

Interview with

Cleave Frink

conducted by Xavier Webb

for the “Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion” project by the City of Mountain View’s Human Relations Commission,

in collaboration with Senior Lecturer Michael Kahan and team from Stanford University.

Mountain View Historical Society
Mountain View Public Library

July 10, 2022

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of “Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Anti-Discrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion” is to document the history of discrimination and efforts to fight discrimination in housing in the city of Mountain View, California. Some of the information collected was shared with the public at an event sponsored by the Mountain View Human Relations Commission, held on July 26, 2022. In order to make the interviews available to researchers and members of the public, they will be added to the historical collection of the Mountain View Historical Association (MVHA) and/or the Mountain View Public Library (MVPL) and made available for public use. They may also be shared with other libraries and collections, including those at Stanford University.

BIO

Xavier Webb (he/him) has been a resident of Mountain View for nearly a decade, he is a Supplier Diversity Professional, a 1st term Human Relations Commissioner, and Chapter President of the United Nations Association Mid Peninsula Chapter.

ABSTRACT



Cleave Frink is a single, Black father that has been a Mountain View resident for over 10 years. In this interview, he speaks about how, since moving here from Orlando, Florida, he has created a community network for himself both inside and outside his immediate neighborhood. Unfortunately, due to rising rent prices, and the desire to purchase a home, Mr. Frink speaks about his uncertain future in Mountain View and California.

Date of Interview: July 10, 2022

Interviewer: Xavier Webb

Interviewee: Cleave Frink

Xavier Webb:

Alright. My name is Xavier Webb, I'm an interview working with the City of Mountain View's Human Relations Commission [HRC], in partnership with the Mountain View Historical Association on the project entitled "Understanding the History of Housing in Mountain View: Stories of Racism, Antidiscrimination, and Movement towards Inclusion". The purpose of this project is to document the history of discrimination and the efforts to fight discrimination in housing in the city of Mountain View. Some of the information collected will be shared with the public at an event sponsored by Mountain View Human Relations Commission, scheduled for July 26. Today is July 10, and I'm interviewing Mr. Cleave Frink. And Mr. Frink is going to share a little bit more about who he is and his information. But first, I'm going to make sure Mr. Frink gives us his name, to make sure that we have it documented correctly, the way you pronounce it. Can you share that please?

Cleave Frink:

Sure, my name is Cleave Frink, Junior. It's spelled C-L-E-A-V-E, F-R-I-N-K.

Xavier Webb:

Thank you. Can you tell me where you currently live?

Cleave Frink:

I live in downtown, near downtown. Do you need my address?

Xavier Webb:

No, no.

Cleave Frink:

Okay.

Xavier Webb:

Can you tell me how long you've lived in Mountain View?

Cleave Frink:

I have lived here... this is my tenth year.

Xavier Webb:

Okay, okay, okay. Perfect, thank you. Now, if there's some experiences you can share, like what got you here. 'Cause you've been here 10 years. Did you buy a property or do you have an apartment here?

Cleave Frink:

I have an apartment here.

Xavier Webb:

Okay, and where did you migrate from?

Cleave Frink:

I moved here from Florida, from Orlando, Florida specifically. For work.

Xavier Webb:

Oh okay, okay. Can you tell me a little bit more about what your apartment's like?

Cleave Frink:

I live in a two-bedroom... what's that?

Xavier Webb:

I know it's downtown, right, downtown ish?

Cleave Frink:

Yes, I live directly across from the Mountain View train station. I live in a two-bedroom, one-bedroom cottage. It's approximately 900 square feet with a 1 car garage. And it is on a property with two other similar properties, similar houses.

Xavier Webb:

Okay, alright, since you gave me a little description about your house, or your apartment, can you tell me a little bit more about your neighborhood? And how you feel about living in that area?

Cleave Frink:

I live in the Willow Gate neighborhood. It is fairly diverse. There's renters and owners here. There's some older residents here who've lived here for many many years. There's a lot of newer residents, there's some new construction in this neighborhood. There's some construction that's been around for 20 or 30 years. So it's a little bit of a mix. And then of course we have gardens in this neighborhood as well.

Xavier Webb:

Oh, okay. So, that's a great thing. I'm interested in community gardens myself. So, tell me how you interact with the community garden - do you participate in it, do you reap the benefits of it, those kind of things

Cleave Frink:

Yeah, unfortunately I don't interact with the garden at all. When I first moved here I applied for it, the waiting list was 5 years long. My intention was to have sort of a fun and bonding activity with my then younger child. And then by the time a plot became available for us, he was too old to force him to go and participate, so. [Laughs].

Xavier Webb:

Well I like that word, "forced him to go".

Cleave Frink:

[Laughs]

Xavier Webb:

Oh, so you live there with a family.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah I'm a single parent, I have one child here.

Xavier Webb:

Oh okay, do they go to school in the area or are they too old now?

Cleave Frink:

He goes here, he's a senior at Mountain View this year.

Xavier Webb:

Okay. So, he... Let's see, so if I'm doing my math correctly, he got here - he was in elementary school when you guys moved here?

Cleave Frink:

He moved here in fourth grade. I spent out here by myself. And then he moved here to start his fourth grade school year. But he's been here ever since. But he spends part of the year sort of with his mother.

Xavier Webb:

Oh okay, okay. So I'm sure there's many stories you can tell about the diversity in your area and diversity in his school. And I'll add in [inaudible]. Did you move to this specific area because of the school, or did you pick that area in Mountain View because the location was a great location...? Tell me a little bit about that.

Cleave Frink: [00:05:28]

I picked the school first, and then I found an apartment. I was persuaded to the school because of Carmen Ghysels, who was the then, she was, her name was Carmen Mizell; she was a principal at Landels¹, and she was incredibly helpful and instrumental in helping me get my son get into a school with - he has some special needs, very minor. She was instrumental in showing that our school system in Mountain View could support him. At that time, I was also looking at Menlo Park and quite frankly when I went to the school there, my best friend was in that neighborhood, and we were really considering that school system. But in that school, there wasn't a lot of diversity in that school just because of the area. And then when I went to Landels, just that year, there was 79 languages being spoken, in just that year. And I just felt that was... an advantage, an educational opportunity that can't be matched very often, so, we chose Mountain View.

Xavier Webb:

Great. Can you tell me about - I'm assuming this is the only place you've lived in since you got here?

Cleave Frink:

This is the only city I've lived in, as a renter. I did spend my first year in Sunnyvale living out of a hotel because of the nature of my work at the time. So I spent about 9 months learning the area

¹ Elementary school in Mountain View Whisman School District; refers to Edith Landels Elementary (K-5)

but I was living out of a hotel. But I spent all of my days as an actual tenant here in Mountain View. And I've only lived in this apartment.

Xavier Webb:

Oh okay. So can you tell me about that process, for you, moving in there? The [inaudible] process, did you feel there was any kind of issues with that...

Cleave Frink:

I'm sorry you broke up there, can you say that again?

Xavier Webb: [00:07:35]

I said can you tell me a little bit about the application process when you applied: do you feel like there was any sort of discomfort, or was it a fairly routine process when you applied? Do you feel like there was something outside the ordinary where you felt that you asked you that because of what you look like or who you were vs you thought, which would be, say, a standard type of application process.

Cleave Frink:

So for me, the application process was actually quite inspiring. I came, I found this apartment on Craigslist, which at the time wasn't as full of scam listings as it is now I would imagine. I was the second person to see it. It was recently, newly renovated, so no one had lived there since it was renovated. And the only person to see it before me was a doctor. They went and saw it, they sort of gave me indications that they were going to select that person because of their job, and for whatever reason, they picked me. And the only complication from the process was the amount of the deposit that was required to get the apartment, which was just shy of \$10,000. I think that's a little, I mean I was in a special situation at the time, so it wasn't unattainable for me. But I think for most people that would be really difficult, that would be a really difficult process; to come up with \$10,000 plus the first months rent to start living in an apartment and do all the other stuff that you gotta do.

Xavier Webb:

For me, that seems a little extraordinary. I'm, like, I'm not trying to have you share information that you're not willing to share... And again, was it because of- like a doctor applied for the place, right? Now, if you have a doctor applying, I'm assuming that they've got this humongous salary, and so this place is humongous. 'Cause I'm accustomed to maybe first and last month's rent. 10,000 seems kind of odd. Plus the first month's rent, which would be a couple thousand dollars, or something like that. And again, this is why we're trying to find these things out, and I'm inquiring too because when I moved over here to Mountain View, I didn't have such a large amount as a deposit. I think my deposit was like \$3,000. That was the standard 6, 7 years ago.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah.

Xavier Webb:

That's... I'm like...

Cleave Frink:

It did feel and seem excessive. It did not seem to be motivated by anything other than - you know, I was coming in from a divorce, my credit number wasn't necessarily the best. I think it was probably based on that. Which again, I always feel like, in our country we seem to make it the most difficult for people who are already having the most problems. You know, a person who is poor, or lower than average credit... at least in terms of housing, it probably isn't the best idea to force them to come up with extra money for deposits. And this was just for a deposit. And a couple of years later when I was experiencing some unemployment, they gave half of it back, to help me get through a difficult time. It actually turned out to be kind of a nice thing, because it was some savings that they were holding for me that they freely gave me back one year. So, it kind of worked out.

Xavier Webb:

Nice. Nice. That's good to know. Now, the other thing... so your son is here for the school year, am I correct?

Cleave Frink:

Yup.

Xavier Webb:

So how is his interaction with the neighborhood, with the neighborhood kids? How's he getting along in that sense? I'm assuming he's a young black man in the area as well. So how's that working -

Cleave Frink: [00:12:14]

Yeah. He's had a pretty great experience here. He went to Landels, he went to Crittenden². He has a very diverse group of friends. Many of which actually had to move away, because of how expensive it is to live here. But actually his best friend is actually in a military family, and they have moved away - he's actually visiting us now, and they've been getting the whole group

² Refers to Crittenden Middle School (6-8), a school in the Mountain View Whisman School District

together. He also plays competitive basketball, so a lot of the kids that he's gone to school with have played on his basketball team for which I'm a coach. They've been sort of reliving their younger days in the neighborhood and visiting the play areas that Cretin did, and visited the play areas at Landals, and reminiscing on school days and all the people that they met through their years. He's had a wonderful experience here. For me this has been one of the reasons that we picked for him to live here instead of living in Florida is [that] this has been a very safe community for him to grow up in. The school system, for which I have been very involved in; I've been a chair or co chair on the last two Bond campaigns, I've sat on all of the dowedry commissions for the past, the past three of them. I currently sit on three oversight committee for Mountain View and one for Mountain View-Los Altos. So we've been very involved with the schools here, and we've felt very fortunate for the advantage that the schools have provided for our student. And these are advantages and resources that were not available at our school system back in Florida. We come from Orange County, Florida, which is, I think one of the top ten largest school districts in the country. It has over two hundred and 30 schools under one district house, with a budget just over a billion dollars a year. Here in Mountain View, we have two school districts - the middle school and elementary school district, I think they cover a total of 12 or maybe 13 schools. You can go down to the district office and ask them for the superintendent on a Tuesday if you need to. And the same goes for the high school. Both districts have been very supportive and very involved and has been very helpful.

Xavier Webb:

Oh okay, okay. It seems like there's been a wonderful housing experience for you.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah. Like I said I've lived here almost 10 years, it's going to be my tenth year in december. This property was previously managed by a management company and the owner has since let the managing company go and is managing on his own. I consider him a friend. He's often asking me if I need anything. In years where I have been unemployed and struggling to find my next position, he has amended my rate, my rent, schedule to make things sort of work so he didn't have to kick me out. And quite frankly I'm not sure I would still be here were it not for his support, because he has always made sure that I was able to keep this apartment for my kid. He's watched my kid grow up. In addition, in almost 10 years that I've lived here, he has not raised my rent, which is kind of unheard of.

Xavier Webb:

[Laughs] That does not happen here in Silicon Valley. But fortunately for us, we do have rent control for older buildings, but its not for all the newer buildings. But the older buildings are, you know - zero is better than any number.

Cleave Frink:

The rental company raised it a hundred dollars one year. And then they raised it a hundred

dollars the second year. And then he let them go, and then he dropped it a hundred dollars, and then dropped it again a hundred dollars. So I'm back to when I was. It was a little higher, \$200 higher for a couple of years, and now it's back to what it was when I moved in.

Xavier Webb:

Wow. Wow. That's amazing. I wish I had it so good. Tell me how you interact with your neighbors. I mean, they come and they go, how do you meet, how do you greet, is it just you stay in your unit and don't talk to anyone, how's that work out?

Cleave Frink: [00:17:11]

So I come from a neighborhood in Florida where I was the neighborhood watch leader. I organized parties, Christmas parties, Fourth of July parties. I knew all of my neighbors within a four or five block radius in downtown Orlando, and it was very different from coming here where I don't know a lot of my neighbors here. I have some neighbors where our children go to school together so I know them. But other neighbors, my next door neighbor, just on the other side of this wall behind my camera, he's been here for many, many years and his children have grown up in the house. And I see him from time to time and we know each others names and we talk from time to time. Next door to me is sort of a complex, about 8 or 9 units, similar to mine, and I don't know anybody over there. So I know people in this neighborhood, but they're not, it's not quite as open and friendly as I would like. But, you know, it is what it is. People on this property I know fairly well; the person behind me is the owner's ex wife, and she and I are pretty close, and we talk most days. The person who lives on the other side of me is fairly new. But I have known everyone who's lived in that unit actually pretty well. They've moved away for other jobs or to go back to their home countries or those kinds of things.

Xavier Webb:

So you've had a, it seems like you've had a fairly diverse group of neighbors as well.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah I think so. The first couple that moved there were from Ireland. And they moved back home when they started having children to be closer to family. Then there was a single dad there who I bonded with. But he was only there for 8 months or so, and then he moved on. Then there was a couple there, and they moved to LA for a job, but we're great friends and I still keep in touch with them. And I actually still keep in touch with all of these folks that I'm talking about. The person that lives there now, she's only been there for a few weeks and she travels extensively, so I haven't really gotten the chance to get to know her as well, but we talk and look out for each other. And then behind me the owner's ex-wife has lived there for the past several years but before she lived there, his daughter lived there. You know, we've all always been helping each other out just 'cause I kind of consider them family, too, so.

Xavier Webb:

That's great. So, since you've been here a decade, and I'm talking about your neighbors, and you're saying that you came from a place that was a little more inclusive based on your role - is there a way that you think you could make Mountain View a little better in terms of inclusivity? Any suggestions, or...?

Cleave Frink:

Yeah! I have tons of suggestions. I'm just a single parent, so I haven't had time to get involved in that process. I am currently chair in the public safety advisory board, and like I said I was doing these other things for the school districts, and I also coach youth basketball, and I'm also a full time employee - so I just sort of ran out of time. In my neighborhood back in Florida, what we did was we just had parties, everybody likes a party. We would literally shut down the street and invite everyone to come. I've always wanted to do a block party in this neighborhood on my street, I think that would do a lot to bring people out, particularly around neighborhood watch; they have a fall program, I forget what the name of the program is, that brings everybody out for these little get-togethers. I would love to do something like that here, just, I don't have the - or at least I haven't had the time to organize it. National [inaudible] is what I'm talking about. I think it would be helpful to have a National ____ on my street. I think that might bring a lot of people out to get to meet folks.

Xavier Webb:

So do you think that would help definitely, because of the pandemic and people being isolated based on the pandemic? Is that part of why people are more, we'll say, not as engaging in your neighborhood? Would you say that? Or was it like that before?

Cleave Frink:

I think people are generally less engaging in this area in general, and there's probably a variety of reasons. I think people tend to stick to their culture groups and their ethnic groups just for familiarity's sake. I think of Asian folks being attacked on the street during the pandemic, and it's probably also a likely contributor. And then I just think that, you know, we sort of live in this small bedroom-like community, and I think people are just aren't really amenable talking to strangers on the street, like they are maybe up in San Francisco or larger cities. That's one of the reasons why I really enjoy the way that we blocked off Castro street, to sort of promote more of a festival atmosphere there. I was down there last night having dinner by myself, and another woman sat next to me having dinner by myself, and we started talking. Which is not a thing that is very, I don't find that to be a normal occurrence in our city. And so I'm encouraged by how that actually has sort of created, and helps to promote community in our city.

Xavier Webb:

That is somewhat rare. I see that downtown as well, I go down there with my wife, occasionally. And I do where other people are sitting outdoors. I think the weather's better so that we can go out, and make a little bit of a difference in the summertime.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah.

Xavier Webb:

If there's anything... I'm thinking about the housing situation here, aside from rent control, is there anything else that you think would make a difference for housing, here in the city, to make it better? What do you think?

Cleave Frink: [00:24:23]

I don't know, you know. One of the thing that frustrates me, is I would like to stay here, and I think it would be next to impossible for a single person, a single parent, to buy here. And I can't rent forever. I kind of feel like the biggest thing that we could try to figure out is maybe not just affordable housing, because I don't probably qualify for any affordable housing, but I still don't have enough money sitting around to put a downpayment on - I think the average median cost here is just shy of \$2 million. I couldn't buy a house for that here. That's for an old, dilapidated house, it's not even, like, a nice house that you can move in and you don't have to do anything to. If there was a way to provide down payment assistance for people in my class, it would do a lot for people who are unhouse. It would do a lot for folks who are sort of in - couples, who are in the lower income group. But we don't do anything for people who are in that middle group, who don't have quite enough money to get started. So we end up having those people leave the area. And that's pretty much my only option is, I'm looking at "Well where am I gonna move after my son graduates, 'cause I have to buy a house eventually, and I don't think it can be here. I would like to stay here, I've invested a lot of time in this community, both civically and personally. And I love it here. But the market is the market... so I don't think that I would be able to stay here.

Xavier Webb:

So you're thinking, 'cause he's a senior now - is he going into his senior year?

Cleave Frink:

Yeah.

Xavier Webb:

So you, next year, you'll no longer be a resident of Mountain View, possibly even the state of California.

Cleave Frink:

Most likely, yeah. I'm looking at places all over the country. My job is remote, so I don't have to stay here. I would love to stay in California. I would have to move pretty far away to stay in California, and once again start over. I could go back East and go back home, I could go to the communities that I've spent a lot of time in back East. Yeah, those are my options at this moment.

Xavier Webb:

Wow, that's... yeah. And I'm sure you're not the only one in this position as well. And that's sad, to lose someone that's built such a, that's become such a large part of the community. One of the things that you're doing, and like you said, there's some suggestions that you have to make things more affordable. And this is one of the things that we talk about here in Mountain View, as part of the commission; is dealing with unhoused people as well.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah.

Xavier Webb:

But again as you said, there's that middle, that middle tier.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah.

Xavier Webb: [00:27:36]

We're not all a part of the Googlers, making Google money. We're just hard working middle class people that can't afford a \$2 million house.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah.

Xavier Webb:

Can you tell me, what's your role, like, your day job role.

Cleave Frink:

I am a filmmaker. I work at a tech company. I've actually worked at several tech companies in the area, including Apple and Google, as a vendor for a contractor for several years. I'm now currently employed at Salesforce.

Xavier Webb:

Okay, okay. Is there anyone you've heard, that you've talked to about - that have had housing concerns here in Mountain View? Besides the people that have just moved?

Cleave Frink:

Not really. Some of the kids that I have coached have sort of been unstably housed, but they've been able to figure it out because many of them come from fairly large families that are all still local, and they just sort of band together and make it work for their families. Everybody else that I know has left the area, or is still renting, or has just figured out how to buy someplace else.

Xavier Webb: [00:29:16]

M'kay. Can you suggest anybody else I can talk to about issues, housing issues. If you can't think of anyone right now, If you can keep them in mind or keep this in mind, so we can just have a conversation with them about -

Cleave Frink:

Sure.

Xavier Webb:

- housing issues. Or even someone that's [an] activist in the housing bubble, trying to help people out. It'd be nice to talk to them about their experiences, experiences they've had in the past, anyone that you know of that's lived in the community 30 years, 40 years, that are willing to share their experiences. We would greatly appreciate it. We're trying to put this archive together so people can look back in time and get a sense of what the city was at this point in time, and further back in time as well.

Cleave Frink:

I don't know if I could get - one of my son's friends recently moved their family out to Tracy so that they could buy a house. That child is, their child is actually visiting in town recently. They're one of the, they lived in an apartment for several years, and then when they were able to

save enough money to buy a house, they moved out there, so they could afford whatever it is that they decided to purchase. Other than folks like that, have you spoken to Laura Blakely? She's a school board member for Mountain View Whisman [School District]. I think she's lived here 30 years or so. Phil Lambert, another school, former school board member, he's lived here for 30 years, and they're homeowners. And they've participated in a lot of these debates through the years and how they affect school systems. They might be good resources.

Xavier Webb:

Okay, I'll take their names down, and then maybe you can share their information with me. Or, if you're more comfortable reaching out to them and giving them a little background on what we're trying to accomplish -

Cleave Frink:

Of course!

Xavier Webb:

Word of mouth is great =

Cleave Frink:

Yah sure!

Xavier Webb:

You'd be helping us as citizens of the city.

Cleave Frink:

Sure.

Xavier Webb:

The more information the better.

Cleave Frink:

Sure.

Xavier Webb:

Is there anything else you would like to share about the housing in Mountain View, where all these...

Cleave Frink:

I wouldn't know if... this isn't an issue that I've been faced with, I've been so... my situation has been focused on my own proud home through the years, that I haven't seen a lot of other folks struggling or having various issues. All of the people around me are doing alright, so - [laughs].

Xavier Webb:

I get it, I get it. So I'm going to end the recording here.

Cleave Frink:

Okay.

Xavier Webb:

Thank you for your time. Again, I'll get the release - I think I've emailed the release form over to you.

Cleave Frink:

Yeah I have it here, I'll do this - I'll send it over to you right now.

Xavier Webb:

Yeah and if you can do that, send it back over, or if you need me to come and pick it up, I can do that as well.

Cleave Frink:

No, I can send it digitally.

Xavier Webb:

Okay. Gonna stop the recording.