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BRODERICK JOHNSON INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

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Advisor
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
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ON SCREEN TEXT:
Broderick Johnson
Advisor

Growing up in Baltimore

01:00:11:20

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

So, I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, during some pretty turbulent times, particularly the sixties and seventies. I was raised by middle-class parents who worked hard and gave us, my sisters and I, great values. And education was so important to them. And yet, for them, because of segregation, because of discrimination, because of the nature of Baltimore, they were denied many opportunities, but they were determined to give those to us. So they gave me as much as they possibly could in terms of education and guidance. And I was born and raised in Baltimore and then left and went to college and kind of never went back to Baltimore, at least professionally.

Deciding to become a lawyer

01:00:56:19

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Yeah, it was, well first I was going to be a philosophy professor, so I studied philosophy in college. I was a major in philosophy. But then along the way, when I was trying to decide what to do after college, it became clear to me, because of the sixties and seventies, I had become very aware, certainly, of social turmoil, of social justice issues. So as college was ending, I was thinking, "Well, what's going to allow me to make the biggest difference?" And so I decided on law school. Went into law school thinking I'd be a public defender, and along the way decided that I'd rather get involved in government and politics. So, being a lawyer was something that clearly to me was the right route for me to take. There'd been no lawyers in my family. And so, that was also a really important motivation as well, was to be the first, in hopefully of many. Good ones.

Meeting Obama

01:01:52:06

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

It's hard to believe it was that long ago. We -- He had a very close friend in law school, a dear, dear friend by the name of Cassandra Butts. Cassandra had become a very good friend of mine, because of our Hill work together, and social settings. And so, she came to me one day in 2003 and she said, "I have this friend from law school, he's a state senator in Illinois. He's running for

the U.S. Senate. I'd love for you to meet him. And his name is Barack Obama." And I was like, "Yeah, Barack Obama, I think I've heard that name before. Didn't he run against Bobby Rush or something?" But I said, "Sure, Cassandra, I'll meet with him." And I'd heard some other things about him as well. So, he came down to the AT&T offices in D.C., and four or five of us got into a massive conference room with him, because it was the only one we had available. It's all funny now, because you think about the sizes of the Barack Obama crowds over the years. And so, we talked about what his chances were, about what help he might need fundraising, but also just kind of political guidance and strategic advice. He was aware that I'd worked in the Clinton White House, and had a long history on the Hill. I was like, well, my impressions? This guy is really cool. He's the kind of brother I'd like to hang around with. We probably talked about jazz and sports and those kinds of things. But he came across as so authentic. Look, I get solicited, had been getting solicited, in terms of fundraising activities or getting involved in campaigns for decades already. And there's something about him that just sort of jumped out as, like this is unique. And so, but, it's probably a long shot. The polling showed that he was like fifth among five, I think. But I was willing, since he was an African American candidate, and he was a state senator who had been successful, to get involved in his campaign for the U.S. Senate. So it started there.

Helping Obama with his U.S. Senate campaign

01:03:52:13

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

You know, as an advisor, giving him some political advice, helping him meet other people who I knew would be inspired by his race, and who had been successful in their own right politically, as well. And then just, again, being a sounding board for him, someone he could turn to, who he knew he could trust and who making a commitment to help him, would follow through.

Becoming friends with the Obamas

01:04:23:01

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

We met Barack and Michelle in early 2004 or 2005, through my involvement again in his Senate campaign and his work and building his Hope Fund effort. And then we took a couple trips to Chicago, and we met that way. I'd say, our friendship developed into a very deep, personal friendship during the time that they were in the White House. And I'm incredibly proud that that continues to be the case today.

Having children around the same age as the Obamas

01:04:56:06

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Yeah, so you know, our children, our children, Michele and I, and my children were like third and fourth graders when Barack Obama became president. And that was around the same grade, same ages as their two daughters. And they were all going to private schools, but private schools that were very, very close in terms of interest, size, population of students, and the like. But I guess, what is most relevant is that at least our children and their children

were growing up in Washington, D.C. at the same time that they were serving as President and First Lady. And our children got to attend events together that might be school-related dances or whatever else. And so, they also developed a friendship over time as well. But I think that the inspiration of those times, particularly for our kids, was pretty important, that they got from being around the Obamas and other people who were raising families at the same time as well. It was really something.

The Obamas interest in young people

01:06:04:15

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

He and Michelle Obama did so much to bring--you know, open the doors of the White House to young people, who otherwise it was unimaginable. And you'd see it in all sorts of ways. You'd see it at events that they would hold around issues involving youth. You'd see it socially, and whether it be the White House Easter Egg Roll, or the 4th of July celebrations, it was just constant. And, you know, when I'd been in the Clinton White House for a few years, there's certainly -- the doors were open to people who otherwise may not have been there, but it was dramatically different during the Obama years, and reflected, right, their commitment to open the White House to everyone. And especially little kids who otherwise, and families that otherwise wouldn't have gotten the opportunity. It was really quite something. And we were encouraged as staffers through our work, to make sure that we could open the doors for things as well. As I think about the populations we were allowing into the White House for opportunities, again,

that they wouldn't have had. And it was all over the place. It would even be in the White House dining hall, for example, you'd see young kids in there, having lunch and ordering their grilled cheese sandwiches and being so excited. You know, it was really quite something.

Working on Kerry's campaign

01:07:21:18

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

So, my role with Senator John Kerry was as his Senior Advisor for Congressional Relations. And what that meant was I was basically his lobbyist, particularly with regard to Capitol Hill and making sure that, you know, members of Congress were involved in the campaign, that they knew what we were doing, they knew what our strategies were around the convention, making sure that they were aware of what our convention schedule was. Communicating speaking opportunities for them. It was really to be his liaison to Capitol Hill. But it also entered into other things, in connecting with the African-American community, for example. Or the business community too, because of my reach into those communities. But so, that was my role in the Kerry campaign.

The 2004 DNC

01:08:11:07

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

So the day of, the evening of his appearance, I was assigned to meet him because they knew I was close to him, had gotten very close to him and to

meet him at the entrance to the Boston Garden, and to help him make his way up to the area where he could, in relative seclusion, relax, go over his speech, get ready for his speech. So by then he'd become fairly popular, certainly as a Democratic political figure. And so, it was difficult in those narrow corridors to get him where he needed to be without him being interrupted constantly by people. I don't mean interrupted in a negative way, but people who are, "Hey, there's Barack Obama. Good luck with your speech." And people wanting to take photos with him and and all that. It was a little bit before selfies. So there was a lot of that. So I got him up there, and to where his space was and to where his room was. And then we waited for his opportunity to go down and give his scheduled speech. And then I had to basically lead him back down through the hallways and through the corridors and through the basement, so to speak, of the Boston Garden to get him ready for his speech. And that was difficult, too. All of it was. It was clear he was quite the celebrity. And then after his speech, we know that it just was, it rocketed him into his political career that led to the White House. It's quite something. You know, it was really clear that, first, it had already become fairly clear he was going to win the U.S. Senate seat. And that he also was committed to trying to help the Kerry campaign as much as he could, and also other Senate and House candidates. But it was clear he was, after that speech and just, while during the speech listening to him, it was just so inspiring.

01:10:01:04

And he was saying things that I felt that Democratic candidates need to have been saying. You know, about, you know, basically about we're not a red America or a blue America, we're one America. To paraphrase what he said

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there about joyful and hopeful themes throughout his speech. And the way he delivered it was just so impactful. I was as moved as anyone else was watching. I'd never seen him give that kind of a speech before. Certainly, no one really had, but I hadn't even seen him on his stump giving speeches during his campaign. And so, it was really quite remarkable. And here's a funny story about the speech and the impact on children. So our kids, then, were three- and four- year-olds, and after the convention we went on vacation to Martha's Vineyard, and we were taking a family picture. And there were some other kids who were there and we got them all together to take a picture. And we said, "Okay, y'all, say, 'Cheese.'" And instead of saying cheese, these kids yell out, "Barack Obama." And I thought, "Wow." They were there watching enough and impacted enough that they were already calling out his name. And it was a cool, he says this often, it was a cool name to call out. So more cool than cheese, certainly. But it was really quite something.

Discussing a presidential run with Obama

01:11:22:20

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

So Senator Obama had a group of informal advisors, many folks that I'd known, some people I was meeting for the first time. But in the room, there were people like David Plouffe and David Axelrod, for example. And we were talking about, a lot about, the practical challenges that he would face running for president. For me, having been part of the Kerry campaign, I certainly had seen that as well. And so, there were a lot of discussion about, do you realize what this going to mean to your life, and to you and Michelle, and the things

that you won't be able to do? And then there were discussions about sort of policy and all of that. And, lingering in my mind was the question of, could an African American win the White House? And so, that was the question that I asked part of the way through this conversation. His response basically was, "Of course, I believe that I can win. I look at my experience as a State -- successful State Senator, and U.S Senator in Illinois. I've done well in downstate Illinois. So I believe that yes, race will not be a factor. And, but we'll see." And that was his answer to my question. I believed that the country was ready to elect the right African American to be president. In that someone who was seen as inspiring and unifying and authentic. So I absolutely believed that he could win. And believe me, though, there were many, many colleagues of mine who doubted that he could win throughout. I think about my dear dad, my dear late dad, and he was like, "I don't know. I'd like to see him win, but I'm not sure he can win." And God bless him. A couple months before my dad, before Barack Obama won, my dad said, "He could win." Then he didn't have a chance to vote for him, but he was convinced. And that, to me, was like, okay, that's affirmation enough for me. But I believed he could win. It was a generation of, maybe it's not his time. The country hasn't really come that far yet. You know, there are all sorts of dangers out there for him. But it was, for my dad, I know, it was more just practically, it was more practicality. It wasn't a fear of what could happen to him. But it was more like, is the country ready? And this is his first time running for president. Can he do it? And he turned my dad around. So ...

Fear for Obama's safety

01:13:59:00

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

I would hear about it, certainly, as we were campaigning in South Carolina in the primaries. And you -- you know, I would even read articles where there would be African-American voters, South Carolina voters, who would express that concern. And over time and maybe after the Iowa caucuses, and when he demonstrated that he had a tremendous appeal among white voters, too, that went away. And I think also the hopefulness, right? People started to see him and say, and if he and his wife are willing to make these sacrifices, and then I think he probably got into some religious values as well, in terms of praying over him and for his safety. And I think that took over, and got a lot of people to get past the fear. I don't, I never got a sense that Barack Obama and Michelle Obama worried about that at all. And I know those of us involved in the campaign certainly didn't either.

Racism during the campaign

01:14:59:13

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

And thinking about the -- about John McCain as a presidential candidate, and I remember the moment when he -- when there was the woman who tried to say that Barack Obama is a Muslim, and John McCain saying, "No, he's not, he's a good person." And I remember back then thinking, "Well, that was decent of him." When I've gone back and looked at that more recently, I'm really struck by how John, how I wouldn't even call it courageous, just how real John McCain was, in pushing back on that. And so, I've reflected on that,

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and it would be great to see more of that. In terms of racism during the campaign though, and whether it be at rallies or other instances, I honestly didn't see, I wasn't involved in events where things like that were a concern or would happen. I'm sure it did, in some sense, there would be hecklers, certainly, but it wasn't as widespread as you see now, that's for sure.

Michelle's contribution to Obama's 2008 campaign

01:16:05:04

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Because of her honesty, her commitment, though, to do things a certain way, to do things the right way. Someone that he could get, you know very candid advice. She wasn't driven by -- I never got the sense she was driven by, "I want to be the First Lady of the United States." So it was always, let's make sure that we do what is true to us, and what she believed would inspire the American people to continue to support them. And for them to be effective and to represent being the President and First Lady, and First Family the right way. She brought that in droves.

Election night 2008

01:16:47:00

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

So this friend, Cassandra Butts, who had introduced me to him in 2003, called me late that afternoon and said--and I'd had to take it to catch a flight, a Southwest flight to get to Chicago for the rally. We knew it was going to be a victory celebration, but she said, "I have, I know someone who's flying on a

private plane in about an hour or so, do you want to go?" I was like, "Oh, I don't know." You know? What am I going to do with that Southwest ticket? But I was able to make the flight, and I was able to get there in plenty of time to go to Grant Park. And it's indescribable still. You know, it's one of those moments in life where you just wish you could go back in time and relive it again. You can't. But there were just, you know, didn't want to have a camera or anything. You just wanted to experience it and live in the moment. And then talking to my mother about it all, you know, back in Baltimore and hearing how- how emotional she was, and then myself and thinking, "This really happened, we really did this." There were so many, so many things about it that were so deeply emotional. My wife flew in the next morning, I think it was, and then we went and bought as many newspapers as we possibly could. I think we have a couple hundred still at the house. But that night, it's just indescribable. Indescribable. And you know what also struck me as I looked at the election returns? Was, we were winning states that a Democrat had not won in a long time. And a Democrat has not won since. And even states that we didn't win in 2012. The fact that he won Indiana and he won North Carolina, you know, you just were filled with so much optimism about how the country had turned the corner. Not in some post-racial sense, but in some like other thing that's hard to describe, but people really wanted to vote for him, even in states where it was unimaginable. And we'd also run very effective campaigns in all states, no doubt about it.

Pride in his parent's generation

01:18:57:09

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

It was because of them. I felt so much that it was because of the sacrifices that ... And my parents always insisted on, you know, on us registering to vote, because they had always voted, and they had had to make some really difficult choices in terms of who they would vote for. Lessers of evil certainly in many situations, but they believed in the power of it all and there they could see then that night the impact of all of that commitment to making change through voting and being able to elect an African American president. So, it was more about them and pride about them rather than, you know, them feeling like, "My son was part of a movement." I'm sure they were proud of that, I know that for sure, but still I was really more proud of them than I was of my generation.

Birtherism

01:19:50:09

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Yeah, I was so saddened that he – that he had to answer to it. I'm still not sure that answering to it was so necessary. It didn't go away by answering to it. Eventually, I guess it went away, but I mean it's still kind of there, right? There's still many people who believe as a result of Trump's lies that Barack Obama was not born in the United States. So, I don't know that it -- that it- it went away as it should have, but it was just so outrageous. It was hard to believe that anybody would take it seriously, and yet clearly tens of millions of people took it seriously and millions still do. And it benefited Donald Trump's political ambitions greatly.

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Underestimating the movement behind Trump

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BRODERICK JOHNSON:

It seemed like more of a nuisance and more of a- of a laughingstock. And I wasn't quite cognizant that there was a movement that he was building that was getting behind him. I don't think many people, even in the Republican party weren't, but there was a movement that was building up. I like to think that analogous to sort of that movement of his so to speak is like the World Wrestling Federation fans, people who are just sort of entertained by strife and- and insult and made-up fights among people. I certainly underestimated how much of that could be turned into a political movement, so to speak. So, it's been really surprising.

Congressman Joe Wilson disrespects Obama

01:21:36:06

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

I don't know what that congressman's motivations were to do something that was ... and I've been on the House floor for many debates, I've been on the House floor during President Clinton's years. I would go for the State of the Union address. I had never witnessed anything like that. I don't know what his motivations were, but it was so outside the mainstream, it was really unprecedented. Maybe it happened in the 1800s, but I hadn't seen ... It was pretty shocking, but I don't know what the motivation was. I really don't.

Criticism of Obama

01:22:11:05

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

You know I -- I would ... I think about healthcare reform, education reform, turning around the economy, our environmental work, and I'm very aware of the data around the impact of these challenges, these problems, particularly on communities of color. So, it was always very clear to me that when people would criticize the president for not being more focused on the black community, so to speak, that they were missing the point. That in fact, much of what he was doing and the way he and others in the administration went about things was having a greater impact on communities of color. You didn't have to say that "Well, this is for Black people, this is an agenda for Black people," but you could say that, "This agenda, because of disproportionate challenges black communities and other communities of color face, I'm focusing on these things and then the solutions would have more of an impact." That's the way I saw it, and I was very, very proud to continue to say those things about the impact of his policies.

Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr.

01:23:25:10

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

It was such an-- it was such an odd situation. You know, how it evolved. And then the beer summit and what that was supposed to do and what the point of it was, I'm not quite sure to this day that it had an impact one way or the other. You know, there -- Everything that happens in the White House is not

consequential, so I'm not sure that that was particularly consequential one way or the other.

Obama's temperament

01:24:00:15

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Uh, very emotional man. In that sense, he and I are very similar, too, because we oftentimes will talk about the things that we both cry about, whether it be about our children going off to college, and the impact of leaving them at college, and how emotional that is. But certainly, in watching him around his speeches involving the tragedies, particularly the gun related tragedies, very, very emotional. He connects with people so much and often will wear his emotions on his sleeve, but in a way that is so deeply authentic. You also see that though with regard to his joy and his happiness. He can be so exuberant, you know about – on the golf course or in a social setting around music. He's just a very, very authentic emotional person and you'd see it so often. Those events, though, around the gun tragedies and the shootings, he couldn't contain – certainly couldn't contain his emotions at times and others of us couldn't, too, as we were sitting through those remarks that he would make, or in meetings with him to talk about what we should do, or meetings with families.

Obama's gratitude

01:25:23:11

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

President Obama would always express such gratitude to his staff, to his cabinet, to his friends, and to people that he would meet with who would inspire him or energize him. And he would thank -- I've seen him often times thank young people for sharing their ideas and making him feel connected to them. He's just incredibly a grateful person and he'll express it. He won't hold back.

Obama as a father and his work with *My Brother's Keeper*

01:25:55:11

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Watching him under the enormous pressure of being the president of the United States, and yet the devotion and commitment that he has when he would make sure that, for example, he would go and have dinner with his family. We'd maybe have a six o'clock briefing in the White House and around 6:30 PM he was like, "Okay, that's it, I'll see you later," and he'd go and meet with his family and have dinner. And I could -- Oftentimes, I was still there working, but it would inspire me to spend time with my family. But then also being able to bring my family to the White House for events that would make them feel part of the family around the White House, so to speak, meant a lot as well. And he made sure that we had those opportunities, as did the first lady. So that meant an awful lot. There was one particular moment, and this relates to the work around *My Brother's Keeper*, with this issue of him being a good father was raised by a 15 year old from Boston who asked the president, sort of started with, "You're such a good dad, you're so devoted to

your daughters and to your wife, and yet I know you didn't really get to know your father. So how did you get to be a good dad and a good husband without having had that guidance in your home life?" And then this young man went on to say that his father had abandoned his family when he was 11 or 12 years old, and so he certainly felt that sting, and he's looking for some guidance. And that -- The president's answer was really quite something. That young man, by the way, has become part of our My Brother's Keeper work. He graduates from college next year.

01:27:39:01

The president told him, though, "Try to reconnect with your father. You know where your father is, reach out to him and ask him why he did what he did. Because you will perhaps understand more about your father, but more importantly, it will help you to avoid the mistakes as you get older and you think about family." You just imagine the impact of that not just to that young man, but all the young men who were sitting around the table where the president talked about that in such personal terms. It was unbelievable. I have these moments that, again, I wish I could go back and sort of be there and watch that conversation take place, because it affected me, too. It was in May of -- Actually, there is some press around it, though, because it was at the launch of the My Brother's Keeper Alliance, a nonprofit in May of 2015 in Lehman College in New York. The young man has been interviewed a number of times along the years. He's now a member again of our leadership and My Brother's Keeper.

Working with Obama

01:28:42:20

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

I didn't work for president Obama in the first term. I worked in the – informally in the campaign in the first term. In the second term, I got involved as an advisor in the campaign for the second term. But my first White House job with him was as cabinet secretary beginning in February of 2014. And as cabinet secretary, I was one of the highest level advisers in the White House, which means I would oftentimes participate in briefings with him where it was around my issues involving the cabinet or My Brother's Keeper, other things as well. But I was part of the leadership team that would meet in the chief of staff's office every morning, every day except on weekends and sometimes on weekends, to talk about our issues and then to figure out how to prepare him for different things, getting memos to him and briefing him as well. But I would see him on a regular basis in the Oval Office and otherwise to advise him, so I was very close. There's a picture and it's been out there publicly, so it's not like a secret picture, but there's a picture of me in the Oval Office with the president sitting by the desk. He's about to make a phone call, I was in there to brief him for the call. And uh, I mentioned something to him about something that my wife had received an award for. He said something like, "Well, you married up, and you know you married up." So I laughed. Of course, I'm going to laugh even though I was slightly insulted ... No, I wasn't. So that was an interesting sort of mixture of the personal and then it's like, "Okay, now let's do this phone call." But there were rarely moments like that, there was a very clear separation and a very clear expectation, "This is your job and this is where we're friends and the two --

one is not to impact the other in a way that would make either less genuine and important." That was quite an important distinction to hold on to and it worked well. There certainly were unique aspects of the advice that I could give him, particularly around ... not just around the My Brother's Keeper work, because it would certainly have an impact at times around some of our discussions about cabinet policy. But yeah, I brought certainly a unique perspective oftentimes as particularly someone who shares a lot of the same values as he does and interests in many of the same things. You can draw connections to some things, for example, because of that.

Why Obama's staff was so loyal to him

01:31:21:12

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Because, among other things, he's so decent. And when you're working for someone who's so decent, it certainly inspires a great deal of loyalty. Second, he is so incredibly brilliant, and so you -- I often felt, so many of us have often felt, certainly. We all showed that we were learning from him all the time, that he appreciated our advice, certainly, but that he would make decisions that were based on what he thought was the best thing to pursue. And that inspires loyalty as well, because you, you know, you realize he's going to make the right decision, but he will take your input. And then it just was great to work for him as president. We did so many meaningful things and you felt like you were making a difference, despite all the hardships that were thrown our way, because people weren't cooperating in Congress, for example, to the degree that they should have. But you saw that he was not

going to give up. And if he wasn't going to give up, then you weren't going to give up, and you weren't going to turn cynical. He had all sorts of expressions that he would uh, that he would put out there to guide us through our work, even some bumper stickers.

What made Obama a great leader

01:32:37:23

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

We knew that he was paying very close attention to everything that he was responsible for as president, everything. You know, there wasn't -- For example, you didn't feel like, "Well, this doesn't matter to him that much, so maybe I can turn this memo around." No, you had to accept the reality that he was going to review your work, take your recommendations under consideration, and challenge what it is that you were recommending if he thought it needed to be to be challenged. That attention and then attention to detail was really quite something. I oftentimes will talk about how I would prepare a briefing memo for him for a cabinet level meeting. There's a memo that I would write with input from other people, but I would write it, and then I would highlight all the things that I thought were really, really important in this memo. Then I'd go into the meeting with him the next day and he'd open his folder and he'd have that same memo in front of him. I'd have all these yellow highlights, he'd have none, but he would go right to what was most important like a highlighter in his head or something. I just haven't seen that in many people. But then--so his incredible intellect, and his attention to details large and small, and then making decisions.

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Trayvon Martin

01:34:05:09

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

We certainly had many, I'd say, more casual conversations about what was going on with African American males across the country. Incidents that would happen, when I'd see him we would discuss those. But again, this would be in a more social situation or perhaps during the campaign, because it wasn't long after -- I came into the White House not long after Trayvon Martin had been killed. So that's when our conversations really got focused on specific things to start to do around these issues. But he clearly was very aware of the work that I had done in the past, because that was among the things that he talked about with me when he asked me to lead My Brother's Keeper. I think he'd been thinking about what he could establish, but there's no question that the murder of Trayvon Martin, and the circumstances around that murder, and eventually the verdict and the reaction to the verdict, all those things greatly impacted him wanting to start something out of the White House.

01:35:06:16

BRODERICK JOHNSON:

But at a very personal level, what happened to Trayvon Martin really affected President Obama. There's no question. And he talked about it that way. He talked about how Trayvon Martin could have been him 35 years ... or whatever number of years ... earlier, or Trayvon Martin could have been his son. I mean, just think about the impact of that personally. And it's something

that I as an African American man think about all the time, particularly when you hear about tragic circumstances involving a young man of color. You know, you think, "That could have been me," or, "That could've been one of my sons very easily," and not because I'd grown up in circumstances that would make me more vulnerable given the community I grew up on economic circumstances, but just because almost the luck of the draw in this country oftentimes where tragedies befall people who are doing the right thing every single day, going to school, working, whatever else, and violence takes their life away.

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So, he saw it in those very stark personal terms. And I remember the very distinct conversation that he and I had not long uh – not long after he'd been inaugurated for the second term. And he said, you know, "In this second term, I'm going to do something." I can't remember how this fit in the calendar around Trayvon Martin. I think Trayvon Martin happened during the campaign. In fact, I'm sure it did, because I was in Chicago campaign offices. So, it wasn't long after he'd been sworn in again that he said to me, "I want to use my power as Commander in Chief and convener in chief to bring people together." But it was so distinctly personal for him. So not long after this conversation I'd had with him ... again, I had not started working in the White House, yet. He directed people on his staff, including Valerie Jarrett and the then Cabinet Secretary and Michael Strautmanis and some other folks to get together and to start designing what eventually became My Brother's Keeper would look like. They would have to draft a presidential memorandum that would lay out the purposes, it would lay out what the goals would be, who

would participate in it. And so all that work went into developing what became MBK, including figuring out what to name it, for example. That involved the communications team and the messaging people in the White House. So all that work went on and it got to the point where it was launched in February of 2014, but there was a lot of prep work that went into it. I mean, again, it's a presidential memorandum that established My Brother's Keeper. That, to me, says so much about how important it was to him and how much of a formality he wanted to make sure that it was.

The goals of *My Brother's Keeper*

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BRODERICK JOHNSON:

So, recognizing that historically tens of millions, countless boys and young men of color especially, get denied opportunity in this country or are shut out of opportunities in this country, and recognizing that this country is not what it should be as it continues to have that legacy. And it continues, of course, today. But he wanted to make sure we had a systematic approach to it. So, let's understand what the stages in life are, what the circumstances in life are, that affect the plight of boys and young men of color really as soon as they're born. And then, let's figure out with using data and analysis ... the same kind of approach that went into everything else we did in the White House, studying the issues, coming up with solutions that were based in data, and being able to prove it would matter. So, getting the public and private sector together, the federal agencies organized around a task force. The private sector involved to, again, systematically address the challenges that boys and

young men of color face. Identify what works, and help to scale what works, and to make it, again, something that we can measure to see the difference and to be able to adjust to making differences. So that essentially is what My Brother's Keeper is all about. The incredible moment when we launched it in February of 2014 was great in and of itself, but when we went back and looked at its historical significance, here's what we found.

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And again, it wasn't designed to do it on a particular day the way we did it, but it's almost 50 years to the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was done in that same room, the East Room in the White House. It was done with stakeholders so to speak, lined up behind the president, behind President Johnson. It was civil rights leaders and members of Congress. But with MBK, as we call it, the stakeholders, the young men of color from Chicago and D.C. are the ones standing behind the president as he pens this- this- this order that ... We've done a side by side. That's a pretty and impactful and powerful representation of what the '64 Act promised to do, we were still falling short in 2014. How the '64 Act was a priority of President Johnson, My Brother's Keeper, a priority of President Obama 50 years later articulated from that same incredible grandeur of that room. Unbelievable, yeah. And again, we didn't realize until we went back and looked like, "Wow, that room? Really?"

Obama's personal involvement in *MBK*

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BRODERICK JOHNSON:

You know, My Brother's Keeper, there are communities all across the United States. And we had federal agencies having their meetings and the like, and much of it is about mentorship throughout life and other things, interventions. But the personal aspect of it was really visualized by this. So the president said to us a couple of months into My Brother's Keeper, "I want to have a mentorship program established in the White House with young men of color from this region. Who Broderick, you and other senior advisors, other White House staff will mentor. We'll work with them on college applications and mentor them and we'll bring them into the White House on a regular basis. And, I want them to know that I'll participate with them, too". So we started a mentorship program in the White House and we did it for two consecutive years. But this goes to the personal aspect of it. So, let's say one Tuesday in 2015 we had the young man come in for a resume writing workshop and they did it in the White House, one of the rooms there. And then, we got him into the Roosevelt room and then he walked in and surprised them.

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Now he had a full schedule for the day and he was only supposed to drop by in this meeting for like 10 minutes or so. But he sat down, and as he would always do, he'd ask each one of these young men to tell him something about themselves. So that took probably an hour. I'm sure the chief of staff is like "what happened to the rest of the president's day on this schedule?" And then one of the young men said, "Mr. President, when are you going to play a game of basketball with us?" He said, "Right now." Again, this is an hour after we had already changed his schedule for the day. So we got up and walked down

to the White House basketball courts. There is a picture of this, the Washington Post featured it by the way, as one of their 20 pictures of the Obama years. It's a picture of him walking down the White House driveway with his coat off, I think his tie is loosened and these young men all around him. And they go down and they play a game of horse, and he could only play against the one who challenged him, the others got to watch. But for like the next hour he dispensed lessons in life and asked them about their lives and all that while they're playing horse. Now I've seen him hit five baskets in a row quickly. He didn't do that this time. I don't know why, maybe he decided he needed it to talk to them for a while or he was off or something, but it was an unbelievable moment. By the way, these young men all then went on to either college or the military as a group of about 20. But that's the personal aspect. So, I go back to the chief of staff two hours later, he's like "what happened?" I was like, "he decided he wanted to do this, ask him." Dennis McDonough always understood how personal this was to the president. But you look at that picture and the looks in their eyes, and the look in his eyes is like, this is like purposeful. This makes a big difference to the lives of these young men, but also to him, but also to him.

Continuing *MBK* after the presidency

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BRODERICK JOHNSON:

There was uh – of course, there were lots of questions toward the end. There had already been a nonprofit started through My Brother's Keeper Alliance, so the questions were how much was President Obama going to get involved

in the My Brother's Keeper Alliance? Was he going to do something different? Was he going to basically say, "this was during my time in office and we did the best that we could" or whatever. And we were getting asked questions, I knew it was something that he would continue to want to help lead, but there were other folks who wanted to be reassured and who needed to be reassured. So toward the end of his time in office, we actually had a gathering, I think it was December of 2016, of hundreds of people from MBK communities across the country. Young people and also adult leaders. And he gave a speech there where he basically said, "this, as I said before, is life's work and mission for me and I will continue to do this and you will hear from me about this after I take a little time to rest after we leave the White House."

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And so, now it's part of the Obama Foundation and I continue to chair that effort, but it is a fundamental mission of his to continue with this work and to lead this work. And he still engages with young people and has conversations with them wherever he, you know, can find time and we can arrange for those kinds of settings. So, this is life work for him. No question about it. The Obama foundation sponsored a national summit last year in Oakland, California. We brought MBK communities, young people, by the way who led a lot of the discussions from the stage. Athletes and entertainers, for example, Steph Curry, who's stayed very involved in the work, interviewed President Obama at that session, the President flew out for the session. It was a two- or three-day session. And so, there are communities represented from across the country who continue to do this work. And, they talked about the challenges of the work and the benefits of the work and then some

announcements were made and awards were granted to MBK communities across the country that have already shown to be making a big difference or that need some seed money based on early indications that they are getting the work done.

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But since we don't have the reach of the federal government anymore, we certainly have had to look at how do we scale the work back. So, we are principally focused on identifying programs that make a difference in mentoring. Again, mentoring can include from little kids all the way through men who are trying to reenter society after being in a criminal justice system. They need mentors to tell them, "Hang in there and go to work", whatever. "Don't despair, don't give up." And then also violence prevention, and there are many programs, of course, that can help prevent violence. So, while the focus is more limited, it still can be quite expansive, too even under those two categories. And President Obama continues to talk to people who he then directs me to talk to and others to talk to about supporting the work, about highlighting the work. And so, it has the capacity certainly, to continue to spread even without the resources of the federal government. I do think that there is more that needs to be said about the work, the impact of the work, the fact that the work continues. Honestly, I think when it comes to issues around boys and young men of color and girls and young women of color, there's a lot of attention given to the bad stuff and the challenges.

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And they are grave and they need attention oftentimes, but not nearly enough attention to what's making a difference. To the fact that lives are being

improved by people working on these issues with young people. And this is what it takes. And look, I've been around the legislative process for decades. I've seen when Congress could do things that were, you know, that made a difference, and I've seen how Congress has gotten bogged down, certainly over the time that we were in office and trying to get things done. So hard to get the ACA done, but we couldn't even get a hearing from Merrick Garland. So recognizing that if we were to wait for Congress to come up with programs that may or may not work. A lot of lives would continue to be lost. Not just, you know, because of death, but just because of circumstances. People being left behind.

Baltimore youth garden

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BRODERICK JOHNSON:

Yeah, this was one of those, again, one of those magical moments. It started out at the tragedy of Freddie Gray's murder in Baltimore, my hometown, you know, Baltimore then. There was an uprising and there were riots in Baltimore for days after his funeral. Sadly, I was at the same church that my mother's funeral had been held two months before. President Obama asked me to go to Baltimore and to represent at that funeral. So that was, of course, incredibly difficult. But we also had made a commitment to help Baltimore as much as possible, and after Freddie Gray, we accelerated with a Baltimore task force. And that involves several cabinet secretaries going to Baltimore, to the high school that was at the heart of where the uprisings had happened, and to talk to the young people there about what had happened, but more importantly

about what they needed. So we had the Secretary of Education go, we had the Secretary of the Treasury go and talk about financial literacy, but we also had Secretary Vilsack, who is our agriculture secretary who served basically every day of the eight years of the Obama administration.

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And he and I went and helped launch a garden, an urban garden there on the grounds of that high school. And it was interesting to listen to the young people talk about, over time, to talk about how much that garden meant to them. They would look out the windows and they'd see the corners with the drug dealers and now they could look out the windows and they'd see something very different. They were very clear over time about why that mattered to them and what difference it made and how it inspired them. But also, how they could see urban farming as an economic opportunity as well. That was one of the points we wanted to make sure they understood. But anyway, going back to the day we launched it, a couple of them said to me, "we've never been to the White House before. Would you invite us to the White House one day?" And I said, "Sure." So, like three months later I get an email from, I think the principal saying, "Hey, they're still wondering when you're going to invite them to the White House, by the way." And of course, I wouldn't have left that undone. So, we arranged for them to come to the White House, this group of two dozen, and this was in the early summer. So, they'd had a time for their harvesting, whatever. They come to the White House, and they want to see Michelle Obama's garden, because they want to see how they can make their garden better. And so we took them to the garden and walked them around and some of Michelle's staff went out there,

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and one of the White House chefs went out there and talked about what was in the garden. And one of the Baltimore news shows actually followed them and did a positive story about these young people coming to see Michelle Obama's garden and getting ideas about theirs. That garden still exists today, and again, lives have been changed and these young people wouldn't have had that opportunity had it not been for the vision of Michelle Obama, Barack Obama, and the work around My Brother's Keeper.

Obama's legacy

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BRODERICK JOHNSON:

I think, no question, among the vast majority of Americans, the notion that we can be better as a country. We can support each other more as a country. We can resist division and cynicism. But I think maybe the most overriding thing is the importance of getting involved. That when people... you know, it took voters, many of whom had never voted before, to elect Barack Obama to two terms. To turn out again in 2012 to make sure that he won. People who said, "I got his back, I'm going to vote again." And then in the midterms, even when he was in office, they didn't vote. And in '16 many of these, sort of what they call sporadic voters, clearly didn't show up either. And so, they see the impact of that. But what they now know is that they have to be engaged as they were before. And if you're not, then you can get a president like Donald Trump, who can have such an impact on your life, on your emotions, on your pride in your country, on how the country is seen by other people. So, I think there's certainly a sense that we can go back to when things -- not to old

policies, but we can go back to a time when emotionally this country was upbeat and positive, for the most part, and proud of our leadership, especially out of the White House. And I think there's such a yearning to get back to that and Barack and Michelle Obama so symbolize that, even in the way they conduct themselves today.

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