where he would dry them. That was interesting, so uh, he taught how to roll the, the, once you put the pictures on the uh, it's like a chrome, um sheet, and once you put the pictures on, you had to roll it so that you would get all the water out from the picture and then you put a, you had a blotter on it, and you roll it on up – and it was really interesting. But, I enjoyed it, I and because what happened was when you got to the point that you knew what you were doing, he would leave you to do that. And I, and I, and I liked that, I liked to do that. But the interesting thing though was when you had to go to the enlarger, um, to put the negative in, and get the picture all lined up, and how you were going to do this and that, and that's when he started showing me how to use this, he had this little device, he made it himself, that would help to, to, to keep uh, the darker skinned people from getting too dark. So he would balance out that picture, and he showed me how to do that, it was interesting, I practiced it, uh, for awhile, and then I didn't do too bad. And then once you have that set up, you went from there um, to- it had the developer, the water, and the hypo. And then he showed how to make that from these big bottles that he had, these brown type bottles, and, and it was really interesting.

Excerpt 4: Memories of his father's activeness

Well, Dad always danced. He would jump up, kick his feet, and – oh he was energetic, I don't know where he got all his energy. It, it, I, I guess it was from sports when he was younger, you know, because I mean the man played basketball, he played baseball. I mean he, he enjoyed, he enjoyed himself. And that's what I saw, he, he would enjoy himself and in ways I guess I do today.

Excerpt 5: Takeaways from his father

I learned to take every day as the most important day of my life because that's what my dad did. That's why whatever he did that day, he put his all in to that day and I saw that, I, I mean I have to say that. This man had a- he wouldn't tell you about all his problems, he wouldn't tell you. He just dealt with what he had to do and just go on until the next day came, and it's all he did, he lived it that, he lived it that way. He would tell you stories about um, places just like when we went to Kennywood we wanted to go swimming, he said you can't go in there, I said well why? He said they don't allow Black people in there, well he didn't say Black, he said colored. I said well that's crazy, he said yeah, you're right. He said come on, let's have some fun [laughs] that's the way it was. Onward to something else! Uh, and I never, I never... I'm sorry but I never, I, I look at it like this. I do not have time for all that negative stuff. You can do nothing about the negative, you've got to work with the positives and that's what he did, that's what he did. He dealt with everything that was positive, and that's why I think he loved Pittsburgh because Pittsburgh was a heck of a melting pot.