Charles, are you a Florida native? Yes, I am. I was born in the basement, as all African Americans were at that time, of Morton Plant Hospital on Dec. 11, 1941.

Can you share a few details of your family life and childhood?

I was the oldest of four kids; my mom was a single mom. She worked mostly as a domestic. I saw how hard she worked, so I was determined to help her. One memory I have is running around the "Whites Only" Clearwater Country Club and Gulf Course at night looking for stray golf balls to collect and sell the next day. Once in a while we'd get run off.

My family was one of the first families to move into the Greenwood Apartments, that are still at the intersection of MLK and Palmetto. As a kid, I worked odd jobs; I would mow lawns, and I rode my bike and delivered papers for the *Clearwater Sun.* I didn't play sports in school, but I did play the trombone and was in the marching band. One memory I have is taking classes in school to learn tailoring and dry-cleaning skills. My class was one of the first to graduate from the all Black Pinellas High School in 1960, the school is now called Pinellas High Innovation.

What did you do after high school? After high school I decided that there were very few opportunities for me in Clearwater, so I joined the Army. My thought was to serve 20 years in the military, retire, and then do something else. Some of my friends were enlisting in the military, and I thought it was a pretty good idea. I thought of it as an opportunity to make money, learn, and travel.

How did your family feel about your service? My mom was supportive. My brother later enlisted, too.

Can you tell me about your military service?

After my infantry training at Fort Jackson, SC, I was sent to Fort Campbell KY for airborne training. Let me tell you – I had never even been close to an airplane in my life! Now I was going to be jumping out of them!

How did you feel about that? Well, they don't ask you what you want to do, they tell you what you're going to do. So I thought – I can do this. I was determined to earn my wings. The paratroopers and airmen, they were pretty arrogant. Everyone had to be jump qualified. I actually hurt my knee in a swinging PLF (parachute landing forward) drill where you have to fall from a significant height to learn how to land properly. The guys would harass you, try to get you to quit – but I wouldn't. Even with a hurt knee, I

was determined to complete my five jumps from an airplane, and I did. I joined the 101st Airborne Division.

After my initial training I came home to Clearwater and got married to my first wife and we moved, along with our daughter, Denetrias, to Kentucky. I was stationed at Fort Campbell, KY, and we spent three years there. I was serving during the Ole Miss riot of 1962 when integration was starting and there were a lot of riots. I was also serving during the Bay of Pigs, when Kennedy was President. Later, I was transferred to Mainz, Germany and joined the 501st Airborne Division. My family moved to Germany, too, and my two sons, Charles and Anthony were born there while I served in the infantry.

When Vietnam kicked off, I was sent back to the states, to Fort Leavenworth KS, for a short time before I was deployed to Vietnam. I was assigned to the First Infantry's POL (Petrolium, Oil, and Lubricants Division). Part of my job was to help refuel vehicles and aircraft. I was very fortunate that I was never injured. Many of my friends were. After that tour in Vietnam, I was transferred to Fort Lewis, Washington, where I decided that after 8 1/2 years in the military, it was time to consider leaving the Army.

What did you do once you left the military?
Well, I did some research on where I might want to live. I had traveled a lot in the service, but of all the places I saw, I really liked Clearwater. I researched jobs in the area and found out that the US Postal Service was hiring returning Vets. So, I took the qualifying test and put my application in. I left the Army in November of '67 and I started at the Tarpon Springs Post Office in January of 1968. I was the first African American letter carrier in Tarpon Springs. Later, when the Post Office opened in Holiday, FL, I was the first African American letter carrier there, too.

Is there anything you want to share about that experience? Being the first African American letter carrier? How were you treated?

When I was first hired in Tarpon Springs there were older, white men - pretty nice guys - who were in charge. They had an elderly black man working at the Post Office as a janitor, and he was so talented they had him doing all sorts of other things. After I was hired, I did a lot of different routes, because when you're new, you have to take the substitute jobs, fill in when a carrier is off. My first route, my own route, was in a Black neighborhood. I had a three-wheel cart I pushed to carry the mail. I got all sorts of cheers from the residents. I was just under 30 years old.

Charles, it seems you've always been committed to learning, planning for the future, expanding your opportunities, and building financial security for yourself and your family.

Yes, that's right. After a couple of years at the post office, and saving my money, I purchased the vacant commercial property at 700 N. MLK in North Greenwood. I took over the C&C Food Mart (a convenience store) that was on the property. My daughter, Cynthia (everyone calls her Nita), worked as the manager, and I hired neighborhood kids to work there. When I finished my day at the post office, which was normally from 6 a.m.– 3 p.m., I would come home and work at the convenience store until it closed at 11 p.m.

During this time, I sold my home through a realtor. I was really impressed by the way she went about her business and made a nice commission. After looking into it, I took the Realtor's License course, passed the exam and got my realtor's license and started selling real estate part time after work and on weekends. Then, I took the Broker's License course and exam, and received my broker's license. Later, I opened Combined Realty next to the C&C Food Mart. I actually was working at the post office and owned the C&C Food Mart and Combined Realty all at the same time. And, to complete my licensing in real estate – I was a certified Mortgage Broker with Magna Mortgage here in Clearwater.

Early on, I was the only African American realtor in our community. This was during integration. I helped many African Americans buy and sell a lot of homes in Clearwater. I was buying homes and renovating them, too. I hired a lot of local friends and neighbors to help with this. There were a lot of challenges along the way, but I'm proud to say I'm still working in real estate. However, my license is up for renewal next year, and I'm not sure I'm going to continue.

Can you tell me about C & C Hair Studio that is currently on on the property?

When my son, Charles, got his barber's license, I moved out of my Combined Realty office and gave him that space for his C&C Hair Design Studio. Charles has turned C&C Hair Design Studio into the most recognized hair studio in the area. He works with students from Pinellas Technical College, where he teaches barbering. I eventually placed my license with Charles Rutenberg Realty and now operate out of my home.

How can members of our community best honor and show appreciation to those who serve in our military?

I was very fortunate to gain employment right out of the service, but most service personnel are misplaced or underemployed when they get out. Some have families and they need lot of help to get stable, well-paying jobs. I think they need to have enough

resources to make a good transition and be successful. Also, letting a Veteran know you appreciate them and their service, that's important, too.

Fun Questions

Favorite type of music? Jazz

Favorite restaurant? Rusty Bellies Waterfront Grill in Tarpon Springs

Sports lover? Any favorite team? I've been a Buc's fan since day one!

What do you like to do on a day off? Well, I don't have too many days off. But my wife and I do like to take a cruise once a year.

Words of wisdom for the "rest of us?" My advice for young kids is get off the streets, put your guns down, and consider all of the new opportunities in aviation, AI, and the military. I look on TV and it's exciting to see all the things available to kids right now. People just need to be determined, have a plan and work hard.

Thank you so much for your service, Mr. Harris, and for sharing your inspiring story with me and my readers.

After a couple years at the post office, and saving my money, I purchased the vacant commercial property at 700 N. Mlk,

Only black realtor in the area –
A lot of whites were calling him to list their home to sell –
And he was buying and renovating himself - employed a lot of local friends and neighbors to help with this -

And took over CNC Food Mart. (How did you have enough money to do that?) My daughter, Nita Worked as the manager, and I hired neighborhood kids to work there.

Did your wife help in any of these businesses?

One call – that I got when I had my office in downtown Clearwater there used to be an older white guy – same office – same building – architect and mortgage broker – small man – and we got to be real good friends – I got a call from a white person – just North of Dunedin – Crystal??? This guy wanted me to seek his house – white guy – so my co-worker friend – this guy wanted me to pay him to sell his house –
This little guy we were really good friends – he had a son named Cas – used to go to his house –

After my son,Charles, got his barbers license, I moved my office and gave him that space, which is now CNC hair design, studio and later, closed my office and placed my license with Charles Rutenberg Realty and operate out of my home. Live on Pinebrook – and work out of his home. You're still an agent – listing agent – broker
License expires end of next year -

Helping Jay Walter's – used to be teacher –

How can members of our community best honor and show appreciation to those who serve in our military?

unemployed when they get out some with families and they need lots of help from the community.
Most vets coming out of service – need guidance – and help – encourage them – provide enough resources –

What do you think is most important for Americans to recognize about Veteran's who have served our country?

What did you do after your military service?

What are you working on now?

I am married have four adult children two daughters, two sons and many grands and great grandkids.

I just had a single-family home built on LaSalle Street intended for first time home buyer but the interest rate increased and knock them out of the market but it's under contract now and due to close next month.

My favorite type of music is jazz.
My favorite restaurant is Rusty bellies, waterfront Grill
I've been a Bucs fan since day one
HOW OLD ARE YOU? You're Still Working?

I'm a realtor, so I don't have many days off, but I try to go on a cruise every year.

My wife – now – used to be a nurse at Meuse Countryside – used to live in Plaza Park – when I had the store – her daughter used to come in the store – her daughter told her about me –
She started coming up to the store –
She came up to the store – in. A swimsuit – we got to be friends

When she was working at the hospital at Mese she used to give me cortisone shots for my back pain
One time we came off the boat – a cruise -on a Saturday – she got sick – she was in pain – emergency room was packed – after a long time – they got a bed upstairs – got settled –
Left her – went home – an hour later – got a call – she had a stroke in the hospital – Transferred to a Largo rehab place –
She had an incident with an unauthorized guy in her room –
Charles took her home –
Now she can't work – her doctor didn't have insurance on her – he had stopped paying insurance on her –
Still married –
She recovered quite a bit – she's driving –
Played monopoly with grandchild

Get Outlook for iOS

, where my two sons were born and was There for a number of years until Vietnam kicked off and I was sent back to the states and later sent there.

Cuban Missle Crisis
Old Miss integration – back in the days –

Other expereiences –
Sponge docks – the regular carrier he was Greek – Nick – he knew everyone – so e's doing favors – this day – windy – Third of month had all these checks – bicycle route – so they wanted their social security checks – Charles said no – can't do that – bicycle flipped over – they did not get checks on that date –

Then went to Holiday – people letting dogs go – or tieing up and allowing to bark – I won't' come to your house –
After a while things worked out

One route in Holiday –

After a number of years in Holiday – got a motorcycle -= had a Honda – some hassle from white kids –

Then the post office started hiring within the ranks – Charleston Garris and John Garris – got to be supervisor – when Charles had his real estate license – then didn't want overtime – he had his regular route – no overtime – back was starting to bother him – watched him on his route –

Had real estate office off Court St. – upstairs – had some employees working for him – secretary was a white girl – girlfriend of clerk at the Post office – one of salesman was a Greek lady from Tarpon – called in sick one day – back was killing him – Johnson Garris – called his office to see if he was working there – gave her a hard time – She called Charles – told him – about n hour later – he came to Charles's office – to see if he was there. – Charles contacted a black female attorney Hazel Lends – from Clearwater – complaining – told them what happened – letter circulated and got back to him –

They sent him to doctor – got permanent disability -