

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Steve Lapkin

INCITE

Columbia University

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Interviewee Steve Lapkin conducted by Whitney Dow on December 16, 2017. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

ATC

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Steve Lapkin

Location: Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: December 16, 2017

Q: And my voice ultimately won't be on the edited tape. So, you need to incorporate my questions into your answers a little bit. And the way this works is I'm right here. If you look at the camera, you'll see me here. And we'll just have a conversation like this.

Lapkin: Have we started?

Q: Not yet. What's the Big Gigantic?

Lapkin: Big Gigantic is the coolest electronic dance music band in the country, maybe in the world, because they are international.

Q: They are international that your son's in?

Lapkin: Yes. They spent a month in Australia, I think, with Pearl Jam, for instance. But they were in Japan this summer. And my son is a member of the band. He's the drummer. His name is Jeremy [Salken].

[INTERRUPTION]

The music they play is kind of a hybrid of EDM [electronic dance music] because they perform everything live. So, it's not like a DJ hitting a play button and everybody going crazy. It's, you know, people playing real instruments.

Q: What's the band made up? What are the instruments in the band?

Lapkin: The producer also plays keyboards and features his saxophone. And then my son Jeremy is the drummer. And they have a lot of collaborations in their music. So, you know, for concerts and such they'll bring in female vocalists, hip-hop artists, some big-band components, lots of horns. It's really cool.

Q: And you say it's all dance music. Do they ever do Las Vegas [Nevada]?

Lapkin: Yes. I think the first paying gig he ever did was to open for another EDM group at an after-party in Las Vegas.

Q: I know there's, like, huge money for dance music in Vegas. There's really big, good—

Lapkin: Yes. And they play some festivals there. They're really big into the festival circuit.

Q: Nice. I'm sure you've been to a bunch of the concerts.

Lapkin: We go to as many as we can. We'll take road trips. We've taken two-day road trips, both to Michigan and to Alabama. And we've gone to Tennessee for Bonnaroo [Music and Arts Festival]. Michigan was Electric Forest [Festival], the Hangout [Music] Festival in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Q: I didn't know you were allowed—I thought that Judge Roy Moore outlawed EDM in Alabama.

Lapkin: Not to my knowledge. I'm pretty sure we were there.

Q: It was a hazy night, though, right?

Lapkin: Yes. And I didn't have to post bond to leave the state.

Q: Well, there you go. That sounds like a successful engagement then. Any time you don't have to post bond I consider, like, a—

Lapkin: That's a win.

Q: That's a win, yes, absolutely. So, can you tell me your name, where you're from, and—

Lapkin: [10:31:40] Steve Lapkin. I'm from Richmond, Virginia.

Q: And can you tell me a little about yourself?

Lapkin: Do I know a little bit?

Q: No, can you tell me a little about yourself?

Lapkin: [10:31:49] Well, sure. I was born in 1950. I have an older sister and on my third marriage. We have collectively two children. The oldest is the musician. The youngest has a form of muscular dystrophy. I have the most beautiful and wonderful wife that anybody could ever have. So, I'm a very lucky man.

Q: And what compelled you to get involved in this project?

Lapkin: [10:32:33] Well, the survey was a bit intriguing. And I know that, you know, it's about race and ethnicity. And a lot of it, I guess, has to be based on me, you know, and my perceptions of things and my background and all that's happened to me in life, I suppose. And I've never done anything like that before. So I thought, hey, what the hell, because it was made clear to me that if I'm unhappy with it I can say no, I don't want it published. So, that kind of reduced the risk factor. And I don't know how much reward there is out there for me. But, you know, if it's going to help somebody else or maybe even improve my perspective on things, cool.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your childhood—where you grew up, what was the community like, your family situation? Did you grow up in an urban, rural, diverse, homogenized? What was your childhood like?

Lapkin: [10:33:46] Suburban family. We always had a dog, thank God, because between everybody else in the family the dogs were the most pleasant people to be with; really bossy older sister who was instructed by our parents to rat on me whenever I did something wrong. Or, if she wanted something from me, she could threaten to rat on me for something fictitious knowing that I was going to get the shit beat out of me, basically, when my father got home. My father was abusive, physically, emotionally. My mother was—she's passed away now. But she was indifferent and narcissistic and didn't protect us. So, that part of childhood was unwelcome and made me very happy to grow up.

Q: And what was the community like that you grew up in?

Lapkin: [10:35:00] Pretty standard for somebody born in the suburbs. I went to Mary Munford Elementary School [Richmond, Virginia] which of course was all white back in the '50s. And, you know, we could walk to school or take the bus to school, ride the bike to school. Suburban neighborhood. Easy to play outside with other kids, and it was safe. We had a sheltered environment. We had a housekeeper who was consistent in our family from the time that I was two. So, Mary Ross [phonetic] was an absolutely wonderful, saintly woman who provided comfort and solace to me besides the everyday necessities of providing for children. My mother worked and well, primarily to put food on the table.

My father was kind of lazy and had a family business, but really was not much good at business. But he was able to leave his father's business—Credit Clothing Store—with enough wherewithal to be able to purchase a business in Hopewell, a ladies' dress business in Hopewell [Virginia], that my mother ran. And that provided for our existence. But for the day-to-day stuff—you know, who's going to provide the clothes and the food and all that stuff—that was Mary. She was at our house every morning at 7:30 to make breakfast for us. And that provided some early perspective for me on the differences between people that grew up in my environment and people who didn't.

Q: And what race was Mary?

Lapkin: [10:37:20] She was black.

Q: So how was race thought about, talked about, sort of processed in your house growing up?

Lapkin: [10:37:31] Well, in private I was kind of told that bringing home a black girl was not something that would be looked favorably upon. My father, I think typical of his generation and of his upbringing, felt that innately, black people were intellectually inferior. I don't know if that's something that he learned on his own from the environment that he lived in, worked in, because he certainly didn't grow up surrounded or involved with other black people. It was as an adult, as a merchant, where his clientele were primarily black.

Q: And how did your relationship with Mary shape your own views on race?

Lapkin: [10:38:31] I wondered. And I admit to not even verbalizing it as a child. But I always had this thought of how could she—more of a question than a thought. How could she get to our house at 7:30 every morning when she had children of her own? Who was taking care of her kids? And I guess I was too ignorant or too young to understand that people had to make money to live. And that's how she made hers, was by taking care of me. But her children were younger than me. And I think I asked her once. And she said that she had other family members. She came from a large family. She had a lot of sisters. And so there was family to help her with her children so that she could be there taking care of me. And I truly loved her. And it was a sad day when she passed. I was well into my adulthood when she died. But we had remained close long after I was an adult, moved out of the house. And she was no longer able to work for my mother. She continued to work for my mother after my school age.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: What was your parents' relationship to Mary? And can you put my question into your answer?

Lapkin: [10:42:25] My parents' relationship to Mary, my mother really relied on Mary for lots of personal service. Mary would frequently take breakfast on a tray to my mother in bed. She would

have dinner either prepared or ready to go in the oven before my parents came home. She did whatever was asked of her. And I think she was paid very poorly. But I loved her. And she took great care of me and my sister. And I know she loved us. That was clear. That was apparent. I felt it. I felt closer to her than I did to my own mother.

Q: And you talked about staying close to her after you left the house. Did you ever talk to her about her relationship to your family?

Lapkin: [10:43:44] No, really didn't. I witnessed some things that I thought, you know, were kind of odd. My father, who could do things that seemed kind of strange, and I didn't really understand a lot of it, but since he was very abusive to me, I didn't ask a lot of questions. But Mary would come to the house. She would take a bus from Church Hill. It was probably an hour or more that it would take her to get to work every day. And she had a little closet in our den where she would keep work clothes. And she would change from her street clothes, her regular clothes, put on something more comfortable for her to clean the house, a uniform kind of thing. And I remember one morning my father was sitting in the den reading the paper, naked as a jaybird. And when Mary came in to change her clothes he didn't move. He just sat there totally naked. And she had to change her clothes. So I just thought that was pretty bizarre.

But I don't know if that typifies their relationship. He had less to do with her than my mother did. My mother really was the one closest to Mary outside of my sister Diane [phonetic] and myself.

Q: And did you ever talk to her about your relationship with her, how you felt about her?

Lapkin: [10:45:38] Yes, oh, yes. She knew that I relied on her. I counted on her. She really helped me survive my childhood because it was very difficult.

Q: So, let's talk a little bit about you. How often do you think about your race?

Lapkin: [10:46:12] I can't say that I really give my race much consideration. It's just kind of a given. I've always been white, also always been Jewish. So, my ethnicity I think about, or have thought about, I guess, more than my race. But it was kind of a revelation to me to discover that not everybody in the world considered Jewish people totally white.

Q: And how did you learn that? What were your thoughts on that?

Lapkin: [10:46:53] Middle school was really the first time. In elementary school, we had a lot of Jewish kids. We still did in middle school as well. But in middle school it seemed like kids were able to express themselves, or were willing to express themselves, a little more freely. And so, hearing that Jews weren't universally accepted was kind of news to me. So I was probably twelve or thirteen years old before I experienced the first bit of ethnic discrimination.

Q: And how did that make you feel?

Lapkin: [10:47:44] A little angry and confused. I didn't understand it because there were kids that I felt were my friends that made statements that indicated that perhaps they were not.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: You say that you're white, that you've been white. What makes you white?

Lapkin: [10:49:20] Both my parents are. All of their parents were. I came from an Eastern European Jewish background. I assume that makes me white, but maybe it doesn't. Maybe they're right. But I really don't care. I am what I am. And I'm okay with it.

Q: Have you gotten any benefits or advantages that you have noticed from being white? And can you put my question into your answer?

Lapkin: [10:50:01] Advantages of being white in my history, well, educationally, before there was desegregated school systems, I was in all-white schools. And I'm not sure that that's really an advantage, because I certainly missed out on the diversity that one would acquire from being in racially mixed environments. But just from being born white, I don't know. I don't think so. I've never perceived any obvious advantages of being white unless I'm just taking those advantages for granted. Maybe they have provided opportunities for me that others don't have.

I'm not sure on that because without having the perspective of people who are not white in my background, I don't really know.

Q: And what about in your adult life? Have you seen—do you feel like people treat you differently because you're white or you have a different experience than other people because you're white?

Lapkin: [10:51:57] I have observed others. But I'm not sure that I have been treated differently because I'm white. I don't recall. I can't put it into a specific instance. I can't pick a memory that says you got this job or you're in this school or you're on this team because you're white. And perhaps it's just because it's always been that way. But I don't recall any of those instances.

Q: Can you describe a situation where you became very aware of your race? Has that ever happened to you?

Lapkin: [10:52:49] When I went to school in Louisburg, North Carolina, started college there, there were only two black students. Of course, I think there was only 800 kids in the whole school. It was a small two-year school, which was about right for me. I was not a great high school student and didn't know that other people considered me smart in any way until I went to college. But at Louisburg there were two black students. They played on the basketball team. And only one of them actually was to live on campus. And this was my second year in Louisburg. And apparently I'd had some success the first year because I was elected to student council for the second year. So I was the student body treasurer. And for some reason the second

year there was a black student to live on campus. And the administration needed to find him a roommate. And why they selected me to head this project I don't know.

But I knew enough about Louisburg, North Carolina and the kids that were there to know that it was not racially diverse. The kids that were in that school came from families that typically had discriminatory attitudes toward blacks. It was just part of the culture. And so it was deemed a difficult job to find a roommate for this kid. Well, I talked to a few people, and I said this guy needs a roommate. And a guy that I barely knew, a freckle-faced, red-haired boy, I'll never forget his look. I can't remember his name. But he raised his hand and he said sure, I'll be his roommate. And it was nice because just given the opportunity to treat people of a different race equally, it was just easy. It wasn't a big problem at all. And that was successful. And both students involved thrived in the environment, so no issues.

Q: What type of work do you do?

Lapkin: [10:55:36] I'm a realtor.

Q: And I know that obviously in real estate there's been all kinds of stuff—redlining and mortgage issues about race. Have you seen in being a realtor race play out in any way, either now or in the past?

Lapkin: [10:55:59] Mostly from the point of view of the client, where we'll have a buyer that may express—I've had, on a number of occasions, African American buyers that I'm working

with ask to live in a diverse neighborhood. And that was pretty easy because we have very strict rules and regulations against steering. And so, basically making any neighborhood open to any particular buyer is the way we operated. And we pretty much let them make the determination as to whether that particular neighborhood was right for them or not. And we didn't really discuss race after that, not from my point of view, anyway.

Q: And how long have you been a real estate broker?

Lapkin: [10:57:09] I've been in real estate for seventeen years. Previously I operated ladies' dress shops.

Q: And in that seventeen years has it always been that way, that race has not entered into the equation in real estate at all, either from the buyer side or the banking side or anything?

Lapkin: [10:57:33] I've never had any issues from the banking side. From the selling side, occasionally you'd talk to somebody who expressed a preference as to whom they would like to see their home sold to, where a particular client would say I don't want you to sell to this ethnicity. I love my neighbors, and I don't want them to have to put up with that. And pretty much I would just not comment. I wouldn't get into an argument with them. First of all I'd lose a job. And secondly, it didn't matter. I was going to operate based on the professional ethics. And, you know, I've never been fired for bringing particular buyers to a deal or anything like that. So, there's never been any repercussions for me.

Q: Did you ever have a seller deny selling to one of your clients because of their race?

Lapkin: [10:58:50] No. Once the process got started, sellers tend to discover their own motivation. And they may initially think that a particular ethnicity or a particular color family would be better in this house than others. But when they realized that selling their house and getting the right price for it is really what's important to them, they developed a different appreciation for those who did not fit their initial criteria.

Q: So, that's saying that, you know, there's black and there's white, but there's also green?

Lapkin: [10:59:43] There's green. There's green. And that's the important color.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your immediate family, your wife and your children?

Lapkin: [11:00:00] My wife is the blessing of my life. She is totally understanding of me. I have determined that I'm not perhaps the easiest person to live with. And I have an appreciation, a greater appreciation, as I've gotten older, as to how a lot of that has happened. And the childhood really shaped me in ways that were considerably unfortunate. And I did the major portion of growing up after I left my childhood family, my mother and my father. And some of the problems that I developed as a child I certainly took with me. I kind of sabotaged a lot of relationships. I allowed anger and resentment to influence me more than it should have. And I'm on my third marriage.

The first marriage occurred primarily because I was dating a woman who also wanted liberation from her home, wanted to grow up faster. She wanted someone she could look up to. And I felt honored to be in that position. And I was desperate to find a life away from my mother and father. And that was good. And I was stubborn with that relationship. Perhaps we should have actually ended it years before we did. But we had a child eleven years into the marriage. This child has muscular dystrophy. And we divorced very few years after he was born. I'm not sure the reasons for the divorce are all that important. But I became the custodial parent shortly after our divorce. He thrived better in my care, and I was better able to deal with his medical and emotional needs, having muscular dystrophy. My first wife also has the disease but was asymptomatic until a number of years after our divorce.

The second marriage was kind of a rebound. I had felt emotionally neglected during the greater portion of my first marriage. The second wife was lavish in her attention toward me. And I fell deeply in love. But that lavish attention was not sustainable. And we divorced. And there were some issues that caused that divorce. And I ended up not drinking for a good while. And it wasn't that I had a big problem with alcohol. It was that the problems that I saw with alcohol and that I dealt with in alcohol consumption, and the anger and the issues that were brought up as a result of that, kind of turned me off to it. So I just decided that it was not in my immediate best interest to be a drinker. My attitudes on that have softened quite a bit, and I enjoy my cocktail before dinner. And that's a pleasant part of life but not a major part. It's just what it is.

My current wife, who's been my wife for seventeen years, was a setup date. It was a blind date. And an eighty-year-old Jewish woman who worked for me at the time suggested that I go out

with her. And I thought, well, she's got to be smart. She knows everybody. And that worked out just beautifully. We each brought a son to the marriage. We all claim each other. And I guess life has a way of working out, you know, if you give it a chance. And she's been the most patient and non-judgmental individual I could ever imagine. She's beautiful, loves me, loves our sons and takes good care of us as I try to do for her.

Q: And so, is the son in the Big Gigantic the son that she brought to the marriage?

Lapkin: [11:06:04] Yes. Her biological child is the musician. And my biological child has the muscular dystrophy. The two boys love each other. They each claim the other parent. So, it was something that logistically seemed improbable to have two families that just got together through serendipity and ended up caring for each other so well.

Q: And can you tell me how raising a son with muscular dystrophy impacted you, affected you, shaped you?

Lapkin: [11:06:57] I feel like I was given an opportunity and that this child is a blessing. I've thought this since he was born, that I have an opportunity to be important in the life of an individual that other people just don't have. And it was a concept that guided me and continues to, because he's thirty-three and lives with us and will for as long as we can care for him. And of course, it's kind of funny. We said to him one day, "Hey, Herbie [phonetic], we've spoken to Jeremy about this. And should anything happen to me and your mother, Jeremy says that you can come and live with him." And Herbie's going, okay, like, you know, looking at his watch.

Ready? Like, can we do this now? We said we're not ready to check out of life yet, so you've got a few more years with us.

Q: And how incapacitated is he by the disease?

Lapkin: [11:08:12] There are forty-three different muscular dystrophy diseases. His is called myotonic dystrophy. Completely, it's an infantile congenital myotonic dystrophy, because his presented at birth. So many other patients of this disease don't present until well into their adult years, as was his mother. But he had to have an operation on his Achilles tendons in order to get him to be able to walk. He has a diminished cognition as a result of that disease. That's kind of unique in muscular dystrophies. Most of them do not affect cognition. His does. And, you know, he has a cardiologist, a pulmonologist, a neurologist. He's got a lot of doctors. He goes to the muscular dystrophy clinic. And he has a lot of people that look out for him, and I guess primarily us.

And it's just life as usual. We don't consider ourselves put out by it, overly burdened. He's a great kid. And he has his role in the family. He has a volunteer job so that he can work on a flexible schedule. But it's important for him to know his place in the world. And we've stressed that since he was a child. And we made sure that when he got up in the morning he would make his bed. He takes care of himself as fully as he possibly can. He understands the concept of being individually responsible for himself. He can't do everything for himself. He has to have braces on his legs when he walks. He will fall a lot. We put a chair lift on the stairway so he can get up and down the stairs safely.

He's been actually teaching himself to read. As a student he didn't want to. It was difficult for him. And he didn't want to learn. But now that he understands so much of life revolves around the written word, he's teaching himself to identify words better than the teachers taught him. So, I'm really proud of him. He's a great boy.

[INTERRUPTION]

Lapkin: How am I doing?

Q: You're doing great. This is such a fascinating story. I mean, I really appreciate you sharing such personal details of your life that sound like they were very personal and traumatic. And it's a real honor for you to come in and be so honest and direct with us.

Lapkin: [11:11:54] Well, I've never done anything like this. And in private, in therapy sessions and such, I find that talking about the stuff that's happened to me in life, I found that to be cathartic. And I didn't know how that would relate here or going public. You know, so many people either know or remember my father. He's still alive. He's ninety-six in a nursing home with dementia. And our family life was very private. He would actually joke about abuse and such but in a way that other people would snicker and laugh at, which I found to be pretty sick.

When I was three years old and was in nursery school I was made an honorary member of the Smokey the Bear Junior Fireman's Club. We had a fire marshal there giving us a lecture on fire safety. And I was, what, three years old. But I came home that day with a need to put out a fire. But there wasn't one. So, little Burt, the neighbor across the alley, set fire to Mr. Lloyd's garage that was behind our house. Actually, not the garage. There was a little pile of trash next to it. And we set fire on it, to the trash. And we put it out just like we were supposed to. But I got in trouble for that. And as a result my father burned me to teach me about fire and fire prevention. And that was pretty rough on a three-year-old.

And as I look back on it, I'm thinking in other times, if I had scalded myself or in other ways created a burn, a blister, whatever, there would be somebody at the house to give me medical treatment. But when he burned me, I had to suffer. Nobody put ice on it, or butter, they used back then. But I wasn't just burned. I was shamed and humiliated over it. And that was an unfortunate thing about my father and discipline, punishment, is that he would develop some sort of entrancement while he was doing this and would kind of become a different person. And he laughed when he would tell the story to other people that he had me light a match. And the second I blew it out, he put the red coal and mashed it into my hand and burned his thumb.

My wife actually visited my father and said to him maybe you should talk to Steve about the abuse that he suffered as a child. And as she told me the story he said, what abuse? And she said, well, the beatings and the burnings and such. When his mother passed away, he regretted that they had never reconciled that sort of thing. And you have a chance now, if you want to, to do that. I couldn't believe that she would actually go over there and kick his ass that way and call

him on that. And I didn't know that she had done it at the time. But two weeks later he came over to the house. And he looked really worried. And he said he wanted to talk to me. And when he started the conversation, I knew where he was headed. And I called Melanie [phonetic]. I said, "Mel, come down, come down. I need you to witness this. You've got to come."

So she came down. And he started to talk about his regret at burning me. He said that's something that he felt like he shouldn't have done. He never said, well, you know, I'm sorry I burned you. But I got the regret. I did hear it in his voice. But it made me shake. And those things left me with a significant amount of post-trauma stress. And they've got names for those things now. Soldiers and firefighters and policemen and all that suffer that stuff. And in my conversations with various practitioners, it became clear to me that I too was suffering that from a pediatric point of view.

Q: And so, do you feel like you reconciled with him before he got dementia?

Lapkin: [11:17:52] In a sense. When his dementia started, he sort of lost his filters. And he was living in an independent living facility and became the house taxi. Well, Stanley owed him money for a whole bunch of rides. I think it had totaled \$800. And my father apparently demanded payment. Stanley refused. And so my father beat him up. This was a ninety-year-old man. And they arrested him. And I had to go to jail to pick him up and take him back. And he was so proud that as a ninety-year-old he could beat up somebody twenty years his junior. Well, that kind of showed me that he was moving along in his dementia and just wasn't right, just was wrong as he could be. And he eventually took too much aspirin in an effort to hurt himself,

ended up in the VA [Veterans Affairs] hospital. They were concerned whether they should dialyze him to get the aspirin out of his system, which was the only way that he would survive. And I authorized it. And since then his dementia has been fairly rapid, and he's in a nursing home.

Q: I understand you have a pretty interesting, complex arc of life. Are you political or politically active at all?

Lapkin: [11:20:16] I'm an active observer of politics.

Q: What does that mean?

Lapkin: [11:20:23] I read. I discuss. I'll challenge people even on Facebook. I guess maybe I'm kind of a bigmouth. I don't know. But I don't think that I'm all that smart. But I think that everybody's point of view is relevant.

Q: And would you say that you're—where are you on the political spectrum? Right or left, middle?

Lapkin: [11:20:54] I'm socially fairly liberal but fiscally conservative. I think people ought to pay for stuff. I think individual responsibility is very important, more important than society deems it at this time. I don't think people work hard enough to improve their own environment, improve their own life. I think not everybody—well, let me go back to my whiteness. Not

everybody has been able to fall into a system of achievement because of their basic backgrounds. And that's where I think people have deserved a little bit of help along the way. So, if somebody needs help to get into a school or to train for a job, and their socioeconomic background has been such that it has been difficult or impossible for them to do that on their own, yes, I think they need a help up.

We definitely have an obligation to take care of those of us who are worst off, whether it be medical, physical, social, socioeconomic. Everybody needs an even break. I believe in equality of opportunity. I don't believe in equality of outcome quite so much. I think the chips have got to fall where they may. But it'd be nice for everybody to have a level starting point.

Q: Do you feel that, as white people, because of our history of institutionalized racism, that we owe black Americans something, either as white people as a whole or as society?

Lapkin: [11:23:32] Well, we certainly have as a society, owed black people and others who were similarly deprived of opportunity. We owe them that opportunity. I think our society, our country, our laws, have removed institutional racism and institutional segregation. So, I think the playing field is quite a bit more level. In individual instances, should a person here or a person there deserve something that they haven't had in life? Maybe so.

Q: But not as a general thing, not like—you and I in 2017, now that things have changed and the laws against discrimination, that we don't owe anything?

Lapkin: [11:24:36] I think how much can we do as a society, as a country? I think we've removed the discriminatory laws, rules and regulations. And if we've missed something along the way, then we need to fix it. But the things that are holding groups of people back may be in the minds of others, not so much in the laws that exist. I don't know how much more we can do to change laws to level the playing field. How much more can we do there? We've done it. The minds of people are perhaps lagging behind a little bit.

Q: So, give me an example of something that you challenge someone on Facebook. When you say you go after things and you challenge people, what are your trigger issues that you're saying, okay, I'm going to, like, come in and explain this?

Lapkin: [11:25:58] You know, there's so many issues that come up on a daily basis. I have to think a minute to see where this goes. The public education system, in my opinion, has failed a great, great number of people, maybe segments of society. And I see little breakthroughs in certain areas. The charter school system that exists in Chicago [Illinois], there are some schools there that cater to poor, inner-city, basically black kids that are disadvantaged in many, many ways. And what I read recently showed a charter school where everybody graduated and went on to higher institutions. And when you look at the totality of that compared to the performance of the kids graduating public schools, there's a dramatic difference.

My sister was a public school teacher. She grew up reading every book in the house, loved the English language and wanted to be an English teacher. So she's teaching twelfth-grade English Lit. This is back in the '70s. And a lot of the kids in her class couldn't read. So it was a wasted

class for them. It was a wasted class for her. She became a disciplinarian instead of a teacher, a job that she was totally unsuited for. So, our public school system is broken. I don't see that we have done much to fix it. I see that currently we've got Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education. She's interested in having more kids choose their schools. She's in favor of charter schools. And I don't see a lot of people giving her an opportunity to succeed at this. I think the opinion is biased against her and her endeavors right from the start. And I think that that's a major, major issue that we can improve upon. And we're on the cusp of it. But somebody's got to let her do her job.

Q: There's a lot of debate, especially on social media, about the current administration and racial issues. Do you feel like it's a created thing? Do you feel like it's—is that another debate that you get into on Facebook, about race in this administration?

Lapkin: [11:29:07] Not too much race because the laws exist. The laws of fairness are there. They're on the books. I think people implementing those laws may want to examine their own brains and their own hearts and see if they're doing what they need to be doing. I know I differ from a lot of my friends on Facebook with thoughts about the police. I think the police are very underappreciated. They have a very difficult job. And I don't see police out there looking to shoot unarmed black kids. I don't see that. I feel that when I read comments from other people on Facebook, but I just have never felt that that was real. I think police have a very difficult job. And I think black police officers have an even tougher job.

Q: Are you a supporter of the president? Did you vote for [Donald] Trump in this election?

Lapkin: [11:30:37] I voted for Trump not because I like Trump. I preferred other Republican candidates. But they didn't secure the nomination. But the knowledge that I've gleaned about Hillary Clinton and the direction that I had seen our country move in over the last eight or more years bothered me to the point where I just felt like electing another Democrat would be dangerous for our country. We've been through bad presidents before, and we survive. We're going to be okay. There was a lot about Barack Obama that I did not like. How we could double our national debt in eight years was just beyond me. I just can't imagine. I haven't divided nine trillion dollars up amongst the millions of people that we have in this country. But I'm trying to figure out, where did all that money go? What did we get for it? I mean, maybe it should have just been divvied up and checks handed out to everybody and saying here you go. We're going to buy our way out of this mess that we're in. But we just increased our debt so much. I just couldn't see us continuing along that way.

And I thought there are a few things that I think Trump is right about, like immigration. In the past, we've had presidents on both sides of the aisle, Democrats and Republicans, express a great deal of concern about illegal immigration and how it affects our country. And I think Trump is right to be concerned about that. I think sanctuary cities are a joke. So, there are things that he is doing that other Republican presidents would have done as well that I'm in favor of. Do I like the way he tweets and talks and belittles? No, I really don't. But I feel that that's a different thing from the direction of our country. So, I'm sorry he does that stuff.

Q: There's of course a lot of talk about race and this last election. And there's sort of the media narrative about how white people, or white resentment, was part of the electing of Trump or the forgotten working class whites. So there's all these things that you sort of read about. And even when we see the Roy Moore election last week and seventy percent of white people vote for Roy Moore, and where it seems like that—is that something that entered into your—or I should say is that, like, just kind of an excuse or something that is made up? Is it something that you recognize as valid? Is it something that relates to you personally?

Lapkin: [11:34:46] Well, I think, if I can go back just a little bit, I think Barack Obama was elected primarily with the white support. I don't think the black community has enough numbers in enough areas to have elected him by themselves. So, he and his persona, his charisma, got a lot of people, a lot of members of my family, to vote for him. And after eight years, I think the fact that Trump was elected rather than another Democrat had more to do with the direction that we had been going rather than the race or gender of the candidates. And I also believe that politics works in cycles. And after having been in a very permissive, progressive, democratic slash social direction, or socialistic direction, I think the country was ready for a little more conservative thought.

Q: And when you said that you didn't like the direction of the country, what specifically were those things? Was it just fiscal? Was it also social? What's the direction that you're concerned about?

Lapkin: [11:36:41] Well, I could see that our country was wanting to do things for the world, our country, segments of society, without regard to how much this stuff costs. And if we're going to do anything as a country or as a society, we've got to be able to pay for it. We've got to be able to afford it. And just because something sounded good doesn't mean that we can actually pay for it or should do it. As long as the world runs on dollars, we've got to find a way to stay in compliance and be able to pay for the things that we buy.

Q: Does the current tax bill fall under that? Or is that different, something that's going to add, you know, to the deficit, just stuff that I've read about? Or is that something that is, like, good fiscal policy that's going to actually grow us out of deficit?

Lapkin: [11:37:54] From what I've read about it, I feel that this tax bill will move us in that direction. I feel very strongly that it will. From what I hear about it, there are a lot of people out there that don't believe it. But the sense I get is that the people that oppose this bill are people that would oppose pretty much anything that Trump says. And I think it's pretty telling that, I mean, there's got to be some conservative Democrats still left in this world. But none of them voted for this. And getting corporations and companies that hire people healthier is vital. It's good for business. And businesses hire people. And I hear the complaint, well, if you give a tax break to the corporations, they're just going to pay themselves bigger salaries. They're not going to increase the salaries of the workers. They're not going to hire more people.

But my answer to that is kind of a question. Well, how does a company with less money hire more people and pay their workers more salary when they just don't have the money? But if they

had a tax savings, it would make it a whole lot easier for them. Maybe they will give themselves a raise. But they're definitely going to hire more people. They're definitely going to raise the salary of those that are doing a good job. And that's fair. And they should. And I believe that that will move our country financially along, if not the world, a whole lot better than it has been.

I do not believe that taxing the rich more money is going to cure all our ills. I believe that our economy has to be working on all levels. The notion that you can pay entry-level workers a lot more money at the same time that the job creators take it on the chin, I think that's an invalid concept. I think it's destined to fail. So, I'd rather have a corporation receive more benefit from the revenue that they bring in and give them the opportunity to hire more people, give them the opportunity to pay their workers more money. But they've got to be able to justify it with business. They've got to be able to have the profit and the wherewithal to be able to afford all that. It's got to be self-sustaining. Otherwise the business is going to fail.

Q: Why do you think that there's such a racial split in the support of Trump or Republican versus Democrat? Do you think that there's a valid reason for that, that more people of color support Democrats and more white people support Republicans?

Lapkin: [11:41:18] I see that changing. I do feel that typically, if we can be very generalistic, white people support more business endeavors. Poorer people of all ethnicities tend to feel put upon and feel that they're not getting a fair shake. So, I think that is out there. But I see it changing.

Q: And what about as someone with a son with an ongoing medical condition? The healthcare debate, I'm guessing, is something you follow pretty closely. And were you affected by the Affordable Care Act positively or negatively because you've had such significant medical costs around your son?

Lapkin: [11:42:35] I was really not affected by that bill at all. When my son was first born, I was affected by the high cost of insurance. I couldn't get life insurance for him. And the health insurance cost me—to add him to my policy cost me—wow, when he was born, it cost me over \$12,000 a year because he was over \$1,000 a month that it added in premiums. And I think I was only making about \$25,000 a year. So, it was a hurt. But, you know, it's just something that we had to do. I had to have insurance for him.

Q: And you never had problems with the fact that it was a preexisting condition with moving from plan to plan with him?

Lapkin: [11:43:40] Well, we could get health insurance from a group policy. And I had a business, or was involved in a business—it was a family business—even before I was a principal in it. So, we were able to get him insurance in that way.

Q: And now that you're a broker, are you an independent contractor? Or do you own a business?

Lapkin: [11:44:10] Realtors are independent contractors. But my son is unable to work a job. So he qualifies for disability. And that's, again, the segment we probably briefly spoke of earlier,

where those that are most seriously in need should get help. So, you know, he gets Social Security. But he worked as much as he could until he was no longer able.

Q: Where do you fall on the spectrum of your family? With your kids and your wife, are you more conservative on these issues? Are you less conservative? Do you talk to your kids about race?

Lapkin: [11:45:16] Race is hardly discussed in our family because we're just so unaffected. We have friends, acquaintances – both mine, my wife's, our sons – that are of all different backgrounds, socioeconomic conditions. We're pretty loose on that stuff. We really don't talk about it much because if my son had a school friend that he wanted to associate with, we didn't consider whether he was black or white or anything. As a Jewish man, it occurred to me one day that if other folks realized that people that are very important in my life, such as my neurologist, who is Muslim, my financial advisor, who is Muslim, and a few other—my dentist, Muslim—it might seem ironic. But these were choices made based on the individuals involved, not based on their backgrounds at all. And they occupy some pretty important places in my life.

And the people who are the coolest about it are those involved. My neurologist and I, we never discuss the fact that I'm Jewish and he's not or those kinds of things. My financial advisor, it never comes up.

Q: And what about history? Here we are in Richmond, the seat of the Confederacy. There's been a lot of talk about monuments and whether they should be taken down or not taken down. How

do you feel about being a Southerner, your relationship to the past and how it is celebrated now today?

Lapkin: [11:47:43] Growing up, I just thought Monument Avenue was the coolest thing in the world. It was beautiful. It was just so cool, these big, broad, wide avenues with these enormous statues. General [Robert E.] Lee sitting on the horse, man, that was impressive. It had no historical significance for me at all. I was more affected by the fact that when I was a kid and I went to the Trailways station there were two waiting rooms. And everybody in one waiting room was black. And everybody in the other waiting room was white. I didn't understand that.

Q: And what about today when you see them? How do you feel about them now?

Lapkin: [11:48:25] Well, the waiting rooms are gone, and that's a good thing. I think that, pragmatically, and I'm sensitive to the feelings of those whose lives have been affected by the checkered history that we have. But it would cost money to take down these statues. And the money that is wasted taking down the statues is not going to help anybody. If we took that money and had job programs for people who would like some self-help—maybe we need more plumbers and electricians and construction people and such. And maybe that money could help us train people. Put those institutions that I'm talking about – job centers, training centers – put them where people who need them could get to them. Put them in the inner cities. And give people opportunities to help themselves. I think that would be money better spent than tearing down those statues.

I also think that those statues can instigate learning, you know, because there's two sides to all of that stuff. And sure, there was a lot of southern pride. And yes, they didn't want a federal government to tell each state how to live and what to do and how to treat their citizens. But slavery was a big part of it. And holding down our black citizens, that was there. And institutionally we're over that. And I think for the most part individually we're over it. But there's still people that are biased. I don't know that we'll ever get rid of it, but it'd be nice.

Q: How attached are you to your own whiteness?

Lapkin: [11:51:03] Not particularly.

Q: Let's say when you leave you could walk through that door and you'd emerge the same white man you are today. You walk through this door, there's a fifty-fifty chance that you would come out as a black man. Would you choose one door consciously?

Lapkin: [11:51:25] I might choose the door to come out a white person because that's what I've always been. And I'm comfortable being me. So, I'm really not looking to change who I am. But if I had grown up black and was offered the same opportunity, I would probably want to go through the door that would keep me black. I think it's important to be proud of who you are and where you've come from.

Q: Are you proud to be white?

Lapkin: [11:51:58] I wouldn't call it pride. But I'm comfortable. I'm okay with who I am. I'm okay with being Jewish. I understand that my Jewish background is what caused my grandfather to desert the Russian Army when he was sixteen years old and do everything he could to bring his family out of Russia and into this country where there's opportunity. The opportunity in this country is here for anybody to take advantage of. And it's up to the individual. And some individuals have suffered institutionally and have a harder time. But it's there. They can do it. There is no institutional racism in our country. It's all individual. And perhaps we'd be a more beautiful place if those with discriminatory thoughts and attitudes would get over it. But I don't see how we can further legislate that they do so.

Q: Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you think is important to say in the context of a conversation like this?

Lapkin: [11:53:28] Well, I don't know. I'd be better off asking you that.

Q: I don't know. It's been a fascinating conversation. I don't know if it's been—I know you were a little trepidatious about it. Has it been worse or better than you thought it would be?

Lapkin: [11:53:49] Well, it's a little bit nerve-wracking. And I am concerned that people who know my father and have benefited from some of the things that he has done for other people might not understand some of the stuff that I've said. And I could go on and on and on about his brutality. But I don't know that that's necessary. But I can see how I may be opening myself up for a little criticism in that regard.

Q: Well, I wouldn't worry about that, because I've talked to you longer than we've talked to almost anybody. We usually do about forty-five minutes to an hour. I think that we're probably pushing an hour and a half now. The stuff that actually goes out and is public, it'll be a very small piece of the conversation. It most likely will not center on your father. And I'm sensitive because that's never my intention is to put people in a—do something uncomfortable. So when you get the transcript and you read it, if you want to run a line through anything, just run a line through it. We're not interested in putting anything out there that is going to make you uncomfortable or unhappy. That's not the point of what we're trying to do. So, just don't feel any obligation to leave anything in if it makes you uncomfortable.

I really want you to feel that this process has been—you know, it's been really valuable to us to have you participate in the study. And we're hoping that it's a valuable experience for you, too, or at least not a negative experience. That would make us very upset.

[END OF INTERVIEW]