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# Oral History of Sean O'Connor

Interviewed by:
Marc Weber

Recorded March 15, 2023

CHM Reference number: 2023.0042

**Weber:** I'm Marc Weber of the Computer History Museum and I'm here on March 15th, 2023, with Sean O'Connor, pioneering web designer. And thank you so much for doing this.

**O'Connor:** Thank you. Thank you for having me. I appreciate your time as well, Marc, and thank you to the Computer History Museum for this opportunity to tell my story.

**Weber:** Great. So, let's just start, what's your full name, and when and where were you born?

**O'Connor:** Sean Patrick O'Connor. And I was born in Bellwood, Illinois, which is outside of Chicago. It's always sort of been a kind of mystery with my parents, because a lot of information was left off of my birth certificate, so it's sort of like, "Hm, mystery man enters the world." <laughs> So, but yeah, so I basically say I'm from Chicago.

**Weber:** So, it's nearby.

**O'Connor:** Nearby, yeah.

**Weber:** And so, tell me, where did you grow up? What kind of neighborhood and tell me about your family.

**O'Connor:** Great, so I remember Rice Avenue is where I kind of grew up, which was in Bellwood. It was a pretty mixed community in terms of demographics for the time which was in the early '70s. And I remember being so young that just the length of my street was my universe. There was a train track that was at the end of the block where the mean old man at the end of the street lived. So, that was the area of no return if you went down that way. And then you know, further up the block it's all my friends and just trees for climbing. And yeah, so it was pretty lower middle-class kind of neighborhood. My parents both are Jamaican. That makes me a Jamaican or Jamerican by heritage. So, my mother is the country girl who came from the Southwest of the island in a parish-- they don't have states, they have parishes-- in the parish of Saint Elizabeth. My father was like the city mouse, right? He's the one that came from the Spanish Town area which is near Kingston, but they were both in the south of the island. And I always loved the story about how my parents met. Apparently, my mom was-- had some business in Kingston, and they met on a bus. And it was sort of one of those kind of movie scenes that you would imagine. You know, just seeing in a crowded bus and then being able to sort of work a relationship. Well, my father-- they'd been seeing each other for a while and my father joined up with the Navy and he was sent away. That's where he actually learned a little bit of the sort of technical engineering side of his background. And he sent my mother a letter and saying, "I'm going away but I really love you and I hope you'll wait for me." And she-- you know, the mail system in Jamaica, you know, a lot of the stuff comes in by donkey back then <laughs>, right, into some country areas where my mom is from. And it did-- the letter did get delivered but it fell behind a dresser, so my mom was wondering where he disappeared to. He just disappeared. "I thought we were going places." And so, he <laughs> was also wondering because he's not getting any communication. So, about a year went past, and the family-- my mom's family were moving furniture and she found the letter. She tears it open, looks at it, sees his sentiment, starts to cry, and immediately writes a letter to send off to him, and when he returns, they marry.

**Weber:** Wow, so neither of them had gotten deeply involved with someone else. Wow.

**O'Connor:** Exactly. I think, you know, I asked my mom, "What kept you?" and she just said, "I just felt like he was the one." But in those days, it was really traditional for the man to make the overture and so she was-- and she was from the country, you know? So, she had very traditional sort of ideas about how it was supposed to work. But it is incredibly sweet story and makes me think about how people meet today online, and a lot of marriages are online and I just-- there's something about must meeting on a bus and the old-fashioned way. But my mother's name is Annette Neil was her-- Annette Rose Neil was her maiden name, and my father was Harold O'Connor. We call him "Phil" because there's just tons of pet names. You know, like one of my uncles, Andres O'Connor on my dad's side, he is known as "Blue," you know, so that's the kind of story about my family. And luckily enough I was born to parents who really strived to make sure that their children had the best possible opportunities.

**Weber:** And how old were they when they moved to the states?

**O'Connor:** They were just in their early 20s. Early 20s. And so, yeah, they-- I know my mother-- I asked her about this, when she first got to the country, she worked for a family cleaning houses. Cleaning their house and other properties until she was able to eventually work in sort of middle management sort of office controller kind of duties. She eventually worked for Exxon Biomedical Sciences. So, the Medical/Bio group for Exxon. And my father worked, as I mentioned when he went into the military, he was afforded the opportunity to learn a lot of sort of engineering skills, and then eventually went and got his degree in engineering, in electrical engineering. And he was really--

**Weber:** In the States or in Jamaica?

**O'Connor:** Both. Well, he got certified in Jamaica and then the lottery system was very big in terms of being able to get a green card to come to the United States. It still is. It's a very strange sort of black box of how you get citizenship and how you get to, you know, the American system. So, my brother and I we consider ourselves walking/talking miracles, because when I go back to Jamaica, I realize how really smart and well-prepared people are for higher education and for opportunities, but they're not there. You know, they're just not there. You know, I'll go back, and I'll see folks in my mom's side of the country that are bathing in rivers and it's a very difficult sort of life. And to think that, you know, my brother and I-- I went to Boston College, my brother went to Georgetown-- that we have been afforded a very, very special gift in life. So, yeah, my father, he ended up working for AT&T using his engineering background in Chicago. And we left there about when I was 11.

**Weber:** Just I'm curious, from Jamaica, though, going to the U.K. was probably even harder than the States, right?

**O'Connor:** Mm hm.

**Weber:** Because they had a lot of limits, right? Because logically, it would, but yeah.

**O'Connor:** Interesting enough that you would say that because England was the-- how should we say it, "colonizing protector" of Jamaica and other countries. The history of Jamaica is that there were the indigenous people, the Arawak's, they were conquered by the Spanish--

**Weber:** Yeah, quite a lot of--

**O'Connor:** -- in that whole time of-- and then Spain with its wars couldn't really sustain their colonies. And it didn't have gold in the way that South America does.

**Weber:** But I mean, your father was in the British Navy, then?

**O'Connor:** Yes, right.

**Weber:** Right, but that didn't work, he didn't want to go to the U.K., but--

**O'Connor:** It was what the opportunity--

**Weber:** But I'm saying that did not lead to some sort of emigration path there.

**O'Connor:** To England, which it very easily could have. We have relatives that are there in England. You know, it's--

**Weber:** And there was the Windrush Program.

**O'Connor:** And with the Windrush Program there was a huge influx. I think along the-- you know, the Windrush Program is the sort of forgotten migration that is now only being recognized that happened in England, but during that time[1], it was, again, the black box of availability and what opportunities came up. And being that he was in the military, and that England and the United States have that special relationship, there were opportunities that came up for people in my family to go to England, to go to Canada, and to go to the United States, primarily.

**Weber:** So, it's basically which came up first...

**O'Connor:** Which came up that you could migrate to. Most folks in Jamaica wanted to go to England during that time, and still, today, they're like, "I just want to go to England," because there's such a linkage, cultural linkage.

**Weber:** Oh, yeah, cultural connection.

**O'Connor:** Cultural linkage, you know. We play cricket and--

**Weber:** Soccer.

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[1] When Sean's parents immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s

**O'Connor:** And soccer, and--

**Weber:** Yeah, the cricket.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, and you know, drive on the left. All the same sort of things. But it's really in-depth feeling of kinship and love for England. So, I-- whichever had come up, I'm sure that would have been--

**Weber:** That would have really changed the--

**O'Connor:** I would be talking with a different accent. <laughs>

**Weber:** Yeah.

**O'Connor:** You know, yeah.

**Weber:** But your brother's younger, older?

**O'Connor:** Yeah, good question. So, yeah, I'm older. I'm the first of my family. And my brother is five years younger. His name's Brian O'Connor. So, I mean, you speak about the kinship with England and Europe, I mean, Sean O'Connor and Brian O'Connor, yeah, there were a lot of Irish that came to the Caribbean for sort of political reasons and seeking religious freedom. Neil, which is my mom's maiden name, that's Scottish. And so, Jamaica is a very sort of different social structure than the United States. So, there's a lot of mixing of all the communities and cultures from the British Empire. So, you'll have Chinese-Jamaican, and you'll have Indians[2].

**Weber:** Indian.

**O'Connor:** A lot, that's where all the curries and all that stuff comes from, in England, anyway. But yeah, so it's a-- that's kind of the background that I grew up in.

**Weber:** But you were born in the States after they'd come.

**O'Connor:** Yes.

**Weber:** And tell me about--

**O'Connor:** And so, was my brother. He was born in Chicago as well.

**Weber:** Well, yeah, if he's five years--

**O'Connor:** He's five years younger, yeah.

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[2] People whose ancestors came from India or other parts of South Asia

**Weber:** Five years younger. So, what did you like to do? What did you want to be when you grew up? Subjects you liked?

**O'Connor:** Mm.

**Weber:** Or disliked.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, so growing up-- the earliest memories I had was, I wanted to be an astronaut or a fireman. That's-- you know, I grew up on PBS. I grew up on a lot of Saturday morning cartoons. And I grew up on-- I just remember in school-- we went to sort of public schools, and it was-- those were the things that you really wanted to do. They were exciting. They, you know, they seemed like the thing. I was always into science fiction, and kind of fantasy, and art and that sort of thing. So, those kinds of jobs were very flashy and caught my eye. I did well in English studies and then as I grew, we moved from Bellwood, from Chicago to Up-- I call it Upstate New York, but it's really just about an hour north of the city. There was an AT&T Park, so they called us AT&T brats. Where the managers in AT&T would go to wherever they were transferred, similar to like the Army[3], right? So, my brother, my mother, our dog[4], and my father, we packed everything up and headed out to an area just north of the Tappan Zee Bridge called Spring Valley, New York.

**Weber:** And you were 11?

**O'Connor:** Eleven? Yeah, 11 and about 12, you know, is when I then started-- I think it was-- I can't even remember, fourth, fifth, sixth, I don't remember that age, right? But essentially, I was pre-high school. And I just remember the classes that I started to like more than just the English classes were, science classes. I just-- I loved biology, I loved the earth sciences, and those kinds of things. And then, you know, I don't know if they still teach it, but social studies and civics. And as I got a little bit older, so we're talking about seventh or eighth grade. So, those were kind of the formative years and all that good stuff.

**Weber:** And you said in Illinois it was a mixed neighborhood in terms of race.

**O'Connor:** Oh, yeah.

**Weber:** But what were your experiences of race or ethnicity? First in Illinois and then later?

**O'Connor:** In Illinois-- you know, I think back and although it was a mixed community. It was like a network where African-Americans, Black folks, would be connecting here and there in various ways. And I know the woman across the street, she was my caretaker after school. I think as both my parents were working. So, I'd have a key and I could go home, but they didn't want me to just-- I was too young to sort of just stay by myself, so I had a caretaker across the street, Ms. Mary Marshall, and her family. And then down the block was one of my really good friends and they were Black and then there would be-- I remember an Asian family or a Hispanic family that we would play with as kids. But really the social strata

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[3] Similar to Army brats, term for children of military personnel who move frequently

[4] Jill

there is one of that it was a mixed neighborhood, but we didn't really mix. You know, because I think in Chicago also in the '70s it was what I realize now is that it was a place of a lot of division and divisiveness. Especially about housing. And especially about who's living where and what neighborhoods are "Black neighborhoods" and what neighborhoods are "white neighborhoods." And what we probably were living in on Rice Avenue was Black families that were forerunners into areas that were traditionally reserved for like white railroad workers or industrial workers. The homes were like one-level homes, but they had a little bit of backyard-- maybe a separated garage. And this was a dream to my parents, you know? This was an amazing dream that they could have a car, and that they could have an apple tree in the back. So, it wasn't really that kind of a mixing pot. But it was a mixed neighborhood. But I think it was-- we were in the fore-end of a change that was happening[5]. Now in New York--

**Weber:** I'm sorry, and your school was also similar?

**O'Connor:** Yes. Again, I think it was just the way that Chicago and that-- and Illinois areas-- kind of dealt with schooling. It was not a bussing situation for me. It was-- I could walk to school. So, it was in the neighborhood, but I remember it also being more skewed towards Black and people of color at the school. And I think maybe it has to do with the parents and what they could see happening to their neighborhoods, and it's something I didn't think too deeply on. But there were white and Black in my elementary school, but I just remember it being-- maybe again it was a lot of my friends, and who I really concentrated on. I think you learn from your parents. Maybe that is it. But in my memory, I just remember there being a lot more Black and African American students with all white teachers. And they were all female, you know, so times have changed.

**Weber:** Oh, for elementary school, it's still mostly female.

**O'Connor:** Mostly female.

**Weber:** Not all white.

**O'Connor:** It's true, it's true.

**Weber:** And were there many other Jamaican immigrants around?

**O'Connor:** No.

**Weber:** Or was there a community?

**O'Connor:** No, no.

**Weber:** Okay.

**O'Connor:** No.

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[5] In Illinois during the 1970s

**Weber:** That's more East Coast, right?

**O'Connor:** Yeah. Yeah. Which is true, there was a greater Caribbean culture. I wouldn't say that, you know, growing up when I moved to New York there was a big Caribbean culture there. It was West Indian culture that included other countries. In the city now, you know, where I had relatives, the Bronx, it was all Jamaican all the time, 24/7. You know, so beautiful neighborhoods and areas that were just filled with people that my parents-- you know, I could see the joy in their faces whenever they'd come back about the things that they could get, and they'd buy, and they could connect with and talk to people in the Patois and in the sayings of the day back then. But yeah. Illinois was together but separate. And then in New York where we were-- well, we were the only Black family.

**Weber:** AT&T sort of town.

**O'Connor:** The AT&T, so it was that community was very much a kind of upwardly mobile white, decidedly white community. And we just like I think about it like my parents were just trailblazers. In a sense they were not-- maybe naïve trailblazers, because I think their attitude was-- they come from a country where Black people do every role, from the bus driver to the Prime-Minister, right? To-- the only highest person was the Queen, right? And then, but everybody else looked like them. And they never really-- there is still colorism in Jamaica and in a lot of West Indian cultures where there's light/dark[6], but it doesn't have the same sort of history and pain associated with it as it does in this country. So, I mean, I remember my father telling me that he knew about racism, but until he went to a store in Chicago and the guy behind the counter wouldn't put the money in his hand-- his change back in his hand-- he'd take his money, right, but <laughs>- but somehow, he wasn't--

**Weber:** Didn't want to touch.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, he didn't want to touch my father's hand. That's one of the things that my father ended up saying it really started to sink into him about how poisonous the racial condition is in the United States. So, when I say naïve trailblazer, I mean that they just assumed that their children were as good as anybody else and deserved every opportunity that any other child should have. It didn't matter, right? Just from their background, you know, there are people in Jamaica who are-- they look like English white. You know, so every kind of [skin] tone or whatever, but they were all nationally Jamaican, and they spoke Jamaican <laughs>, like they spoke Patois. So, it was not-- you know, they really had an education late in life as Black people about some opportunities not being there for them-- and what actually was behind that-- sort of realizing, after the fact, how disrespected they were in a situation. And it ultimately led-- and it ultimately led-- to my father and AT&T being passed up for an opportunity that was well-deserved, and he had spent the time and he had done a lot-- he'd been with the company many, many years, even during the whole breakup of "Ma Bell." And he was senior to a white man, but was the white man was given a position that my father had applied to and [he] was very deeply hurt by the notion that somebody he'd trained, and taught computer skills, and technical skills, and management skills, would be taken to a position where my father had already put in the time and others of his peer-and-level of knowledge would have gone into that position. So--

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[6]  Skin color concerns

**Weber:** But that guy was made his boss, or just promoted elsewhere but at the level--

**O'Connor:** No, promoted over his group.

**Weber:** Right.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, yeah. So, there was a personal-- you know, the way it was expressed is that it was-- there was some personal things there, but it also was an opportunity that under normal circumstances would have gone to the person who-- to the role that my father filled.

So, I don't know, it's New York. And when my father had this issue at work, he instead of wallowing in the negative, he turned it into a positive. He said, "I'm not going to continue to work in this environment," and he took his resources and his personal relationships and then started his own consulting company, where basically he would go into companies, he would file a bid and proposal to do a contract where they would do a deployment of computer infrastructure for a larger company -- and then they would bid contracts out and he would come in with his bid-- and he'd win these contracts. And the people that he knew who worked in the technical areas of AT&T as contractors and so on, he gave them a call and I remember spending some summers working at Triangle Computer Group[7], where I would be entering [data into his computer] -- and he taught me how to enter in contractor user information. So, like their name and all their specs-- and type it all out-- taking their resume, like I'd get stacks of resumes. And I was like <laughs>, "This is not a good summer." <laughs>

**Weber:** <laughs> How old were you?

**O'Connor:** At this point, I was about 14, you know, 13/14. He started me pretty early to help his business.

**Weber:** And so, you would have to enter a whole stack. <laughs>

**O'Connor:** And they would come, and I would-- even when I would get them down to about like this, <height hand gesture> you know, where they're in that little metal in-box, I would just-- it wasn't a sense of like accomplishment-- it was just a sense of, "Thank goodness." <laughter> You know, it was like, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." And then the stack would get refilled and I realized that my woes were not over. But I'm trying to remember the application.

**Weber:** You were entering on a computer, a typewriter?

**O'Connor:** Entering it on a computer. So, this was--

**Weber:** Early PC era.

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[7] Technical consulting company Sean's father started in the early-1980s.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, so this was like '80s, right? Early '80s. You know, I remember the Space Shuttle, the first Space Shuttle flying out. So, it was like 1980, we were already in New York. And it was the time where there were typewriters that had the ball or the ribbon.

**Weber:** Oh, yeah.

**O'Connor:** Where it could actually go back and erase-- that was huge technology back then, right? Because I by this time was writing book reports and things like that. And we had a little-- a giant machine that just sounded like someone was playing drums, you know, when you're just, "tap-tap-tap-tap-ack-ack-ack."

**Weber:** Oh, the printer that had that ball, yeah, yeah.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, the printer that had the ball or the typewriter that had the tape.

**Weber:** Impact printer.

**O'Connor:** They were almost like disks like this <size hand gesture>, and then they'd have a ribbon that went across it. So, it actually looks more like some of the toner cartridges that they have today. But you would-- it would type the letters in, using the ribbon. And somehow you could erase it. I don't even remember how, but they-- it was great technology. During that time is-- so computers were still very early and very uncommon, but because of my father's background, my mother taking jobs at this point, too, as a typist-- so she learned along the way and stopped cleaning houses and then moved into sort of secretarial and clerical work. So, she would take on-- to make extra money-- typing up lawyer's briefs that they would give her-- legal sheets and then she'd stay up late with our typewriter. And new technologies like the Dictaphone, where she could use her foot too-- and it was attached by a wire to her earphones so that she could-- she could step and it would go backwards, it would reverse, and she would step. So, she would be able to hear what the lawyer was saying and then she would type it up. And that's how she supplemented her income. So, both my parents in a way, were not afraid to try new technologies and my father had resources to be able to have computers that were the big CRTs that were like connected to the keyboard. Those kinds of machines, so they were like, oh, Compaq machines and other types.

**Weber:** And that was your first exposure to computers, or--

**O'Connor:** I would have to say--

**Weber:** Or video games before that?

**O'Connor:** Yeah, so yeah, absolutely. Great questions. So, I think that the first experience that I had with computers was not with a computer. Basically, I was rummaging-- this was in New York, I was rummaging through my parents' closet. The homes in New York, they were a little bit more upscale. They had multiple floors, we had a fireplace, and a walk-in closet. And I was fascinated when like I said I had a very sort of imaginative side to me, so I would go into their closets and kind of like explore and it would be like my submarine, or it would be like my rocket-ship or something. I found a box one day. And a box-- and I'll

never forget it. It was a box like about this <hand gesture implying shape>, right? And it was red. And it was not the size of a shoebox. But I couldn't figure out exactly what it was. And it had a lid. You could take off the whole lid. And I did, and there were just these slotted cards. They were oaktag in color. And I pulled one out and I was looking at it-- and it had like these little-- you know, when the Florida election with Bush and Gore and they had the "hanging chads?" So, they were just that same sort of like rectangular punched holes. And there was just so many of them, because you imagine if the box is like this <hand gesture implying shape>, and they're thin as paper and they were all stuck in there, and I'm like, "Okay," pulling them out and seeing what I could do-- play with them and so on. I had them all sort of spread out in front of me. And my dad walks in--

**Weber:** Oh, god, they were-- you had messed up the order.

**O'Connor:** Exactly. He said, "What are you doing??" That's-- and I'm like, "Ah, what are these, dad?" And he <laughs> was just like, "Oh, my gosh. They're not in or--," you know, this was like his project, like his thesis project. Like he'd already gotten his grade when he was in school for the punch card program that he built. So, that's how like deep he was into it. He built a--

**Weber:** But this was, I mean-- he had already graduated.

**O'Connor:** He had already graduated.

**Weber:** But he still didn't want it all messed up. <laughs>

**O'Connor:** He didn't want it messed up. No, I mean, imagine the-- you know, and at the-- from his perspective, you know, this is something that he built and it was a sign of his accomplishment, right? So, he kept it, years later, right? Like in a box, never touched, so it was all in order. And <laughs>- and then I just happened to-- and he couldn't put it back together. <laughs> But he just was basically like, "Oh, just put them there at the end, you know, and put them back." And it's funny, I didn't get in trouble or anything like that, but that was my first experience because I asked him what they were. I thought they had to do with like-- I saw my parents writing checks. Like, nobody writes checks anymore, but...

**Weber:** Because there weren't-- that was the era, yeah.

**O'Connor:** Yeah. It looked something like that. But whatever it was, I made a game out of it and sort of ruined the order of my dad's program. So, he had to explain to me what a program was. [Sean reacting to his father teaching him what a program was] "Hmm? That's really interesting. Hey, that's pretty cool that you could make something that represents something else and it's like a code. It's kind of like a-- it's like a game." So, I got interested with that. He could see that I was interested and when I got older is when I started working with him to do data entry at his job, his work, his office, his company, and when he decided to have-- well, he had a computer in his den and he then got me, one year, a Commodore 64. So, I had been playing with his computer that he's using for business and tax purposes and all sorts of things. He gave me an opportunity to plink around on his computer and as long as the games I was playing on them were math games or they were educational. So, I remember going to like Egghead or these standalone shops. People think "Oh, you get a program, you download it." Yeah. Downloading it was going to the shop, a physical location, and going through all of the boxes and things that were there.

So, you'd get the box and there would be the five whatever, the five-inch program that was on a disk and I would-- I think an epiphany for me was the day that I realized that when you buy a disk from one of these places, you could put it in the computer and once I beat the game, I could use a hole puncher to click and poke a hole in just the-- create a little divot myself and then I could write over the disk. So, if I needed to-- and I got into sort of programming, little things in Basic or in other languages and so, I needed to...

**Weber:** On the Commodore or on his machine?

**O'Connor:** On his machine.

**Weber:** What was his machine? Do you remember?

**O'Connor:** I think it was one of those Compaqs that he had or...

**Weber:** But PC compatible...

**O'Connor:** PC, yeah. So, it was PC and you had to learn DOS commands to make it work and to write things to the disk. So, I kind of figured out along the way how to sort of hack and it was purely a textual world, kind of. Even the games, what I call games, were things about the computer speaking to me and saying, "What is..." and "So on..." and "You've now made it to the next level, but here's the math problem you have to solve." It was all text. Putting graphics on there, it was only two colors.

**Weber:** Well, the Commodore brought that in.

**O'Connor:** The Commodore brought it in, where it was definitely a step above, where graphics, moving animation-- I could write in Basic on my Commodore and I could get the-- I remember it was a hot air balloon about this size and it would be able to move on the screen where I wanted it to. Like, I'd write the program and I would get it to-- and I could change the depth of the page, where it like sits and how it would move and then I just tried to figure things out on my own about making changes. "Oh, so, if I got this, maybe I could change the color," and I would just play with things and I would see "If I could just make the top of the balloon one color and the bottom of the balloon a different color, how would that work?" and I'd just trial and error, trial and error, and I spent a lot of time with comic books and with my computer and this is still like 14 or so and then my dad, I remember, got me for the Commodore one year for Christmas, he got me a plotter printer-- which was not as cool as the dot matrix printers that everybody else had-- which you could have typed letters coming out of there. My reports could come out of there with those pins in the paper, the reams of paper that had the edges that were perforated, that had the holes in them that you could feed into it. He got me something that was a plotter that is-- actually, now that I think of it, which is more super cool, it was more rare, and it was a printer that could do geometric shapes. So, he was pushing me towards geometry and more towards what he considered mathematical stuff. He was an engineer.

**Weber:** Had he done CAD and stuff like that? Technical drawing, probably.

**O'Connor:** Technical drawings because of his engineering background, more for what I realized later were schematics for boards and for electrical systems.

**Weber:** Right, because he was an electrical engineer doing design[8].

**O'Connor:** Yeah. Around this time, an opportunity came up in New Jersey and some family was already there and we moved right in my high school year. So, again, kind of the-- it was pick up stakes and move the family and so, we moved to Somerset, New Jersey, which is still about an hour outside of the city if you're heading towards the Holland Tunnel, and really close to New Brunswick, which is where Rutgers University is, and I went to an all-male Catholic school at that point. So, again, my parents were just like "We want the best for our kids," and this was the education in the public system in that area was not to the quality that they wanted and so, I went to St. Joseph's High School with the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, who had the tassels. <gesturing> They'd spin their tassels and they had what I always called, "dresses." I was like, "Oh, they're wearing dresses." They'd have their black pants underneath their robe, and they were Jesuit and they-- it was a strange experience for a young person to go through at 15 and 16-- It's was just a, I don't know, kind of odd situation where you have this history of education that the Jesuits have, but also, a very sort of strict and like "We're different than the public schools. You are..." I mean, I was told in that school that we are the leaders of tomorrow, like that this school is preparing elitists, sort of that, "Because you're here, you are on track to be a leader in society." That's what they-- that's what they told us, and it was in the '80s and we're young kids and we believed them-- and it was the threat of Russian nuclear destruction, which was pervasive-- and so, it was very much like "Your role is to defeat communism," and multiple times, the teachers would talk about how, "the aim of communism is to rule the world." It was very conservative in that way, and I could count on maybe one and a half hands how many Black boys were in that school-- and that was difficult at times because any racial conversation that would come up in school-- I mean, even for the time, it was very-- I'm trying to express it-- almost too personal, in a way, because it's all male (the school) and for the time period (the 1980s), it was just sort of like there is no-- there is no boundary because the teachers are male, the kids are male, and it's just like-- yeah, for example, it was nothing for a child to be asked to run without his clothes-- the bottom half of his clothes-- because he forgot his gym clothes. It's just like "Now, go run around … put on an athletic supporter, and run around." So, when I see like movies about the '50s and stuff like with Converse and the short-shorts and all that stuff and Catholic authority, I relate to it, even though it was many, many years after the setting. It was a school that had a church. It had a "perimeter"-- is what we used to call it. So, it [the school] had all this land that was out in the woods, kind of, and different buildings that were owned on the property. So, that was-- it wasn't a boarding school, but it had that sort of feel.

**Weber:** Set apart.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, set apart and yeah, many things that were going on at the time, like the issue with Martin Luther King's birthday being a national holiday. There was a whole debate in the country at the time, whether it should be or shouldn't be [a federal holiday] and in our classes of 20 students, these issues would come up. I remember Arizona was a hold out and it was a whole thing. One of my teachers would stop the class and talk about why he thought Martin Luther King didn't deserve a birthday [national holiday celebrating his birth] and he[9] would point at-- I remember it was just me and a brother, Ivan, another Black student, Ivan, and he would say "Right, Ivan?" or "Right, Sean?" centered on us and we're just trying to make it through the day. We're 15, 16-year-old kids. We're just like "Don't look at me. I just

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[8] Designing systems architecture

[9] A math teacher

am starting to like girls. Don't bring up anything that would make me embarrassed," and "I'm not different. I'm not different." But he-- I'll never forget this math teacher who just would go on and on and on about how FDR deserves a birthday [holiday] before Martin Luther King deserves a birthday-- because *he* helped the whole country, whereas Martin Luther King helped [only Black people]-- and it's stuff like that when I talked about my dad, and not having the change put in his hand, and so many of these things that I have in my memories of being disrespected, and set apart-- out of the blue. Like, I'm just living my life through the day and then all of a sudden there's this thing that's put in front of me and I say "In reality, in the '80s, you're an authority in this class. You're saying these things that Martin Luther King..." What I realized was I wasn't very able at the time to articulate how offended I really was and what I've realized even just as I went into college years was that someone like Martin Luther King who helped a community, helps us all-- because then America is living up to the full promise of its creed and a dream of what America is supposed to be-- and I think it's the people who end up being marginalized-- who still love this country-- are the ones that really sort of understand when rights can be taken away, how precious they are to have-- and so, many experiences like that I experienced through high school. So, I did go deeper into my fantasy life and drawing and graphics and art and, again, comics and music. When I started to discover music, I really got deep into that and my friends and just having really close-knit groups and that continued in terms of how I started working with computers. So, they had classes in St. Joseph's on Fortran and on COBOL and so, I took those courses and meanwhile, I'm still working with my dad's business. His business, he stayed in business for a good time until he wasn't able to physically because he ended up getting very sick, but when I would go to his office-- I'm trying to remember. It was like FoxPro, where the database languages are sort of set up-- Lotus Notes 1-2-3.

**Weber:** 1-2-3 was the spreadsheet, Notes was the...

**O'Connor:** Was the application, right?

**Weber:** The kind of sharing, collaboration software.

**O'Connor:** Yes. That was what he needed and used for his business so that when-- he started getting these really great contracts and it was sort of feast and famine in my house. During those years and New York to New Jersey, that era, there were years of really great contracts that were coming in and then there were some years where it was pretty lean and my mother, she wouldn't have lunch so that we could have a little bit of something in our pocket. I know a lot of people have that experience, but the love of a mother, love of a father doing the best that they could for their son or daughter is what I lived. So, I stood on their back, in terms of like being able to explore the things that I thought were interesting and I had a mind for. I was always a child who liked graphics and graphic design and drawing and writing, which I have to admit, caused somewhat of a little friction with my dad, who was more of an engineer and wanted his first son to be more into mathematics and so on. But as far as math went, it wasn't my true passion, and in high school, I was very much into the sciences around like physics and chemistry, things I could do an experiment on and things that I could imagine. So, I could imagine velocity. I could imagine like a stone falling off a cliff, but abstract mathematics for the sake of mathematics was-- just didn't thrill me as much as being able to sort of feel and touch things. So, that's where my programming and tinkering came in and I think what led me into my career track today is. I'm still a very sort of product driven person. I do a lot of different things, but they're for the service of seeing something that was abstract in someone's mind turned into something that is real. Like, you could interact with and touch.

**Weber:** Did you take art or design type things in high school?

**O'Connor:** I did. I did. I did take as many art classes as I could get my hands on and I even sought out different classes outside of school, anything-- I'd go to the library and I'd find books on art and projects that I could do on my own. I remember one class was an English class and we were meant to do a book report and they said, "You have free reign to do the book report," and everybody handed in these reports on paper and I came in with like a recording. Like, we had a little cassette recorder, and I came in with a recorder and some paper that sort of explained what I was doing and that I had actually read the book. But on the cassette, I had recorded myself and my father doing a skit of basically what was in the book and he played one character and he was awful. His lines-- I'd have to stop the cassette player and go "Dad, you were supposed to say this," and I would write out-- yeah, I guess that was the paper I was handing in was the play that I had written and...

**Weber:** The script.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, the script and he-- his performance, he was just not a great actor, but I was always interested in arts and that sort of thing. So, I'd find a way to just bend the rules or edges of what was expected so when we have reports to do, I'd make a diorama. I'd bring it in, and I'd do things with my hands where I could create sort of storyboards and graphical representations of the information that I read or took in. So, it was always that kind of thing. I tried to be creative and had a creative outlet for that.

**Weber:** So, at that point, what did you think you wanted to do when you grew up? If you thought about it...

**O'Connor:** Yeah, I did. So, my-- I'll start with my father. My father had ideas and he had his own business. So, he wanted his son to be a lawyer. So, he doesn't have to pay lawyer fees. So, he put me to work on the stacks of resumes and then as I got older, he saw where sort of my direction was heading and he's like "Well, okay, if you're not going to be some mathematician scientist, then at least let's get a lawyer in the family," and I explored that for a while. Like, I liked the political science aspect of law. I liked the idea that I could help underserved people and Black people or people of color or people of other backgrounds because I knew what it was like being of a small group in my high school and that was a very poignant time because a lot of those interactions that I described happened a lot, feeling sort of marginalized or called out. So, I explored it a little bit, but I think when the idea of going to college and all of that started coming up, I was preparing myself to be a writer and do some kind of writing career. So, I started in junior or senior year taking communications, journalism classes, things where I'd have to write a lot, read and write a lot. So, that's what I thought I was going to be. It was...

**Weber:** And computers you liked, but you didn't see that as a particular path.

**O'Connor:** Not-- at the time, no, because it just-- I didn't see how the jump from my dad's office and these computers that even at that time were still duotone-- where I was going to be able to do the things that I wanted to do, that I wanted to be out there and be meeting people and doing things and engaging with media or that sort of thing. So, I was kind of going more towards what was available and sort of the track at the time was like newspaper and magazines. Those are the things. I guess my comic books turned into magazines and I liked the layouts of magazines. I started collecting like magazines and

especially magazines related to urban culture and hip-hop like The Source magazine or Vibe magazine or any of those things, late '80s, '90s.

**Weber:** And you said you had gotten into music-- so, hip-hop, but what sort of music were you into?

**O'Connor:** Yeah. So, I was into a wide range of music. I would say that during my high school years, I was into early rap and hip-hop and if not equal amounts or more so into what they called alternative music at the time. So, I don't know what we would call it today, but alternative music [groups] back then were like English bands that were very indie, so, The Smiths, The Cure, even Depeche Mode, that genre, REM, a lot of the bands...

**Weber:** Some of it was probably called, New Wave at the time, but today it would be...

**O'Connor:** Yeah. I think it was-- like, the Talking Heads were New Wave. Like, they were the New Wave era in the '80s. But I think there was that transition, like college radio stations. Yeah. In fact, I took one of those extension courses where you could get credit when I went away to Boston College doing the deejay, school radio as one of my creative outlets. So, I knew it was something in media that I wanted to do. I was just sort of feeling my way out there, but I couldn't really see how the stuff that I did on all those resumes [at my dad's company] and all those very dry details[10] and even the programming that I did, wasn't enough for me. I wanted to do something that I felt was more like art and more-- yeah, more media related.

**Weber:** What year did you go to Boston College?

**O'Connor:** In 1990, yeah. Then I took courses in, again, literature and modern forms of communications, journalism. My eyes were opened with some of the courses I was able to take around-- I know one class I took was the *Roots of Radical Black Politics.* "Whoa." That was like very different from the Catholic...

**Weber:** They didn't have that in high school.

**O'Connor:** They didn't have that in St. Joseph's Catholic school. No, they didn't. But from St. Joseph's, my interest around silk screening and print, like, taking as many classes as I could about silk screening and print was a love of mine. I was making a link in my mind between some of the graphical style of art using real inks, using my hands, using emulsion materials to create sort of these really hard-edged graphical style of design, which I just really loved, like the pop art style. In fact, my essay for my entrance into Boston College was on Keith Haring and his style. It just fit with the New York culture, underground, sort of apart kind of feeling that I had coming out of high school in a lot of ways and just the design of pop art really influenced what I-- the direction I wanted to go and it fit in with sort of graphical art and I thought myself very just a quasi-artist, a nouveau artist because I'd go and hang out at coffee shops and look at magazines and talk about how-- all we were missing was like the beret tilted to the side, you know? We were just so intellectual and cool, right?

**Weber:** Clove cigarettes.

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[10] data entry

**O'Connor:** Tons of clove cigarettes. I'm surprised I can still breathe-- <shaking his head> those things. Yeah. Clove cigarettes and learning to drink and having evening parties overnight in the school annex library and those stories and just being different than other people on the hallway. It's kind of funny because I had a partial scholarship to go to BC and when I got to campus, there was just a pervasive thing that if you're Black and you're here, you must be on an athletic scholarship. They're like "What sport do you play?" before they'd ask me my name and like my first day, I made a bunch of friends because I was just searching for my tribe and I didn't feel like it was like I needed to be surrounded by Black people. There were those sorts of enclaves of the Black students, their union, our union, I should say, but I did sort of feel apart from them because the music I listened to-- the sort of style was very English and I had the Jamaican background. So, I was a little bit like-- I didn't have the sort of southern roots that a lot of my Black peers did and as I said, I got this partial scholarship. So, even the first day when I was sitting talking with a woman, who we were freshman and she was a white woman from New Hampshire-- in my dorm, out the window because we were sitting on the curb outside of my dorm, out the window-- this was on my first or second day there-- someone yelled out "Nigger lover," and she got really, really upset and was like-- she was going to-- and we were just talking as like kids, friends, not-- but it was just the two of us and so, someone on my floor in my dorm thought that wherever they came from that that was appropriate and...

**Weber:** That was one of your-- someone else in the school?

**O'Connor:** Someone else-- yeah, it was a kid. We were freshman, first, second [day on campus] -- so, that's my introduction into what BC was from a peer level, it was going to be not an easy Boston kind of situation and so, the connection between the silk screening and so on and the school that I was in and coming into Boston College and Boston in general, I would think that it's actually much more-- at the time, anyway, was much more of a stratification between the haves, the have nots, the Black and the white, and the this or the that and it-- the school being where it was located and separated from communities that were Black in the city, that were just impoverished was a very stark sort of like reminder of like the social systems. So, being able to take things like the *Roots of Radical Black Politics* [class at BC], or-- what's the other class I really enjoyed? *Deviants and Social Control*, when you're talking about racial politics and social struggle for rights and for equality, there's a long tradition of poster art, poster making, whether it's the Black Power movement or if you're talking about gender rights and things like that, there was a lot of handmade screen-printed art and that attracted me as well to this sort of line of an educational space. I was like "Oh, my gosh, I can express myself in ways that-- it matters, and it has that pop feel, because it's not commercial for commercial sake, but it is art that is manufactured, and the point is to be out there and communicate a message. So, the whole idea of communication and print, that is where my experience started to really sort of draw me. Now, along the-- so, I had this balance of conservative, traditional, European, American history sort of line of education as well as points here and there where I could expand my mind and understand what led to some of the feelings of some of the teachers that I dealt with and the brothers that I dealt with in St. Joe's and other points in my life where there was some kind of tension that I was trying to understand that I couldn't necessarily get or didn't necessarily get from my parents who didn't experience that in their childhood. So, it was hard for them to really-- they didn't breathe the kind of things that-- they didn't breathe the air of American social constructs in the same way and most recently when you have this national debate about what happened to young Black men and wearing hoodies and being targeted or the many, many cases of police violence, that the conversation of the father and the son or the mother and the son and saying "This is what you

should do when you have an encounter with-- keep your hands on the wheel if you're driving, certain things, comply..." It was really foreign to my parents. We didn't have a talk like that, although I did have many experiences where I was pulled over just for the fact that they wanted to see who was in the car because I was coming home late in a car from my friend's neighborhood in a neighborhood that's not deemed Black and...

**Weber:** In New Jersey or...

**O'Connor:** This was in Jersey, yeah. This would be in Jersey. But Boston, I had similar experiences of being pulled out of crowds and yeah, it's strange. When I'm telling any of these kinds of stories, people that I talk to in my like work career, they are like, "You?" They're like, "That doesn't happen-- no, that didn't happen to you. You weren't pulled aside, like..." because I was told, "You're not like that."

**Weber:** Which is problematic.

**O'Connor:** You know what? I am. The conversations inevitably go into "Well, I'm not like that," and I'm like "I know. Thank goodness you're not," and they would say "Well, we were brought up not to see color," and then I'm like, "Well, maybe you should," in the sense that you care about me, you love me, understand that there are these things that are happening to your friends that just saying "I'm colorblind is great, but when you really start checking it out, it's like we actually should be a little bit more conscientious about how we relate to each other." So, that's a later sort of story. But school was difficult, but I found my way, found my way. Art was becoming more important to me than writing. I kind of went in phases like this throughout my life. Like, I'd write and I'd be intensely into writing and then somehow or another, just natural shift into painting and to art, to silk screening and design and just around the early '90s, around 1991 or 1992, I-- still into hip-hop, early '90s hip-hop-- give a shoutout-- I started to invest my time into design using silk screening by getting a job, even while I was in school or in the summers for T-shirt silk screening and creating my own silkscreens or working for a company that would be creating printing and print materials. So, I started to think, "You know what would be a really great life… would be to own my own print shop and become a printer." So, I invested time and then as I was working in these shops, I started to realize that, "Wow, these are not just like handmade stuff. This is very, very sophisticated-- you're getting photographic sort of realism for these shirts. How is this kind of working?" and I realized that there were experts using early [graphics programs] like QuarkXPress or other types of tools at the time-- there weren't many that were graphical in nature and the thing that I always look back at is that my dad, in his time, he saw computers as the card punch, like as the thing that you would use to enter data or create a program that would answer a very difficult mathematical problem and here, I was seeing the first like way of laying something out that could then be transferred to something in the physical world.

**Weber:** But some of that was you hadn't been exposed to Macs very much before that, I would assume.

**O'Connor:** No.

**Weber:** Some of that is that in that era...

**O'Connor:** Absolutely.

**Weber:** All of the graphical stuff, multimedia, for the most part, was on Mac, a little bit Amiga or Atari. So, I wonder, was that your kind of first exposure to...

**O'Connor:** Exposure to Macs? Yes. Yes. I'd have to go back and really sort of think about it, but I remember QuarkXPress or at least some other layout tool like QuarkXPress that was on the PC.

**Weber:** There was Ventura Publisher, but it was quite more difficult to use.

**O'Connor:** Difficult to use.

**Weber:** People were really experts in it. But that was-- anyway, so, that made you...

**O'Connor:** Kind of late '80s, wasn't it?

**Weber:** Ventura was '88, something like that.

**O'Connor:** Yeah.

**Weber:** But I mean, that's sort of when you realized that computing and multimedia and art could go together.

**O'Connor:** Exactly. That's when it started pulling me back in, because I was saying "Wow, I can manipulate and prove out my art before I actually have to draw it out and use an eraser and then cut something out or lay some text plate out," or all the physical stuff that I would do with printing, I realized that "Oh, a lot of this can be..." and not only that, I also got it in my mind that this is a business, that it's not just art. It's where I started to really see this-- see and understand that there is a way of making a living that's sustainable from design and I said "There's design and then there's art and they relate to each other. They're cousins," and I started then taking design courses, even if it was outside of Boston College. I would, through those connections, like go to someone's house who-- I'd say, "I'll print up some T-shirts for you and in return, you'll teach me on your Mac some programs that you know." So, that's when I started to really understand that Mac, the Mac world and I'm trying to think now back to when I-- what was the really...

**Weber:** That's what made the connection for you.

**O'Connor:** That is where the connection happened and I was like "Wow, this can actually be a thing," but I still was very much of the mind that I'm doing this so that I can have a print shop, so that I can do that kind of printing. So, forwarding-- I mentioned my dad got sick and he has passed away since then and God rest his soul and it was a difficult time and transition period for me to help support my family and so forth and I moved-- eventually after my years in Boston, moved with a friend of mine-- we drove across country-- to California, site unseen and I had $400 in my pocket. I think that's what I was able to scrape up being just young and making a living from T-shirt printing, but I wanted to branch out. None of my family had been west of Chicago and my good friend from Boston, we still keep in contact with, old friend. We drove across country with his dog in a van and ended up in San Francisco. I was like "Wow, this is California," and I was expecting it was going to be like a Beach Boys' song, like most people think.

**Weber:** There's the fog.

**O'Connor:** And then the Karl the Fog-- Karl the Fog greeted me. It was one of my first friends in San Francisco, crazy. I was like "This is the beach? I can't even see the water." It was a big shock because I'll always say that coming from the East Coast and coming from sort of a New York, New Jersey mentality to California and I was walking down the street and there would be people who would smile at you, strangers, and they'd say hi, and I was shocked. I would literally grab my back pocket because I thought this was a scam. I would look around-- I was like "Okay, who's number two? I thought it was a mark. So, I didn't realize-- I didn't get it. I was like "People around here, they smile too much," and I really just wore my love for New York and New York City as sort of badge of actually protection because I didn't really know what to expect because obviously, if it's not like a Beach Boys' song, what else isn't the same in California? As I said, $400 in my pocket-- I was luckily renting from a friend and so, we-- oddly enough, it was predating a lot of the news in the 2000s about warehouse spaces and art spaces. So, I'm going to admit-- if my mom sees this-- that her son actually moved into a warehouse space that we had to build our own rooms and part of that $400 went to a hot water heater, like a little small hot water heater. We did Home Depot runs all the time and to supplement my income, I discovered the San Francisco auction, car auction, where you could get the cars that were towed, and no one came to pick up and you could get them really cheap as an auction because you get to check them out in this area way out in the-- at the wharf or at the pier and you'd find good bargains. I'd get the car. I'd be able to drive around, which was also something that wasn't a very New York idea because they had the transit system, but I'd be able to drive around for a while, fix up the vehicle in the warehouse space because it was-- you could fit like an 18-wheeler in it.

**Weber:** Where was it?

**O'Connor:** In Bayview, Yosemite [Street]. It was big Roll-O-Matic door, like roll up door and the roof would-- it had a motor and could peel back so that when it was sunny, it would come in. I loved it. I thought I was...

**Weber:** The other people were artists or craftspeople, tradespeople?

**O'Connor:** Yes. Yes, kind of there was folks-- what happened was, as I said, I moved across the country with a good friend of mine. He had a business, a family business in Boston and he was moving it and establishing it also out here so he could have an endless summer. He didn't want to work in Boston in the cold. I exactly agreed with him because I found myself one day in the bitter, bitter cold of Boston working at a print shop in the tub that they would have for cleaning the-- with all these chemicals. I don't think they allow that stuff today, but it was just spraying chemicals into the mesh of the silkscreen and then just you'd use your gloved hands and just scrubbing out all of this gunk and I had the opportunity-- I was talking with my friend and he said, "You can come live with me sight unseen with my business," and he had been renting from me in my place. So, it ended up being a thing where I was like "I could do exactly what I'm doing now there, anywhere."

**Weber:** Warmer weather, yeah.

**O'Connor:** So, why do it in the cold? I knew California was supposed to be warm and beautiful. So, that's what led me to go in that direction, but I showed up in this Bayview area and it was...

**Weber:** What year?

**O'Connor:** It was in '94, maybe '93, '94 and I was-- again, as I said, it was culture shock and environment shock and the people that we built in that place-- it's like one of those big corrugated steel roof places-- we built about six rooms, one for myself and my friend and then he owned the business. So, he ended up renting it out to supplement income and because we were such good friends, he understood my situation and knew that I was a worker type because I remember driving around with him and seeing people holding up cardboard signs on the on ramps to all the highways and I was shocked. I was like "Wow." I said to my friend, I said "I'm really concerned. Like, I can't be that. I can't. I can't be that person," and then he said to me "Sean, you're not that-- you're not that person." He had a little bit more experience with California and so on and he was just like "You're a worker. You're not going to be that--" and it pushed me. So, I remember on 3rd Avenue-- or is it 3rd Street?

**Weber:** 3rd Street, yeah.

**O'Connor:** 3rd Street-- 3rd Street was not-- it didn't have the Muni there at the time. So, it was very separated from San Francisco proper and it was very Black-- because the decommissioned Navy bases were turned into public housing and out there, it's all these warehouses that separate the projects from San Francisco and there was no real great transit going-- there was no underground, there was nothing so that the life of the area was very sort of insular and I remember moving into this place and at night, just hear shotguns going off. You'd hear spinning donuts because at five o'clock, everything shut down in the warehouses and we were out in the badlands. There were dog fights and all sorts of things going on there. It really was an eye opener about what I thought California was and then actually how kind of rough and that there is that element that's there as well. So, yeah, and we had-- because you asked what types of folks were there.

**Weber:** Yeah. I'm thinking somehow you connected to the South of Market, South Park kind of scene.

**O'Connor:** Right. Yeah. So, we'll do that bridge. So, yeah, leading up to that, what I was saying is the people that we lived with in that kind of environment, we had folks that were using acetylene, oxygen-acetylene, welding and were doing like art pieces with welding equipment while at the same time trying to fix motorcycles and stuff in there and we had people who were doing print work and so on. So, we kind of kept it so that it was a real sort of tinkerer community. I, as I said, not had about less than $100 and we-- I walked up and down third street and the back areas there looking for work. Wherever I could walk in, I would just say "Hey, I'm ready to work, here we go, just "I'm here. I've only been here a week," and I'm just walking the pavement and going into each individual place. Eventually, I happened to go by one of those corrugated warehouses in my area that was in walking distance and I saw giant silkscreens that I now was like "I can do that." They were like big-- so, it turns out it was Robb Murray printing, and they were industrial-- so, they weren't T-shirts, but they were like taxi tops and bus shelters and sides of buses and those needed printing too and I knew enough already about it and I had been working-- I knew the chemicals. I knew the stuff. But I still had to learn about vacuum presses and different types of tools. They had the same thing. They had an area that was above the shop floor that they did Macintosh computer graphics. I ended up going in there and meeting one of the floor managers and I said, "I'm ready to work," and he said, "How little pay will you take?" and I said, "Six bucks an hour," and he said "You're hired. Come back tomorrow." After a couple weeks, I came back to him and I said, "I can't make it on six dollars an hour." He's like, "I know. I don't know how you kids do it," and then bumped me up a few dollars more. And I was taught by folks who were immigrated from Nicaragua and from South America about all the

parts of the business. They were masters at mixing color art and so on. So, again, I'm going to have a print shop is my thinking. I know that education is key. So, I managed to scrape up enough money [and borrowed from my mother] to take a course at San Francisco State University. I took a crosstown bus, which was-- it's kind of arduous the way that it goes. It's very long to get out to-- but after work in the evenings, extension classes, I started taking those on print and that's where I started learning Illustrator and Photoshop and those, but really still thinking-- then they had this class that was on web and it's new media and I had been in the know and kind of keeping my eye on it and the idea of new media sparked my imagination because I thought at the time if this is a new media that's coming out and I don't take the opportunity to understand it and tell my story as a Black man, my story will be told by others like the way that "Amistad" and "Color Purple" is directed by Steven Spielberg and all of the sort of pimp archetypes and drug dealer archetypes that is so prevalent that I saw in the '80s movies and so on, especially. They were never the hero, in most cases, and so, I thought here is a chance for me to actually put my money where my mouth is or put myself in a position where, again, thinking about media and so on, I was like "I don't know really what it is, but if it's a new media, I will not really have much to say if I let this opportunity go by and it's the same sort of Hollywood portrayal of my story."

**Weber:** You were thinking media, like mass media.

**O'Connor:** I was thinking of mass media and I was thinking like what were the movies, television, print, magazines and periodicals, kind of media. In fact, when I eventually went to those classes, the professor, she was saying she didn't know what it was either. When she heard "web printing", she thought it was like print web, printing for like newspapers where they have the big rolls.

**Weber:** Oh, yeah, web press.

**O'Connor:** Web press. So, she got involved with it because of just sort of it being something that she wanted to get involved with, but I remember at the time, you had to know how to code in order to make the graphical part work and that's what that course was about HTML and graphics and how you work with the two together to create a page and the whole concept of it being a media that is available to the world, even just from your seat. That was kind of the promise. It was-- I loved it. I had already had that experience-- I didn't have the hurdle that a lot of folks in the class did that was about understanding code and being able to get the two together. It was a lot of artists in the class and so on and there wasn't an industry. There wasn't an industry. So, when you were in that class, you were there because you had some interest, some person interest. They were like "I want to build my own website," or "I want to do something for my community," or something like that. So, it was that kind of mix of folks. You couldn't take that course or other courses along that line at San Francisco State University for credit.

**Weber:** Really? Wow.

**O'Connor:** No credit. The following year-- so, this was like '93, '94, early-- that's when I realized that the following year, you could. So, it was offered for credit-- the same class offered for credit the following year. But at the time I took it, that's how kind of early it was and I continued. I took more media courses through San Francisco State using new programming skills or things that were coming out or learning how browsers were working and then continued to have my idea about media. I took filmmaking and those kinds of courses. What the web courses-- that first course especially as the foundation and then subsequent courses that I took through SFSU, the hunger in the world at large for websites, I just-- it all

just sort of put it all together. The print shop thing-- I was pricing out what presses would cost at the time and I was like "Wow, having my own print shop is going to be a lot of money up front," and then I could spend the money on a tower computer and I-- it's so early. All I needed was a web space and people would pay me to make their website and even host it under-- I could get them up and running really fast, host it under my domain and I went down to City Hall, got to the counter, wrote out my whatever, check for fictitious name and I created Data Kitchen. I guess, I don't know-- at that time, I enjoyed cooking and having-- and pulling things together. So, people used to call me "Chef." Especially because we were living pretty meagerly in the warehouse situation and I would whip up these dishes out of just like little things here and there-- shoutout to the Rainbow Grocery-- just putting stuff together and I looked at it as code kind of in the back office and you've got what's up front is sort of the meal you're making and you're serving people. They call it servers. So, I was like "Okay." I was like "Okay." So, it's a "data … kitchen" and I put that together and that was my domain and my company and basically, I never looked back. I realized that the career that I thought was like way in the future just kind of found me and I started taking on clients and I've never left the internet business. Yeah.

**Weber:** Who were-- so, some of your first clients-- what sorts of places?

**O'Connor:** Oh, good. Yeah. So, there would be a lot of lawyers, early on. There were a lot of lawyers who were just-- they seemed to have the money and the need to distinguish themselves when they had their own law office. So, it was the kind of like legal offices where Someone, Esquire was on the door. So, I talked to that esquire and they found me through various-- I took out ads and various things and we would do these like one-pagers and these one sites or very, very-- looking back, very rudimentary sort of list of links, "About me, home, what we do, practice..." So, it was a lot of lawyers. There were a couple of like community-- using my contacts around T-shirt companies-- you couldn't buy T-shirts online, but they would show what they did and use their telephone number "Call us and we'll give you a quote on T-shirts to print," and I think one of the others that I can remember early on was some café work, which kind of comes full circle after drinking-- they became my clients. I loved the coffee so much they became my client and yeah, we tried some of the first means of ordering through fax machines back then. It was like "Oh, well, you can see the menu. Here's the fax number. Give us an hour or two or whatever and you can..." or print out the menu. You click it-- sorry, you checkbox what you want and then you pay and you-- sorry, pay-- put it through the fax and pay when you get there kind of scenario and they'd call you back. They'd call the number. It was the beginnings of the sort of ecommerce things. I look back on that pretty fondly. It was just so scrappy, and it made sense to me. So, it's, as we call today, use case. It was a use case that was solved or bettered the company reach and I could see that and that's, to me, where design really kind of like focused on that. Those were the early sort of individual clients. As I kind of got a reputation and had tried out some of these techniques, I started to be able to get bigger clients and I used different headhunting agencies because my dad's contract work or his business was basically a contracting headhunting business. He would do the-- triangle company would do the actual installation of the computers and the people that would run it. So, I kind of understood that there are these agencies that work in between as mediators between you and a business job and that you could take contracts. So, even though I was a sole proprietor, I could get jobs coming to me if I started working with these recruiters and that also then just took my business to another level.

**Weber:** But you were the only one doing the work or you were having people subcontract?

**O'Connor:** Yeah, I was doing the work.

**Weber:** Okay.

**O'Connor:** I was doing the work. I made a big effort to look like I had a staff and look bigger than I was. I had a staff page and then you'd click on it and then it was like me. So, it was just I used a lot of terms like worldwide and many clients and world-class and just big-- tried to be bigger, bigger, bigger because I figured this was what the media could do. You were just going to call me, we were going to be on the phone and yeah, I can do this kind of project for you and then I'd come in and represent...

**Weber:** And on the web, they don't...

**O'Connor:** They don't know, and they don't care as long as you could produce. So, I was pretty much a team of one for about a year or so and then in '95 or so, that's when I started taking clients that were advertising agencies. Those were bigger clients because they had bunches of accounts and so, one connection to an advertising agency gave me access to a lot of accounts and projects because they themselves were being asked not for print anymore. So, there was Winkler Advertising downtown, which had clients like Sony and Eidos, a lot of technical clients. It was a great experience and then also Saatchi & Saatchi, which is a well-known advertising agency, they had a satellite office near Levi Strauss Company down in that area of San Francisco and they had clients like Avery Paper and just a bunch of other things. It's still kind of a blur, but I was their operation because they had managers who knew about the web and so on, but they didn't have coders. They didn't have-- it was a different time and so, I was able to scoop up a lot of business. I had this money coming in. I used the money that would come in to afford me trips to Europe and different places throughout the world.

I had the opportunity to either double down and go toward building my own company, which, again, as a consultant, it's like feast or famine, or going into a more stable company where I could do the kind of work that I wanted to do and then have like extra benefits and things like that. So, kind of coming out of that era-- as I said, went to San Francisco State University, started getting all these clients, working, working, working.

I'm glad that I'm here to talk about the ideas of telling my own story as a Black man and not having my story told for me presented itself because I had that experience of new media at a very, very early time period, so, '96, and working at NetNoir. I found an ad, I think, and I went and applied, and I was still sort of at the beginning stages of kind of what it could be in my career and so on and kind of had Data Kitchen as a foundation.

**Weber:** Resume, yeah.

**O'Connor:** Yeah. So, I met Lettie McGuire and she interviewed me, and I met David Ellington and Lettie interviewed me for this position of Assistant Art Director (for NetNoir) and I showed her print stuff, like physical print stuff and other things and she and I hit it off and I said, "This is somebody I can really learn from." She had that-- and NetNoir's mission was something that I was truly, truly a believer in-- that it needed to be told and it needed to be our voices telling the story, telling our current history and so, Lettie runs and gets or asks David to come and view my work and he comes in and I say, "This is what I've done," and basically, it was that and we went from there. She advocated for me, he approved, and we

went from there and the first site had already kind of been stood up by the time I got there, but it was early days and we rebuilt it.

**Weber:** This was in the transition from AOL to the web, right?

**O'Connor:** I was actually there during AOL days, yes. It was the transition.

**Weber:** I mean, you already-- she was starting an HTML version, right?

**O'Connor:** Yes.

**Weber:** But it was still primarily AOL?

**O'Connor:** Yeah. AOL, the language was Rainman and I had to learn that because it's kind of behind the curtain, and so...

**Weber:** Were you on AOL? Had you seen NetNoir on AOL?

**O'Connor:** No. I didn't. I was sort of out there, kind of just trying to make sites (for clients) and hadn't-- really wasn't an AOL participator. I kept an ear on-- but it was these CDs that would come and...

**Weber:** Well, it was seen as backward at the time, mostly.

**O'Connor:** It seemed a little bit like clunky.

**Weber:** Your father's online world.

**O'Connor:** Yeah, my father's online...

**Weber:** Not *your* father, but it's like your...

**O'Connor:** "Your daddy's-- your dad's" internet provider kind of system. Yeah. It wasn't my environment that I-- even sort of looking at it, it seemed to be, from a graphical standpoint, something that was a little bit more constrained. Like, it might be for something you'd use a remote control and see it on a TV, but not in the best way possible. So, I was looking at the freedom that I had from HTML and then looking at Rainman and the very, very structured way that you could plug in things. One site looked like another in a lot of ways, but I didn't know about it. I had answered the ad (in a San Francisco Newspaper) and then learned that there were these two properties because we were building out the web version. So, it wasn't released. It was just the-- and what I discovered was I did enjoy AOL's product for chat, AIM.

**Weber:** Which was a proto social kind of thing.

**O'Connor:** Yes. I sort of started to really enjoy the immediate interaction with people on AIM. There was another product that was popular, which was called [ICQ[11]].

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[11]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ICQ

**Weber:** ICU?

**O'Connor:** I forget who put it out, but it was another web-based kind of tool, very similar to AIM.

**Weber:** Not IRC, Internet Relay Chat.

**O'Connor:** Yeah. I mean, maybe it is. Let's look it up. That's the one I remember being between those two, AIM and [ICQ], and then from there, I really started building the sites with Lettie that were related to sort of social groupings and I was the first internet location for Black people on AOL. I'm very proud of that, that I was a part of that and a lot of my Photoshop and design work was featured in our banners or ads and things like that and yeah.

**Weber:** Had you been-- I mean, there wasn't a whole lot of African American content online at that point, but CompuServe had-- they were just starting theirs and then there were some CD-ROM-based things. Were you familiar with what was out there?

**O'Connor:** I was aware of a small but mighty community of people that were Black and producing content. The idea that if you were Black and you were online and you were a programmer or designer, that you sought to coalesce around a community, was not like the path for everybody. We were out there making what we thought was good work and interesting and forward-looking kinds of material that may or may not be African American-related, people of color-related. I did sort of hear about folks that were online that-- but we already started with the web version and that's really where I started hearing the connections. Before that, it was just "Oh, that person over there, they are part of..." what is it-- AltaVista or there were people working out there in the network, or "That person over there..." We would find ourselves through just networking, but as far as a community goes, only after NetNoir, starting there, did I hear about these CD-ROMs or these companies or loose chat groups that were starting to spring up.

**Weber:** Through NetNoir?

**O'Connor:** Through NetNoir, right. Because I was kind of coming at it as sort of an academic exercise and my own personal business and the work that I was putting online really wasn't my-- it wasn't for me. It was design. It was for clients. So, it was not that kind of thing.

**Weber:** So, talk about that. What was it like at NetNoir at the beginning?

**O'Connor:** Okay. So, in the beginning, there was a very small office that we shared with other like architects. I distinctly remember there was this little atrium that had some plants in it and went all the way to the ceiling, but there were only two floors or three, but the offices were small, and you could sort of see across to the other offices and it was tight quarters, but we knew we were doing something special because we were the first and we knew that it was important and that a lot of people were relying on us for content. We had the feedback coming in and emails and so forth. It was a lot of late nights and deadlines and being resourceful in terms of how we got the content. There weren't as many sorts of online repositories now or Google wasn't around. So, you didn't go to Google and say, "Let me get some images of A," and you'd get it. A lot of times, it was scanning. We had a scanner, which was a new technology. I was like, <pointing and gesturing> "Is that a printer?" "That's a scanner," and I knew what it was from before with all of my screen-printing work, but it was like early camera, digital camera days and

everything was wired and very connected in that way. We would get a phone call, or we'd get an email from businesses or from AOL representatives. I know it would be a big day when the AOL representative would come down to the office to see what we were working on, and what we were doing, and there was only four of us or five at the time and...

**Weber:** Malcolm, David...

**O'Connor:** Malcolm, David, Lettie...

**Weber:** Lettie, you...

**O'Connor:** Me and then some other folks that would come and they'd work for a couple of weeks and then they'd leave, or it wasn't like every day. Like, Lettie and I were a team that built the pages that were on AOL and the HTML website and Lettie would come in with all of her exuberance and she would say "We're going to build the internet site now," and a lot of late nights and code and I owe a deep debt of gratitude and care for Lettie as she had laid down the foundation before I'd gotten there, but she took a special bit out of her time to teach me what it was like to be in a production, very ordered type world, whereas when I was working out in the wild it was-- "as I did it, is when it got done," and it was just my own negotiations [with clients that mattered]. Whereas getting a lot of interest and clients from the funnel from AOL. They would have links to the African American experience around a certain business or product, right? So, if it was some corporate thing from like Pepsi or something like that, they would do-- they wanted to do a web presence that spoke to not only their products, but also to the African American culture around something like different, different holidays, different things. We would be the people that they would call, and we [Lettie and I] would build, and we would have these deadlines to make, and it was very much a go, go, go, long hours environment, but it was also very rewarding in seeing the stuff and that the things that we created. We used CuteFTP, I think, a lot and Mac machines and then eventually, there were the Mac clones, I remember. For a short period of time, there were these towers that we could get and so, we got a bunch of those and we were able to run as if it was a Mac computer. This is, yeah, back in the day, and we would just innovate and when I say innovate, I mean-- it's hard to imagine now because certain things are really just commonplace, but at the time, being able to have a video, for example, on a website, it's like you had to have a plug-in. It didn't work with all browsers. We're talking about like Netscape 2.0, 3.0. and you had to have the specific one that worked with the specific file format and before you could even sort of embed that kind of experience with more high bandwidth, you had to make sure that the people knew that they had to download and all this stuff. So, there was a lot of this prework that went into-- this was also, again, before Flash and...

**Weber:** So, Shockwave came out in like '90...

**O'Connor:** After. Yeah. Right. This was-- as far as like proliferation and so on, I would say we didn't start playing around with that until maybe late '96, '97[12].

**Weber:** So, you were giving people the menu of like six different ways they could-- if you have this browser or you get this plugin...

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[12] Lettie and Sean were part of the beta users' group in 1996 for FutureSplash, the precursor to Flash, while building NetNoir. See the Flash timeline here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adobe_Animate.

**O'Connor:** And go here <gesturing direction> and we'd have them post it so that we could have that done, but Lettie-- I remember-- she came in all excited, that she had stayed up the night before and she was like, "Sean, I found a way to get video on a website," and I'm like, "Oh, okay," and I start thinking about, "Did you create a universal plugin? Did you..." and she was like "Nope, doesn't need a plugin. Nope, doesn't need..." and I was like "Wait, but it needs to have this." She's like, "Nope. Absolutely, it works on all browsers," and I was like, "Okay, this I've got to see," and yeah, because there was just nothing-- what there was at the time were, as they have today, gifs.

**Weber:** Yeah. Right.

**O'Connor:** They were used for like, "Here's an image," and then it would be replaced by another image and then it would be replaced by another image," and that-- you got a little bit of control in it. Early on, you'd have to program it. Eventually, it got to a point where even if I want to say-- well, definitely Photoshop allowed you to kind of output an animated gif and she figured out[13], without a lot of reference, that you could take a video of-- and however you got it in, but a digital video and have it imported into Photoshop as layers. So, that was the beginning-- the sort of first idea that you could have a timeline that was represented, and she actually got it into-- or it might have been the other way around, but I think it was called Macromedia Director, if you're familiar with that one.

**Weber:** Well, yeah, they did Shockwave.

**O'Connor:** Yes, they did Shockwave. Before that, they had Director and it was a big honking...

**Weber:** Yeah, the CD-ROM era.

**O'Connor:** It was-- yeah, all the software you had to install with like a CD-ROM. It wasn't-- yeah.

**Weber:** Right, but they were also-- you could create CD-ROMs.

**O'Connor:** Oh, absolutely. Yes. The output, what it was mainly used for at the time was to make CD-ROM stuff, which was what we [NetNoir] did a lot of that kind of work-- because NetNoir would get these-- as I mentioned-- these clients that would want to do these either special events or build their site for them. One of the things that was upsold to them was multimedia. That was a term that was new in the mid-- early, maybe it was coined earlier, but when it became...

**Weber:** Multimedia Gulch.

**O'Connor:** Multimedia Gulch, right? So, that whole idea of multimedia meant at that time literally you could be-- you could have a presence on the web, you could have a presence on AOL, you could have a presence in a CD-ROM that you could send to people and it would have a presentation and you could interact with...

**Weber:** It would link to the website or to AOL for more information for live information.

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[13] Sean notes that this was a groundbreaking use of animated gifs to display video on the internet

**O'Connor:** Yeah. Absolutely. So, there was a lot of work that would go into the style of a webpage that we would create and then kind of carrying over that style to a disc [CD-ROM] and we'd create a master type disc, and we would then hand that over to the client and then they would mass produce it and so forth, right? That experience is kind of also where experience with NetObjects was-- because they were all about shrink wrap CDs to get to a certain point. So, there was a lot more deadline, like in the sense that the deadline was the drop-dead deadline because there was physical media that would have to go out, whereas today, it's-- I think the deadline is coming back, but for a time there, it was like "Oh, we can change it-- it's a website. We can change it anytime."

**Weber:** Dynamic.

**O'Connor:** Yeah. We'd make deadlines and we'd slip and it would not be a big deal, other than our own sort of...

**Weber:** So, you were producing these side projects, in essence, for these clients.

**O'Connor:** Yes.

**Weber:** Where you're maintaining the AOL site, of course, and also, was the HTML version-- did it start as pretty much porting everything from AOL or was it different? What was the overlap?

**O'Connor:** It was rethinking. Yeah. I don't think there was a really strong desire-- as I'm the Assistant Art Director, Lettie, to this day, has a great sense for design and art and she realized it was sort of like a blank page and she was like "I don't want to just take what we had here and just do a one-to-one swap representation of it." She recognized that there was opportunity to explore boundaries and so, like I said, kind of trying to innovate, it was also about "What could we do? What could we push?" and it wasn't driven by some real desire to prove anything about being Black people on the early web. It was really about living in this environment where we had opportunity to use our minds in a way that could free our creative side, which obviously, then, was talking about our cultural background and things that we found interesting. Yeah. So, we did a lot of the sort of CD-ROMs and a lot of our work got passed around with Zip drives and it was a kind of time that was really exciting because even just finishing up that idea of a video being a CD-- I'm sorry, an animated gif was "Whoa, okay, let's do it," and we would find ways that we could integrate that into our design of pages that gave us a really sort of unique look at the time and a unique sort of feel, along with a lot of other campaigns that came up around-- I remember one was Jackie Robinson's anniversary of breaking the color barrier [in Major League Baseball]. There was a whole campaign behind that. I don't want to misquote, but it was a company along the lines of a Visa or that size kind of company that came in and either through the AOL connection or just other sort of sales connections, we got the campaign to do this for sort of an exhibit and promote it and it was very well-received by a lot of people who were online, people of color who were online and other just baseball fans really gravitated to that. So, we realized that wow, we're not just talking to our community, but also to a wider community of thoughts and ideas and interests. So, Lettie has, I think, talked about getting phone calls from people overseas and I was there. I witnessed these folks that were called to say "Wow, what are you guys doing over there?" They would get our number through connections and so on and it was like a couple of times that people would show up at the office. The small office that I mentioned with the atrium-- when we transitioned more to a web-based [site] as our primary focus, I remember it being a thing where between Lettie and David and Malcolm, it was like "We are going to now..." We think that the

web is really going to be the future. So, we want to invest in that and in order to do so, they felt like they needed to grow and we moved from that office to another office down near where Adobe is located near the...

**Weber:** Near that circle that turned...

**O'Connor:** Circle and stuff. So...

**Weber:** Because you were near South Park before, right?

**O'Connor:** Yes. We spent a lot of nights there and a lot of our days there in an early sort of open plan [layout]. So, you had Malcolm and then David sort of working in their like cubicle kind of office side. They had walls sort of up, but no roof to the ceiling. It was like just the walls that separated in this sort of open space, and Lettie and any of the contributors who started to come in after-- so, this was '97. This was solid '97. Yeah. So, the contributors that would come in would be sitting in an open plan and I said "This is kind of new and different. Okay," and I liked it. I liked that sort of open kind of style. It was more art-related and we just continued to work on making a website and sites that reflected a cultural choice of like either design, color, themes, making, for example, a-- looking back on it now, like a navigation item. Instead of it being sort of a set of links that are all evenly spaced and so on, we made a navigation item that was like a djembe drum and like, it would be the outside of a drum that kind of bells out and the links would be there and just sort of playing with how we might relate to each other and tell our story with like whether it's Kente [traditional Ghanaian textile] colors or colors from sort of the American south, using like food as inspiration and all sorts of things. It was just a really-- we didn't have a lot of limits[14]--  and we really sort of reveled in the ability to kind of take what we knew and said, "What if we do this," or "What if we do that?"

**Weber:** Lettie and you were responsible for that. Did Malcolm and David, did you consult them at that level or that was really you guys just did what you felt made sense?

**O'Connor:** Yes. We did what we felt made sense. Malcolm and David did not code. They didn't, and you had to code in those days to make it really work. They didn't do graphics. Lettie and I did all of that. The production of NetNoir was basically a two-person operation until it got large enough when the HTML site became more of a revenue stream or more of a property than the AOL site and we were reaching more people, then there were these contributors that were coming in, but they were basically writers. So, they would do articles. So, Malcolm and David weren't writing. Honestly, the way it worked is that we'd come into the office and I sometimes wouldn't see them. They would be in their walled-in space. They'd pop their head out once in a while, but the work that came across my desk was driven by Lettie and she'd come in and put her bag down and she'd say "Sean, we're going to do this. This is what we need to do," and she would pitch a lot of ideas to David and Malcolm, but I can't really-- I couldn't really remember there being much in the way of like regular group and staff meetings until later on. I do remember a staff room, but it would be like every now and again, let's have a meeting and David would be there and Malcolm would be there, but [Lettie and I] were very free to do what we thought was right for what we actually produced. I knew that there were things coming down the pipeline that were sales-related that

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[14] Meaning Lettie and I had a free-hand to be creative and build the site and fuel its content. Malcom and David did not create or editorialize much of anything that was posted on NetNoir

either-- Lettie had a lot of connections because I know people were coming in with their story or whatever content that would sit down with us and we'd record them and then we would make that into a website either for them...

**Weber:** Record like audio or...

**O'Connor:** We would record on audio or...

**Weber:** Or video...

**O'Connor:** Yeah, if it called for video, we-- I believe she had a camera that would do that, but a lot of times, it was pictures and story, like typing it out.

**Weber:** So, you mean record just in the general sense.

**O'Connor:** Recording in the general sense, yeah. Recording-- yeah, I remember it more as recording like "Here's a picture of so-and-so that came into the office. They are a-- they run a youth organization for underserved kids in Oakland and they would come in and they'd sit down, and we'd take pictures of them and then we'd talk with them and either the contributing writers would be involved, and they'd take their notes and read and write it up or we would do that ourselves. It was like all hands-on deck all the time. It was code, copy. It was nothing that we were not empowered to do to make it work-- creating art, taking photographs, uploading, downloading, scanning. It was all the stuff that needed to be done to create the NetNoir site and the AOL work started to trail off and more HTML started going up and that's the way it was most of the time. So, I knew that things were coming through the sales pipeline, which I assumed was going on with the business folks and Lettie had a big part in what was done and delivered, and she brought things to the table. I remember she just had a lot of energy for "Oh, I have this contact," and she would take it to David or take it to Malcolm and she would be the contact on the business side. But my role was to sort of work-- we had our own little like sort of workspace area-- was to learn what I didn't know from Lettie, who was-- she's just kind of brilliant at that and execute on things that were production in nature and so, just like I needed a bunch of graphics, I was cutting graphics all day, or we needed story, I would write and type out the story. We'd need something uploaded-- we'd do that, all the folder structure correct or get our process together and I kind of-- this was still early my career—I was a young guy. So, I didn't really know exactly how they were doing. I had an idea of getting clients, but how they got these big companies to-- I think they were also just attracted to what we were doing and the fact that AOL was a partner and the fact that we had a lot of following from people all over the world and so, I think it attracted them that were working in large organizations because they didn't have their own web department. So, there was a lot of that.

**Weber:** Did you get any-- I mean, there were probably no comments, but like feedback from users? Did you have a sense of how it was being received and who was reading or was that pretty much just one way you were putting it out?

**O'Connor:** No, no, no. Yeah. It's a good point. I wasn't paying-- honestly, I wasn't paying attention much to the feedback we were getting when we were building it because there wasn't any reference. It wasn't rebuilding. It wasn't-- we decided not to just redo the AOL version.

**Weber:** There's a whole community on the AOL side.

**O'Connor:** Exactly. Where I was mentioning before, AIM and sort of the chat world and different communities where you could interact and get feedback, that was more lively than when we were doing the HTML building the property. So, the HTML property was just like it was focus, focus, focus-- not listen to the outside world so much-- Lettie and I building, building, building, and then once it got going and as I was saying more of the focus began to be on the HTML side with contributors and writers, that's when I started to pay more attention to the mail that we were getting in and the groups that were really relying on us as a news source. There was a hunger out there that we started to realize that people were like "This is the only place I can get this kind of talk or news about these kinds of subjects that matter to us," right? It was a still very, very early point of the web and the internet. I remember one time; I was in one of these social chatrooms and there were several people there. There was a moderator in there and I was-- it was after work and I was just interested in the topic and we were just talking and so on and I was making my points and other people were making their points and we were giving each other thumbs up or we were saying cool and then one person on the chat stream said "Isn't this great that we're a bunch of white people talking about technical stuff," trying to kind of give the impression that self-deprecating like "We are this group of white nerds and we're talking about this stuff that most people don't know and are not communicating around," and he just assumed that the seven or eight people that were in this chat stream were white and I, growing up in a time when I watched my fair amount of television, the thing that came to mind was "The Three Stooges" and I made a comment "Hey, I resemble that remark," and the moderator was like "Yeah, go ahead, Sean." I wasn't sure if they would get it, but I always remember that because it was an off-color or off-topic kind of just assumption that was made and if you listened to media and the story, that was what was told, that there weren't Black people online or not technical or that it was the same story being told by the same folks and so, I didn't blame the guy, but I needed him to know that your assumption and what you think is going on is actually not going on -- and do it in a way that was not adversarial, but...

**Weber:** Yeah. It's funny, but it gets the point across.

**O'Connor:** It gets the point across, but at the same time, understanding where we live, what the environment is. I can understand why you think that but challenge yourself because this is a medium that is different than others. You're not talking about a local news broadcast or a local radio broadcast. Someone from the other side of the world can be talking to you in a way that-- so, it gave me also a sense of like "Oh, wow, so, there is this responsibility that I have to communicate and also, to recognize that there is a virtual avatar, even if it's not an avatar that you can see or that looks like a Martian or whatever, but that there is a persona that's there, that you only know from your ability-- you only know how valid it is from your ability to trust that someone is giving you the information. So, there's this filter. So, I learned from that experience as well. It also-- I always remember that experience because it was also a reminder of what kind of environment we were in. When I was there in NetNoir days, and focused, it was like "The internet IS Black."

**Weber:** Right, but this was obviously not a NetNoir channel on AOL.

**O'Connor:** That's absolutely right. That's absolutely right. So, if I wasn't...

**Weber:** So, you sort of went out of that space and you were in this-- you also were surprised-- you didn't know who you were in with.

**O'Connor:** Absolutely. Right. I didn't know who they were. I guess I-- to further clarify, I was working at NetNoir and then after work one day, because I was a tech nerd, I was interested in some topic that wasn't NetNoir related or African American related. It was about, I don't know, I don't even remember. It could have been anything.

**Weber:** HTML or something.

**O'Connor:** It could have been technology. It could have been baseball, all sorts of things-- and it was a community-- so, it reminded me-- a community around a topic and it reminded me that when I'm at work with NetNoir, it's a very special place and a special environment and we are doing the work that is really important because for every one of these folks in a non-NetNoir, they weren't looking for the Afrocentric space in the web. They are living their lives over here and their assumption is that the people that they're talking to, the people they're interacting with look like them, have the same sort of history as them and there is a lot of that and so, reminding myself-- that's just one little story of representing many different experiences that was "This is why we're here. This is why we are here." Not to forget that when I come to work and we talk about Jackie Robinson or we talk about MLK and we talk about all sorts of topics that these aren't necessarily the conversations that other people are having too in their day-to-day work and that to me, as I said again, the internet was Black because that's what I was focused on and being able to bring creativity out of me and represent people that look like me that I don't know. So, I felt a certain sense of "I have to really understand like what Black cinema is doing or like what writing is doing."

**Weber:** You become the channel for a lot of people.

**O'Connor:** So, this kind of goes along with your idea about feedback, right? Because then I started-- once we had something stood up and it was a moneymaking operation, it also-- I realized that there were voices out there that I needed to make sure that I was on point to represent because they weren't-- like photographers, "What's going on in art? What's going on in local politics? What's going on..." and I felt a real-- even if I had a desire, like I said early on, about not wanting my story to be told by others, it was realized that there was a-- it became realized that I bore a responsibility to stretch myself into understanding and realizing like what the pulse of our community and from an art perspective, from a national conversation's perspective was, and that thirst wasn't just technical and being a nerd. It was about also being this conduit.

**Weber:** Yeah. You became a gatekeeper whether you wanted to or not. You had a responsibility.

**O'Connor:** Absolutely. So, we came along on that kind of path and it enriched my life. It enriched my life. So, as I said, the internet was Black to me. I recognized in reality that when I pull my head out, "Oh, okay. Yeah. Not everybody's coming to an office and creating a Black cultural site," and we would also, because we were so new and engaged and plugged in, Lettie and I would go to these meetups to learn about what's the new-- like "Oh, JavaScript, okay," different language markup and informal sort of get-togethers where people would share their experience or that they were looking for a job or so on and I remember like Craig Newmark and different folks like that would show up at these things. It was very much like a community...

**Weber:** Small community.

**O'Connor:** You just look back and you say "Oh, gosh, wow," guys that started Netscape, wow, they-- Mozilla, we would go to these things and they'd be there and it was just-- community is a word that's over sort of stylized and used, but it really was a sense that we were all doing something new and even in our own area or own background-- sorry, backyard-- we were the gatekeepers of whatever that thing was. So, whether it was like listservs or whether it was different cultural things like a lot of Hispanic sites were coming up and different areas, Asian sites were coming up and just being able to sort of cross-share. It didn't seem as siloed as it kind of does today and very specialized as it does today. It was just like sharing and sharing and coming to these groups and somebody would like bring food and potluck and whatever and from that sort of era is where I got the idea because I was still doing sort of contract work and client work that I would go to these offices in these advertising agencies as well and they would have these meetings where there was all this food leftover. So, they'd have tons of sandwiches. This was the era where people were really surprised. There was a pool table and all this stuff for young people to kind of work around, but I just felt like it was such a waste. So, after going to these contracts and meetings, I would like-- any time I'd see something that seemed to be laid out after hours, after six, after seven when I was still there, I would-- this was during the NetNoir days-- I would take what was there and I'd go and hand it out down in-- so, the Data Kitchen...

**Weber:** It became a physical...

**O'Connor:** It became actually a delivery service. I'd drive my VW van and I'd go down to certain areas in San Francisco and I just felt like it was such a-- just coming from my background, it was do not waste, especially food and those kinds of things.

**Weber:** How did it end with NetNoir? I know they sort of-- but very briefly the next major things you did.

**O'Connor:** So, yeah. In about 1997, I think late '97, I still want to say that because I had moved from California back to New York in 1998. So, I think the end of my time with NetNoir was-- it was a difficult time. I think that there were some-- it seemed as though things were sort of difficult or falling apart from Malcolm and David's point of view[15]. They didn't seem to come into the office as much. They weren't there sometimes. It would just be Lettie and myself and they had a few other sorts of business folks that joined the team later in the experience. There was, from a content perspective, there were at least some other sites that came up after [NetNoir] that were like Black centered, Black voices, and some other kinds of properties. So, it wasn't the only game in town, and there were pressures from New York's Silicon Alley scene for these dollars and so, something I felt was different in the wind and eventually, I think it was Malcolm or David, one of them, they pulled me into a room and-- so, it wasn't Lettie, but it was one of them [Malcom or David]-- they were like, "We're shutting down your area," like the properties I would update and things and "We're sorry about this, but we're going to have to let you go," and it was a hard thing to take because I had put so much of my identity into what we built. My home in terms of learning and tapping into culturally-- like, this was feeding me so much, spiritually, emotionally, all of this stuff. So, it wasn't just like leaving a job. It was leaving the family and the laughter that we-- this, that, and the other

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[15] Meaning the business side of NetNoir seemed to be struggling, from Sean's point of view

and my conduit to understanding what modern Black culture was and I didn't know how I would continue, like how would I...

**Weber:** So, what did you do then?

**O'Connor:** Yeah. So, I took some of my money and I went traveling. I just tried to sort of calm down and find myself and I had saved, thank goodness, enough that after I sort of settled, I decided that I was going to go back to the East Coast. So, I left California and kind of returned as the conqueror on an elephant riding back home because I had been a forerunner in my own family. As I mentioned, no one [in my family except for my brother and I] had ever been to California. My mother has not been to California, stuff like that. So, it was going back and coming back with a nest egg, with a little bit of this, and a lot more experience. So, one of the first things I did was I helped build the Madison Square Garden website in New York. I also worked for Chris Blackwell, who started Island Records, who discovered Bob Marley, discovered U2 and a lot of other bands. So, he kind of sold his library and his share to Polygram and created this site, Sputnik 7, which was an early media company and started working for them for some time. I worked in London under that arm and then started to work in a [New York] company called UBO. This is the super, super heady days of the dotcom. So, it was like 1999 and I still had my entrepreneurial spirit, and I created a site called IMNYC [Image Makers New York Corporation], with a friend of mine, Shaun O'Rourke, and we can talk about that, but it's also a real deep kind of conversation about urban, first generation Black-leaning kind of media and UBO, Urban Box Office[16], was started by Mr. [George] Jackson, who's [President and Chief Executive] of Motown and we had a lot of people coming in from sort of Black music and entertainment. That was around '99 and 2000 and eventually the "dotcom bust" happened and we were a company of like 400, had a building on the west side, crazy stories about how that world worked and a lot of the sort of Black-oriented websites and properties that were there and communities that were springing up. So, UBO was attempting to be a sort of hub for that kind of material, so, urban-based first-generation people. So, I worked there for a good amount of time until the dotcom bust and shortly after that, 9/11 happened. So, I was in New York and was there when the towers fell. Internet and graphic design and advertising all sort of one day-- in one day-- the budgets were just pulled. So, it was kind of a difficult time there and I had a choice of going one way or the other, but I survived and there was a moment where I-- a moment meaning a year-- about a year and a half, where I went to Jamaica, really just to visit with my mother, who had moved back by that time, and I had the opportunity to donate or volunteer my computer skills to teaching kids between like 8 and 16, I'd say. That age range, the school system is a little different. But I operated with a group that got a lot of computers delivered or donated from Florida and then through the school system, I was able to just donate time. I had the resources and as I said, the job market in New York was really flat and a lot of people wanted to realize a better future for themselves and there was a lot of sort of self-reflection and I was no different and I felt like I needed to do something. So, I spent time and eventually, my program, my little program, I was able to call up the Peace Corps and get them to take it over. I look back on it as one of the best experiences of giving back. It's appropriate that you've mentioned this forum and being able to inspire or at least give some light to the truth of what happened and what could happen in the future, right? No one could pay me enough money to replace the eagerness and the laughter and the excitement that I saw in those kids' faces when they would line up before I'd even get to the place to teach about the basics of computers and

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[16] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Kidron#Urban_Box_Office_Network

they would just be like "Sir, sir, me, sir. I want to go first," and so on. But it was a beautiful time in my life and I just think we need more opportunity. I ended up going to Las Vegas and thank goodness I didn't have to work as a croupier in a Casino. I lived in Henderson, Nevada, right outside, and I worked as a designer and programmer for an advertising company that served the US Air Force Reserve. So, it was an advertising opportunity and I worked there for some time and then eventually, decided it was not a bad life living out here in San Francisco and California and by now, I was okay with the idea that I wasn't going to get a New York slice of pizza or I wasn't going to get a bagel in the way I remember-- and I could deal with the smiles a little bit more after 9/11 and so on. So, I came back and today, after working for a lot of other sort of larger companies and banks, like Wells Fargo and US Bank. I now work for Blue Origin, which is Jeff Bezos' rocket company because I had this opportunity to leave actually where I was for ten years, which was General Electric in industrial workspace software design, which is where I've kind of directed my career is I kind of got a little bit bored with the same sort of like search results, product page, credit card page flows that I would get from banks and other sites. So, I really wanted to do something different. So, I started working in the sort of wayfinding and sensor data type of software for the big machines that GE makes, like jet engines and locomotives and in particular medical devices. So, I started through that, working on AI assistants for doctors who are doing patient analysis diagnostics and radiologists who have algorithms that now can read X-rays and MRIs and all that stuff. So, I was part of that and now, I'm building rockets and I'm heading to the moon. <laughs> Yeah.

**Weber:** Your father would be proud that you went back to a more scientific engineering direction.

**O'Connor:** I came full circle, right? So, I think my dad is somewhere right now engineering his wings and looking down and is pretty proud. I know as I've gotten older, I'm much more proud of him, and especially my mother, and I would like to dedicate this recording to my family and all of those that are seeking sort of a better life, and a life that America sort of has as a promise and an opportunity. Just thinking about how this started all those years ago in a bus in Jamaica in the hills and then the city-- that I don't think my parents could have imagined their sons would have gone to some of the best universities in the country and are now leading in their fields-- for African American men, especially. We need more. We need more. We need more African Americans. We need more people of color in technology, and in this space-- and I know this is a conversation that's ongoing, but it starts from the youth and from our parents.

**Weber:** The hope is some of these interviews can at least be interesting to people that might want to follow.

**O'Connor:** I would love to be another conduit, or a center point of giving back, or a means of helping along the way. That's what I've looked to do throughout my career and so, thank you very much for your time.

**Weber:** Thank you for a wonderful interview.

END OF THE INTERVIEW