Interview with Phyllis Sherrill for the YWCA of Asheville 100 Years Oral History Project by Sylvia Robbin on April 8, 1993

ROBBIN: Okay. This is Sylvia Robbin. I'm here to talk with Phyllis Sherrill. And it's April eighth 1993. And we're in the offices of the Buncombe Community Relations Council. And Phyllis, you listed on your card, it says Human Relations Specialist.

SHERRILL: Um-hmm.

SR: Can you tell me what that means?

PS: Jack of all trades and master of none in reference with dealing with the human race. I don't know. I think that's really a name that--. You know how they come up with names. But, we're primarily involved with the total community. And, I have been working as sort of a social worker, I guess, all my life. So that's one of the titles that I think since beginning working here with the Council that the Human Relations Department has come up with as my title. I was an employment coordinator at first. Then I was a community development coordinator. So these are just names and titles, you know, that people come up with and give you. I'm not one that's too particular about titles. You just do what you have to do, you know. I've been dealing with people and trying to help better people's lives in any way

that we can.

SR: And how long have you been with the Council?

PS: I have been involved with the Community Relations Council now twelve years.

SR: And what kinds of things do you handle (unclear)?

PS: We primarily deal with discrimination in housing. When an individual feels that they have been discriminated against because of their sex, race, age, national origin, handicap or familial status, which is family, the family status, or that you've been denied employment or housing for any of these reasons then you come into our office and we can investigate those allegations. In housing we have enforcement power, but in employment we do not. That means that we can, you know, take it into court if it need be, if we find cause in housing. But with employment we refer the individual to the EEOC, the Equal Employment Commission Office in Charlotte, North Carolina.

SR: So you work with other agencies in Asheville?

PS: That's one aspect of my job. The, the other part of my job is that I'm sort of a liaison person between the community and city and county commissioners or city officials in reference to living conditions or street or problems that individual may experience that they are not getting a reasonable response to by a supervisor or someone in a particular department of the city or the county and, for some reason.

And that things do get tied up because of paperwork or work load or this kind of thing. But--. And, to, to also assist with, you know, putting out fires. If someone calls in irate because a trash man did something to their trash can or they ran over a bicycle, or just something, you know, rather than--. If we can prevent an incident or if we can prevent any kind of (unclear) or anything like that we generally try to step in and see, you know, put a fire out is what we call it, putting fires out. And, generally, we're pretty successful when we see that that happens.

We also out there when there are racial disturbances we're called in for hate crimes. And if there's an uproar of any kind in a particular neighborhood in reference to fighting, young people or black/white issues or this kind of thing we usually, our office can usually go in and sort of settle everybody down and, and get some order and try to get people to hear each other and try to, you know, work the problems out before it gets, you know, out of hand, you know, if we can.

SR: Do things go to mediation then sometimes from your agency?

PS: Not, not, not normally, you know. I was instrumental in--. I was one of the founders of the Mediation Center and my boss is on that board of directors now. And I was on that board of directors and then we sort of switched around. So nothing comes from our office but if we feel a need, if we see that there is, that they can go to mediation then we would certainly refer them to mediation if, you know, we

think the case is warranted to do that. But, generally, if it's in reference to a racial incident or something like that we could take care of it here in the office. In fact, the Mediation Center oftentimes calls us, you know.

So, we, we have a very good working relationship with the majority of the agencies in the, in the, in the community. We're either sitting on a committee or we're on the board of directors. And we kind of keep our fingers on the pulse of the community and be involved and be out there and let people know that we are here and that we are concerned and, as I said, oftentimes can get things done when, you know, somebody else can't.

SR: So, coming in early then, as you said, things don't need to go to the Mediation Center.

PS: No. They get, the Mediation Center get most of their referrals from the courts and from, you know, they're generally from the courts, maybe from the school system. They have a very good program in the school system. But, most, I think the majority of their cases from the courts.

SR: I was just going to ask about the school system because I know there have been some times when you've been needed there.

PS: Yes. We've, we've gone in. My executive director mostly deals with the school problems. And now we've been there with them, you know, we've called. The principals in the system now is getting

more, very comfortable in calling us because they do--. And, in particular, when there's a racial incident they would call us and we would often help them mediate and solve the thing.

Sometimes parents, you know, get up in the air, you know, about their child, of course. You know, they feel they're mistreated. And we've been very instrumental in helping putting out fires in particular in the county, some of the county schools, you know. One we're having a real hard time with now, but--. You know, I say having a hard time, it's you know, it's still brewing.

SR: I happen to be volunteering at the Kandler Elementary School now. And I was surprised at the makeup on their school population.

PS: In the county? They're not that many minorities in the county system or, or that lives in the county, period, you know. So there are thirty-seven county schools, I think. And there's a (unclear) population among minorities first of all.

SR: It's mainly in the city.

PS: Um-hmm.

SR: If you've been here twelve years, how old is the agency?

PS: About twenty-five years.

SR: Twenty-five.

PS: Yeah, about twenty-five years.

SR: I, I ran across the name of Ruben Daly. Is that the person who—

PS: He was one of the founders. Yeah, he was one of the founders, he and Matt MaCoe. I'm not sure who the other (unclear) folks from the city. I know Kim Michael was with them at the time from the Chamber of Commerce, (unclear) George Green. And I think Miss Lucy Hearing. I can't remember, I mean as far as the agency is concerned.

And, the fact that there was a (unclear) for the Council is rather unique in that we're autonomous from everybody else, although, an agency. Although the city and county funds us, we have our own board of directors and we're not under the thumb of the city nor the county. And I think it was purposely set up so that we could investigate them. You know we could investigate the city or the county comfortably without having, you know--. Often they have called us several times especially when it comes to dealing with employment. We're often called to investigate situations.

SR: So you're funded by the city.

PS: City and the county.

SR: And, how many people are on the staff?

PS: There are five people on staff.

SR: Do you know what directly led up to the founding of the Council?

PS: I think the racial unrest that was going on at the integration of Asheville High School. You know, they, they were having, I think, and that, that some—. I'm not going to quote. I'm not sure exactly. But I do know it was during that year, during the integration when there was a lot of racial--

SR: When you said twenty-five years ago, I thought, well that's--. Those were the times.

PS: Yeah.

SR: I noticed that Asheville had been named an All-American city at one time.

PS: In the sixties.

SR: It really surprised me.

PS: I think Ruben Daly, at that time, was one of the persons. We have some information on that in our scrapbooks on this.

SR: Okay.

PS: I'll let you look at it.

SR: All right. And, before you came to this Council, were you at the Y then?

PS: Yes.

SR: The YWCA.

PS: Worked at the YWCA for about fifteen years and thoroughly enjoyed it. That was my, that was my growing up time. I started at the Y as assistant teen director and sort of worked my way up to the assistant to the executive director. I'm program director. And had some good years at the YWCA, some very, very, good years.

SR: Now that was after the integration of the Y.

PS: Yes. Yes. I was employed there after--. Yeah. They, they merged after that the black and white YWCAs merged.

SR: Nineteen seventy is what I—

PS: Yes, about 1970.

SR: So you were at the French Broad location?

PS: Um-hmm. Yes, I was, I was. That's where I was first hired at the Y. But, however, we were still, the two, the YW on—not downtown—the Employment Security Commission—

SR: On Grove?

PS: Grove Street, the YWCA there. And we had a swimming pool there and--. So we did not have a swimming pool at the Y on South French Broad. And then we built one. And then after it was built then they started shutting down the one at south, up at Grove Street under much protest from some of our white constituents, white, you know, staff. But they came over and stayed for a little while but eventually left, some of the staff. And some of our members who had been

members for years, life members, you know, no longer participated or was involved with the YWCA.

SR: What did they really object to?

PS: In my opinion, they just didn't want to mix with black folk. You know that's my opinion. And at that time the YW here had hired the first black executive director in this, I guess, in the western part of the United States, you know, which was Miss Caldwell.

SR: Miss Caldwell.

PS: Yes. She was our first executive director, black executive director. And you can imagine they could not deal with, with that, just the fact that we had a black executive director. That's just my opinion, you know, because I couldn't--. In being there and inquiring I could find no other reason. Nobody gave me a reason.

SR: Did you feel like that has healed over?

PS: In a way, yes, I think. I, I still--. I don't see those people that were originally involved at the YWCA. I don't see them there now, you know. They have--. They've changed executive directors I think three times and (unclear). They've had the fourth one since I left, the fourth executive director since I left. And all of them were white females. And they were, some of them were, you know.

And, I don't see the--. It is the minority participation there is almost, you know, is drastically dropped. I don't know what that was

about. The teen participation is not there, you know, where they were involving, because we at one time had a very strong youth program. And I, I think this Saturday, in fact, some of the--.

When I was there I had organized teen groups. And at that time we could go over to the school system. And we would set aside like thirty-five or forty minutes like 2:05 to 2:35, you know, we could have a youth group and I got them organized so that we could go into the school system. So I was master of teen groups. And on this Saturday they have scheduled a reunion.

You know, I think I had approximately, about five groups, you know, right out of there, when I was employed with the Y. And they all since have graduated. And we've got some, you know, through college and getting, you know, and through that whole thing. And so they're having a reunion and I'm just so excited about that to see some of the young ladies who did, who were, did work with me at the Y that I did have under my thumb and sort of help mold them into their careers and their, you know, adulthood. And I'm real, very, very proud of them, very proud of them. The majority of them have finished college, you know. They've gone to AB Tech or, you know, have had some technical skills and have been doing some, you know, have very good jobs. And I'm very proud of them.

SR: So that must have left quite a gap when those programs—

PS: I think so.

SR: --declined.

PS: We used to have teen dances for them. Oh gosh, there could be any given night I'd have four or five hundred kids at the YWCA with, you know, with teen dances and etcetera. We had chaperones and the whole nine yards.

And I'm not exactly sure--. Perhaps when--. I don't know if they—. To my knowledge, I'm not sure if their budget has ever been cut. But I'm not exactly sure what happened, you know. But I don't think people had the patience or the time.

I think I saw very--. Well, I'm not sure if there were any minorities on staff in, in management positions, you know. I think Mr. Wells, who's in maintenance, is still the only person that's still there. They have one other minority, a young lady who is sort of like a program director or something like that over there. And I did see a minority on the front desk the other night I was over there. But as far as, you know, being instructors or being on staff I don't--.

They have a very nice and very good daycare program or after school and, you know, nursery, you know, program. And I'm very impressed with that. And they have a very, they have a mixture of staff. But I think here again in that capacity the majority of them are minorities, you know, babysitting, that kind of situation. So I do know that there are some.

SR: And you haven't had any real connection with the Y?

PS: No. No. I, I still--. I still encourage people to go and, you know, I've always--. One of the things that was taught to us through the YWCA was that it's not the Y it's the people, you know. So don't say it's the YWCA. It's the people that run it. And if you're not satisfied with what's going on. But it's certainly not the Y and its philosophy and what it's about. It's how it's carried out, and by whom, by whom it's carried out. But we certainly encourage folk to go. And my daughters are members. And so we, we're still there. But it's just not like it used to be, you know. Things march on.

SR: I know you have--. You mentioned being on some boards. And I know you have done a lot of volunteer work in the city. I mean I know that from personal contact with you. Could you tell me something about that?

PS: Oh, the boards.

SR: Not necessarily the boards. But where have you put your volunteer time? Sometimes it is boards, sometimes it's other things.

PS: Yes. You know mostly I deal with human services kinds of things, you know. We're very interested in seeing that, as here again, that people who are at a disadvantage, you know, know where to go, know how to get things done. Finally we realized, you know, that life isn't as bad as it is simply because you don't know where to go, who to see and what to do. So I guess it's mostly human services kind of thing across the board with young people, with, you know, with young teenagers.

I lived in public housing for twenty years, Mountainside Apartment, raising my children. So I was looked at as sort of the social worker up there because--. And my house was always like--. My apartment was like the halfway house for the kids or the center, you know, because I had young people.

And so I had three kids, you know, two girls and a boy. And so they were always active and involved and doing things. And, fortunately, because I think my position with the Y was able to include them into a lot of programs and spend some good quality time with them through recreational kinds of programs at the Y doing fun things with them.

And I was quick to include other kids, you know, to take advantage of that because, you know, in housing developments, you know, we're there because we're on limited income, you know, and we're not able to, to be in a, you know, our own homes. So, you know, we, we try to make sure that they try to be as well rounded, you know, as possible and be happy even though, you know, you may be not in the best living condition but they're not the worst and be happy with what we have, you know. And so I was very quick to include the kids there.

I organized the teen groups there. I organized the parents and the mothers. We had fun things. We would have--. I would have a cookout. It was nothing. We'd just throw a grill out and just, you know, out on the street and just say bring some eggs and some hot

dogs and, you know, we'd just have a good time on Saturday morning. And people would just come, you know. So, I'd just do fun things.

And I see some of my young kids now who are excelling. One young boy in particular is excelling at the basketball team at Asheville High now, O'Neal Vernon. And I'm just very, very proud of him. And I saw him on the basketball court, you know, and saw him playing football. And got little cheerleaders together, you know, just doing stuff, you know, to be happy and having kids doing some productive kinds of things rather than getting out and carjacking themselves and other things that they're doing now, you know, and exposing them to, to the drug world, you know.

But that wasn't even--. Nothing like that was going on when we were outside at that time. And through the process of that and with my connection at the Y, you know, if someone couldn't get Christmas, their kids' Christmas out of layaway, it was nothing for me to get on the phone and call some folks down at the Salvation, Ed Schells. They'd call the folks at the Y, call the folk at, you know, Council on Aging. And, you know, just around because we knew folk there and knew they, you know I need five dollars and this kind of thing, you know. And we would help the individual to get the children's Christmas out of layaway.

We worked very closely with my church, Nazareth First Baptist. And so we were there when folk didn't have enough food and this kind of thing. We could get them food and, you know.

So your fingers, my fingers was kind of on the real pulse in everybody's pie up in the community so that if someone came to me with a problem we'd help them work it out, you know. Hey, it's not so bad. Let me see what I can do and we can work it out. You know, if you didn't have any clothes, okay. You know, sometimes you don't have to, you know, people don't have to come to you, you can see, you know, for yourself.

And I always had that keen eye looking in--. If I was ever in a position where I saw some mother, especially a single mother, wasn't able to provide, you know, very well for her children. I've often had the staff here just, you know, I know this family and I know the mother can't do this and let's do Christmas for them, you know. And the staff here would come up and buy Christmas for kids and we've come up with, you know, outfits and clothes and food, you know, just with the staff here. And I say--. I come in with tears in my eyes, you know, and they, they say we'd better start digging. And we, you know, we come up with something for them, you know, we would give them their Christmas, you know.

And, to see--. I remember one Christmas one of the staff members here and her husband said, well I'll get him a bicycle, Ana Gill and E. V. And she got him that bicycle and she said, and Gill said

I've got to go with him to see his face on that when he sees it, you know. And up the mountainside (unclear), you know. And when he saw that bicycle I don't know who cried the most he or Gale, you know. You know, just to see that, you know, that surprise on his face. He had no idea. His mother didn't know we were going to get it. But I knew him. He had been to the house and we'd sat and talk and he let me know what his wishes were, you know, just talking, you know. And right now I see him. He, he's a father now. God, seventeen and a daddy. But, you know, he is working. He's working with Domino's Pizza, delivering pizzas. And I'm so proud of him. And every time I see him he always reminds me of, you know, my bicycle, you know, and that kind of thing.

So when you--. Those are the kinds of rewards that I, you know, that I, you know. Just to see a kid come up and say, hey, Miss Phyllis, you know. So you know you've, you know, you've helped a kid. And, you know, he could be somewhere, you know. It could be worse but you let them know that hey, all you do is seek out somebody, you know, and let somebody--. I'm here or let them know that I was there to do stuff for them, you know.

SR: You've referred to yourself twice now as sort of a social worker.

PS: Yeah, well, yeah, I'm kind of sort of, whatever, whatever you call it.

SR: When you were in school what, did you have that sort of thing in mind?

PS: No. You know it's funny that you should mention that. We're in the process of getting ready to celebrate our second alumni reunion, Stevensly High School alumni reunion. It's no longer on the hill.

SR: I saw that in the paper.

PS: Yes. And so we're in the process of having a second celebration. It's really great, we think.

And so some of the things, some of the members of my class and some of the other class members are asking for their school record, you know. And, so it, since Stevensly closed I think the records have passed from one school to the next school to the next school, you know. So now they're housed at the Asheville Middle School on South French Broad. And so I asked for my, for my file. And so I read it off. And I got it in--. Oh, it's just amazing. And it's fun. The first grade through the twelfth, you know. So it's very interesting that you, funny that you should ask that. Apparently, from what some of the remarks that the teachers have made there I guess I was one of those people that was always there to help somebody, you know, always doing stuff for somebody else.

SR: And that showed up in your school records?

PS: Yeah. And one of the teachers said, you know, potential leadership or shows leadership or something like that. I don't know. I just sort of scanned over it. I haven't really had a chance to look at it. But, some of the people were looking at it over to the house the other

night and they were just laughing at some of the remarks. And so apparently, I guess that was one of the things I was destined to be, you know, to help people because if I can I will.

SR: Were, did you feel you were preparing for a certain kind of work when you were in high school?

PS: Well, I think along with that was where our teachers were helping. I, you know, when they ask if, you know, what you want to be I think when I graduated high school for some reason or other my mother's best friend and her daughter had gone to Cleveland, Ohio. And they went into the beauty cultural, you know, they were doing, went to beauty school. And I said, well, I want to be a beautician or a barber. Now, why I thought I want to do that is the only reason. I don't know, you know. I don't know. But I assume that's why I had that in my mind because in my yearbook it said I wanted to be a barber. So, and I did, I did go to Cleveland to, to pursue that.

But then all of our instructors at that time had asked, I mean at Stevensly High School, encouraged us--. I was an honor student and, you know, all that kind of stuff. But they made sure that we were prepared for college whether you wanted to go or not, you know. If you had that potential and you made good grades and stuff they saw to it that we took the college preparatory, you know, classes so that.

So I said, well, I didn't know if I wanted to go to college or not. So, I'm not sure if it was Mr. Reynolds or Miss Myrtle Lumley, one of the two of them encouraged me. Well, you know, you get prepared.

I think it was Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Geraldine Kennedy because she was our (unclear) and she told several of us, you know, who were potential good--. Well, we were good students, to take courses, you know, whether you want to go to college or not because you might change your mind.

And I'm glad they did because I was out of school about a year and I got a scholarship to Knoxford College. And even though--. I graduated in '57 and so I was feeling like, well, I'm just glad I'm out of school. I don't know whether I'm going--. If I had to get through I didn't know if I wanted to go to college or not. And so I went to Cleveland, stayed up there about three months with the, with the thought of perhaps going to barber school but that, you know--. I don't even think--. I think I just looked at it and that was about all, you know.

And then my mom called and said you got this scholarship. You're going to school, you know. And my father, I think, wanted me to go to A & T and he was encouraging me for that. But at the time, my husband, who was my boyfriend at that time was at A & T and I didn't think that was a good idea because I didn't go where he was. I came back home and with that help I packed up and got my school stuff together and went to Knoxford College.

SR: Had you applied for a scholarship?

PS: No. I hadn't applied nothing. I knew nothing about Knoxford College, nothing. I think from my coach. I played basketball and I

was a pretty good basketball player. And so I think through that--. And then apparently they had scouts, you know, to come up. And I did play a little intermural basketball.

At that time girls, you know, women they didn't have any--. Women's basketball was just a pastime. You know, it's like a floor show before the big game for the guys, you know. But, so we--. But I didn't think--. I didn't even pursue that. I majored in physical education and minored in biology. But, we came home and went to school. Went there, came home and off I went to college.

SR: And how was it?

PS: Knoxford College? It was an experience, you know. I was there for about two and a half years. I liked it. It was my first experience of having a white instructor, you know. Mostly it was a predominantly black school. And, you know, that was a little strange.

I had never had a white teacher, instructor before. And I don't ever recall having a bad experience with, you know, racial problems or anything. Even though we went to segregated schools and we had to pass by Randolph School because I lived in the area called--. It was on Morrow Street but we called it Stump Town.

SR: I remember that.

PS: Yeah. And so we had to pass by Randolph School to get to Hill Street School and so that was--. We never really gave that a thought, you know, about, you know, passing the school and everything, you

know, we just went to school, you know. I guess we accepted, you know, they had their schools and we had ours, you know. But I never, we never had--. I can't recall ever having an interracial bad experience.

Maybe, I--. One little something when I was on the bus. I caught the bus one day and so then at that time we were to go to the back of the bus. We sat at the back of the bus. And so there were no seats available so I sat, you know, in a seat, you know. And it just so happened that it was next to a young white girl that was a basketball player at Asheville High School, Lee Edwards, Lee Edwards. And I knew she played ball because, you know, we kind of kept up with each other and stuff. So we always wanted to play Lee Edwards or some of the whites because they were good company. And our girls' basketball team was very good at Allen High School and Warren Wilson. And we always wanted to because Warren Wilson had a good team and so did Allen. Now we played Allen High School but we never did get the opportunity to play Lee Edwards. And (unclear) I knew she played ball and I happen to sit down next to her. And I said, well, how's your basketball team going now, you know. And I said, you know, I saw y'all play last night. How many points did you get? Nothing, you know, she sat there like a stone like she was going to die. And so I ceased the conversation.

And I, I don't--. I can't--. I remember that but I don't remember having any feelings, you know. I just thought, well, she's

another one of those persons you got to, you know, you got to deal with. She's got a problem. And was okay with it, you know. But, but I remember, you know, being that way. Anyway, we did have to pass the school going to our school. And, you know, we just did it.

SR: Speaking of schools, I'm going to back up just a minute and ask you. I can't figure out where Stevensly was.

PS: You know where—

SR: Was it called Catholic Hill?

PS: You know where--. It's off of Valley Street. You know where Stevensly Center is?

SR: No.

PS: You know where Calvary Presbyterian Church on the top of the hill? You know where my church is, Nazareth First Baptist, up at the top of the hill there at the red light? (Unclear) You know where the new, where they're building the new garbage place down here on (unclear) Street?

SR: I was going to say is that your church—

PS: Right on top of the hill. But our school was, was where the parking lot is now as is the Stevensly Gym now, Stevensly Center. And it's a recreation center now. But where the parking lot is is where our school was.

SR: Because I saw a picture of it and I couldn't figure out where in the world it was.

PS: Yeah. We were up on the hill, up on the hill. That's still, that's still up there. The whole area has changed quite a bit but—

SR: Well, Hospitality House is in one of those churches up there on that hill. I had--

PS: Yes. It's across the street. Well, in fact--. Stevensly School, you can just look right out, right from the church you can look right into the school.

SR: Oh, okay. So, I, I do know where that is.

PS: Yeah. It's right in that area. Yeah. It's in that area.

SR: How many children were there in your family? You said you—

PS: There's just two. I have a brother older than myself, just, and me. And, he's, he's still around. He's, he's doing great. He's had some--. But, he's, he's, he was four years older than I was.

SR: And, were there--. Do you think you got your attitudes and your interest in helping people from your family?

PS: I think pretty much so. My mom was very much a, you know, person to get out there and do stuff. I think, from what I can understand from others and from what I can remember, my family was always, was sort of the pillar of the community kind of thing, you know.

My father was a high school graduate and he worked for Southern Railway. And so at that time, you know, that was middle class kind of folk. And he got a car every year, you know, that kind of--. And, here again, our house was the, was the center. You know we didn't have a center, you know. And as we grew older we did carve out a place that we called the Hollow. It's where--. You know where Martha's Center is?

SR: Um-hmm.

PS: And, you know where the ballpark is?

SR: Um-hmm.

PS: We used to call that the hollow. We would go down there and it was surrounded by houses and, you know, hills and everything. And we would have to beat our path. This time of year we'd all, all of us would get on our blue jeans and--. And the girls were just sitting up there keeping the boys company. You know, and the guys, were just, you know, cutting a path down to, down in the hollow. They'd cut the grass around and my daddy would help. You know he got us a basketball equipment and showed us how to, you know, put it up. He put it up and all that kind of stuff. He was a good guy. And, so that's where we, we--. That was our entertainment place.

But my house was like right there in the center of what we called the flat. And my dad and I played horseshoes and we had, you

know, all that kind--. He would get all that kind of junk for us and stuff, so--.

And my mom was the kind of person that, you know, she was straight from the shoulder with the guys. You know she would tell them how to protect themselves, you know. You know, my brothers she'd get them all in there. They call her Miss Adeline.

SR: Miss Adeline.

PS: Miss Adeline. And Davy Jones, who was the director of the housing authority, he has vivid memories of my mom because he used to come and talk to her all the time. Yeah. And we all grew up together, Officer Watts and his wife and Carolyn and Barbara, Preston Dorce, who's now a policeman down in Atlanta, Georgia. There were a bunch of us down in there and (unclear). And, so we all grew up together. And Officer Watts just recently retired.

SR: I saw that in the paper.

PS: Did you see that in the paper? Yeah. He, he's a great, great person. But all those guys used to come. And we had steps and they would sit down on the steps. And one of them would be at the top and she would just talk. And then she'd have time for the girls, you know.

And so, you know, and then she, I remember we said we wanted to have us a little social club. And so she said fine. Y'all can meet up here. And then we got one of the other girl's parents to sort of be our advisor. You know, so anyway, we'd meet at my house.

So anyway, we had a big wide basement downstairs, you know. And then my dad used to--. He was a fisherman. He loved to fish. And at time he would—it's funny--. He made frankels. The things that, you know, you put in the water. He had all the equipment. He melted and all this. He had all that equipment in the basement. And all of the fellows the men around used to like to fish they would come up there. They'd set a time when he was off on Saturday because he would work four days and be home two days or this kind of thing. He would go out, you know. But when he was home they would have a time down there. You know, probably had them a little moonshine or something, you know. But he, he's, he was a--. They made those things down there so--. It was sort of a hubbub. There was always something going on in my house.

And then as we grew older, rather than have us going out Halloween night--. My birthday was in October, so she would always have my birthday on Halloween, you know. And all the kids would be there and it kept us out of trouble, you know. We'd pull down the beds because we had a little, I think, a little four-room house, you know. And we'd pull the bed down out of the bedroom and put it out on the porch or somewhere and throw all the furniture back and she'd have hot dogs and hot chocolate and stuff and we would have a ball. That's where we'd have our—

SR: (Unclear)

PS: Yeah.

SR: Did your mother work out of the home?

PS: Yeah. She worked as a maid. She, she did day work. You know, did day work for Miss Woods, Miss Devinish, Miss Campanell and all these little old ladies.

SR: Now were your parents from Asheville?

PS: My father--. Well, my father was from Brevard. My mother was from Anderson, South Carolina. So, I don't think there was neither one of them was native Asheville. My brother and I were the only one out of the family, you know, born and reared here.

SR: So maybe your father's work brought them here?

PS: No. No, my, my grandmother married again. She married my, my grandfather. Well, he was my daddy's stepfather but he was the only granddaddy we knew. You know he raised him. And, so I think she married--. I'm not sure how they journeyed from Brevard here. But I think she married him and then he brought them to Asheville when my daddy was a young man. He had a brother and a sister. There was three of them on my father's side. And so they came here.

My father went to school here. He went to elementary school and finished Stevensly. I, I have his diploma. I have his diploma and mine. And so, you know, they attended that. But he was born in Brevard. My father was born in Brevard.

SR: Did you know--? Did you know all of your grandparents?

PS: Yes. Well, I knew---. Yeah. I knew my mother's mother. She just recently died about five years ago, and my father's mother. Yeah. I knew both my grandmothers. And, of course, the other, my stepfather--. He might have been my daddy's stepfather, but he was just granddaddy to us. He was the only granddaddy I knew. So, yes, I had, you know, I did have the privilege of knowing the three of them.

SR: Did you know your great-grandparents?

PS: No. My great-grandmother on my mother's side was an Indian. I do know that. She was, she was an Indian from, from--. She was Cherokee. And any more information than that I don't have. But I do know she was a full-blown Cherokee.

SR: That was your father's--?

PS: Yeah, my father's mother's mother, my great-grandmother.

SR: Are you interested in that history, that family history?

PS: Not really, you know. I thought several times I thought of trying to go out in Brevard. In fact, we did go out in Brevard and try to get some information about my father. But the records burned, the courthouse burned down or something, so we couldn't trace anything.

I think that's the other thing I'm going to do is look, get my father's records and see if they have my father's records. He graduated in 1935 from Stevensly High School. So, you know, I'm

going to see if I can get that information and records to him. And that, that might lead us.

But, no, I haven't really looked at seriously doing anything like that. You know it had gone through my mind. But I think at some point they had--. We got cousins and stuff here. There was some property that was in question in Brevard. And it being heir property, but, you know, there was this tax thing and the whole nine yards. So my cousin—well, she's like my second cousin—was going to pursue it. I told her, you know, whatever, if you need me to do anything. But you have my blessing.

SR: So that's not something you cared to follow up on.

PS: No. Not on my father's--. Now some of my mother's folks are--. She still has two sisters and a brother living in South Carolina. And, so we do keep in touch with them and go down there about every summer, you know, every, twice, two or three times a year. Stay like weekends and visit and like that.

SR: Neither of your parents are living?

PS: No.

SR: When, when you think back to your, like your school career and all the places you've worked and so forth, who have been the people who affected you? Who have been--? Who would you call a mentor?

PS: My mom mostly.

SR: Your mother?

PS: Yeah, my mama. She was so good and just--. She, she was not a strong disciplinarian, but you sure knew how to stay, you know, you knew your place. Okay? And I was one that had a tendency to be, that could be a little stubborn sometimes. And she helped that a lot, you know.

But, I remember getting a couple of good little lickings, you know. And I think, you know, had I got them now they might call it child abuse. But, I remember doing a couple of things, little antics. And she was--. I remember one of the tortures. She would make us go get our own switch, you know. You go out there. You go get me a switch. You're going to get whipped.

And I think one of the ones I remember mostly is she used to give us, I think, like she would give us thirty-five cents on Sunday. A quarter was to put in church and you could spend the dime. You know my granddaddy had a little sweet shop. He had a little one it was called Howard's Sweet Shop and he kept all kind of stuff. And that's the reason I don't have any teeth today. He used to give me all this candy and stuff. But, and then one day this--. They used to have a (unclear) where they called all day suckers. And they cost like fifteen cents, I think. And at that time that was a whole lot of money for a sucker. And I wanted me one of those all day suckers. And so I got it. And so one of the guys knew I didn't put my money in church.

And he went and he told my brother. And my brother went home and told it. And my mother liked to skin me alive. Told me that I gave you that money to put in church and you don't take the Lord's money, you know.

And so she whipped me and I sat--. We had a great big old green chair in living room. I never will forget. And she whipped me and I sat down in that chair and I, there was this guy (unclear) and I jumped up and down and I started screaming and yelling, I'm going to tell my grandmother, you know. And I ran out in the street and I told my daddy's mother because she lived up the street from us. I ran and told my grandmother. And my mother came out there with, she was in her gown still, and she whipped me every step of the way. She said I don't care who you're going to tell you don't do that. Needless to say, I did that no more, you know. But, she, you know, she didn't whip us much. She always--.

One good thing about my mom, she always allowed us an opportunity to go, to venture out. And we had an opportunity to go into Girl Scouts. And, of course, and at that time my father was a Boy Scout leader. He was running those kind of things, you know. And, as I said, he was sort of a pillar of the community.

But he, along with Mr. Walter Math, and Mr. Clatt Waters, and Brother Math--. I wish he would--. He was, he really impressed my brother. I think he was really good for those guys during that time as a Scout leader. And, you know, he just has not got his dues in my

opinion for, for the help that he gave those young black boys back then. But my father was a part of that.

And any time we had an opportunity to travel, you know, like go on a bus or our church--. My granddaddy would, every summer would take us to a zoo somewhere, you know, like to Knoxville or just somewhere, you know. And it wouldn't cost him maybe like three or four dollars or something like that. If she didn't have the money, I remember she would borrow it from one of the ladies that she worked for. And she, you know, allowed us to go out and do things.

And she trusted us, you know. That's one thing that I remember her telling me, and I instill it in my kids, and it sure worked, you know, is that, you know, hey, you can go anywhere. You can do whatever you want to. You know how to act. You know how to, you know, what to do. You know as long as you don't mess up, you know. Now if anything happens to your going about and my, you know, putting, you know, the skates on you or taking them off is going to be because you did it, you know, because I'm getting you, I'm working hard and giving you the money. You know how to act. You know what to do, you know. And I expect you to behave. And we never had any problem, you know.

We, we went anytime it came in, and especially with the schools. You know how the schools are. Every year you would go on a little field trip, you know. We'd get to Lanketer Caverns or to

Cherokee or, you know, all the places of interest, you know. And I remember—

[Recording abruptly stops and then resumes.]

SR: So it sounds to me like you got your values mainly from your family.

PS: Yeah. Yeah. I would think so. And then we were--. My grandfather and mother we were great church workers. In fact, our family literally built Welfare Baptist Church there. And we have pictures of my father on the roof and, you know, this kind of stuff. My brother has them. I had hoped that I had gotten those but they kind of got away from me. But where we were actually build the church. And my grandmother was the mother of the church for years and my grandfather was always the head deacon. And so we were always involved in church.

At that time church was our, you know, that was one of our social places, you know. We would have dinner on the grounds and we'd have all day singing and, you know, and just all kind of activities were there. And, of course, that's where you met the boys and (unclear) and things, you know, the girls. And so we were, we were very active in church.

I started in the choir there. And then I think that's--. My mother liked the music and my father did, too, so I've always kind of been musically inclined. And that was also brought out in my records which surprised me.

So we were, you know we were involved with the church. So, I got some real strong values from the church through that religious background of, you know, right from wrong and this kind of thing.

And I don't see much of that happening now, you know. We also, we were supported in the school system. Not only did--. In the school we were allowed to, you know, say bible verses and we were allowed to discuss our religion and etcetera without any kind of intimidation on anybody else, so--. And I think that's the fault--. We, we, we maybe have crippled our young people now in the reason that they don't have the values, you know. You see some kids now that wouldn't think nothing of cutting your neck off or blowing you away, you know. Would think nothing of helping you, you know. I've even see with some of my kids, I say, why don't ya'll get out there and help each other. Shoot, she didn't help do nothing, you know, why should I help her. You know that kind of attitude, you know.

We would talk to, you know, you help somebody in spite, you know. I remember my mother when someone had to go to the hospital and they lived across the street from us. She had about eight children. Each time she went to the hospital it was nothing for my mother to go down there and, you know, get the kids, feed them, make sure everybody's in the bed and, you know, they had food for the next day. And we just, you just did stuff, you know.

And at that time I think our house was about the only house that had an indoor bathroom. But my father also rigged up a system

where you could have water on the outside of the house, you know. And I don't have the--. He was a, he was a--. My father was a smart, smart man. And, you know, he wrapped the pipes to keep them from freezing in the wintertime, you know, like this, this, this blizzard we had not too long ago. And people froze, literally freeze all over the neighborhood, but our water. They could come. He fixed this little pipe right there on the, you know, faucet on the side of the house so that if anybody's water froze they were welcome to come and get water, you know. And, you know, that kind of thing.

And I thought, you know, you'd think about that now, you know. And it was nothing, you know. I mean it was just, that was just, you just did that, you know. You had--. You took care of each other. You know if somebody--. If my daddy would paint his house every year, ah, guys would come up and he'd have, he would have especially younger guys, he'd say, well, here, I'll give you a dollar, you know. Give you a dollar and a half, two dollars, come help me paint my house. And that's where a lot of them, Rupert Roof, Aner Roof, Davy Jones, and all those guys, they would come and help him paint. I made fun out of it, but they did learn how to paint, you know. They learned how to paint and learned to make money that way, too.

So, you know, you just, you just did stuff. Anybody had a problem, you know, they had an ox in the ditch you'd help them get it out, you know. And you just did stuff like that, you know. Somebody got sick you just fixed food and you took it down there,

you know. Somebody was not well or, you know, we'd take you to the doctor. My daddy did. You know, we need, need someone else to go help at that time bring in coal and kindling because you know we had them coal stoves. You know you just, you just did it.

SR: And you don't see that happening now.

PS: No, no. You know and that's--. I would think now because lots of folk perhaps may know me and, and know that that's my whatever, it's my calling or whatever it is, you know, if I hear of anybody experiencing some kind of difficulty or having some problem, if somebody's in the hospital or something, how are you. I'll be by to see you if you need anything. Sometimes if they're home we don't ask. You take orange juice. You take apple juice. You take stuff. You don't ask, you know. You know, you know what I mean?

And they may not--. People won't tell you, you know, I need this, I need that. But I think nothing of stopping at Little Pig's or somewhere and getting some chicken and, you know, fixing a macaroni dish or something and take it over there. You just do it. I mean, you know, whether they--. You know that's just what was instilled into me through my mother, you know.

So she, she was certainly one of those persons that I would think was very instrumental in helping me become whatever it is I am, I guess. And I think another one is a teacher, Miss Cooper, my first grade teacher, certainly, Miss Daniels who's dead. Miss Cooper's still alive. Miss Wilkins who's passed, her husband owns

Wilkin-Harts Funeral Home. She was certainly somebody that I looked up to.

In my high school days, Miss Lucille Burton who certainly--. And, especially, Miss Gladys Forney. She was really, I think really molded me in my senior high school because when she first started there I didn't like her. You know how you go through that. And now to this day there's nothing I wouldn't do for Miss Forney. She is--. She's certainly the, you know, as far as molding me, I would say, in my adult life would be Miss Gladys Forney.

And then from then on from there I would certainly say Miss E. Thelma Caldwell who was the first executive director at the YWCA. They certainly helped. And Mrs. Hall, Miss Julia Hall. You know these were people who--. And Miss Ollie McCool Reynolds, you know. These were people who took you under their wing, you know. And, and just would talk to you and tell you things and would take you places.

You know if there was a--. And, here again, as I say I've always been interested in music. If there was a, you know, a good movie, a musical or something that Mrs. Reynolds felt, she would tell me, now Phyllis, you go see this. And she would tell the class, you know, go see this. And I would go. And it would just so happen that when I'd go she'd be there. And then we'd get extra marks for it or something, you know. But I liked it, you know. But there were--. You know, they kept us involved.

And I guess one man that I really—in addition to my father—is Mr. Washington. Ed Washington was our basketball coach and he was really a true, true, dear, dear person. He was somebody that was always special in my life. And Croftmore—

SR: Who was this person?

PS: Ed Washington. Ed Washington. He was my basketball coach when I was in high school. He was really--. He was somebody we could go to and talk to and everything, you know. He was that male model, you know, that some of us would go to, as I said, in addition, to my dad. He was a good father.

I remember my mom wouldn't miss a basketball game. They were involved in PTA. You know they would come to PTAs and stuff. And so I think that may be a lot. They didn't miss a PTA meeting, keep involved.

In fact, I'm doing things with my grandson now, you know, I'm involved with him and helping him, you know, do some things because they can get pretty wild. And he's my son's son. And his mother is not here and he's staying with his other grandmother. And so his grandmother was having some problems. So I try to stay in there and help mold him and keep, because he's getting, growing up a little bit and kind of messing up in class. And he's an excellent student so we're trying to just mold him, you know, keep him on the right track.

But, those are folks that you don't, don't forget about. This is it. That was my house. And you see up underneath there, the porch, that's where they would come and, and, and down there. And my father would play checkers and whatever, make those things, you know. And this is a scene from over there.

That was where, this is where Arthur Park. I mean, excuse me. You know where the center is? That's, that's how it used to look originally. They tore all of that out and the center (unclear). You can't even begin to imagine. But those were the good old days.

We're in the process of planning now a Stump Town reunion. And a lot of folk I'm kind of in touch with--. I know just about where everybody is that lived over in Stump Town, where they're located now.

SR: Is there anything left of what you called Stump Town in terms of—

PS: Oh, the church is still there.

SR: Are there any homes?

PS: One. One. Mrs. Gladys Weatherspoon, she's been there for years. She's the only house there. But, you know, on down the street on Madison Street on out, you know, the church is still there but most of the houses are gone now.

SR: So you're planning a reunion?

PS: Yes. We're planning on having a reunion. Mostly for right now to get the folk together who are here in town, you know. Because we had, in fact, one of the gentleman that raised my children when I had to work, Brother Macavie, just passed. And he and his wife used to, you know, take care of children. And I don't know how we would have made it without him. He would keep them. I was working at American Yankee at that time. We was working shifts, you know, and they would--. She would keep them all those crazy--. In fact, she just really raised my baby almost. You know I'd go get here, you know, when I was off and all that kind of stuff. But if I was working graveyard she would say just leave them here.

SR: Were you a single parent, Phyllis?

PS: No. Well, I was a single parent, let me see, my husband and I were married about nine years. And he went to service and he just never grew up. And still hasn't grown up. But then he came back when he came out of service. He wasn't, you know, a mean person. He was just somebody that was out there. So I guess, yes, yes and no.

You know, my baby--. Trisha, who was my baby, was a year, year and a half when he left. He went to Detroit to find better things and to send for us. Of course, that never happened, you know. We still have a very good relationship, you know. I, I wouldn't let anything happen to that because I think it's very, very important that young people, children, know who their parents are. So I never went through the thing of not letting them see them.

When, in fact, my son went and stayed with him for a year. And then my daughter went up. They would go up in the summertime. You know I let them go up in the summer. You know we didn't make it but, you know, that was us. It didn't have anything to do with them, you know.

He's since back here now. And I still, we still, you know, we call each other and I see him. Of course, we graduated from high school together. So, you know, it's still--. I wouldn't allow--. I just don't think it's right even though our relationship, you know, we couldn't make it as husband and wife, you know. That we just wanted some things that, that, you know, (unclear) is all I can say. And I just couldn't deal with that. You know I didn't think it was right to try to break up the children.

SR: You really were responsible for raising them.

PS: Yes. Yes. I, I--. Yes. I, when I was in the housing development like I said for twenty years. And so, literally, yes, I guess you could say I was sort of a single parent.

SR: Well, I have just a couple more things I'd like--. You made some comments about how things have changed and how things are today. And how do things look to you in Asheville today?

PS: In reference to anything in particular or just in general?

SR: Well, how it is for people here.

PS: Well, in my opinion, you know, some things are, are what you make it, you know. You know if you're determined to, to do some things for yourself, you know, you have to make a way. Either you have to begin to do something for yourself. But in general, it's, it's a hard hill to climb, you know, in order to get in management as far as black folk and minority folk. And I think the persons who were in positions if they're leaving they're not being filled by minorities.

I'm very concerned about that and especially in the school system. The young people don't have any role models, very few. And what's happening there, you know, I just don't know, you know. Just recently there was a lot of controversy over the accelerated learning center and the fact that it was a majority of black students and who had experienced some changes in the schools, I mean, whose parents had problems in the schools, etcetera. And, you know, that they shouldn't be taken out of the mainstream of the system.

And you know, there's a lot of pros and cons for it. And I had to think very seriously about that. And I didn't even comment until I saw what was going to happen over there at that school, you know. And I'm still--. I'm feeling good about it to be very honest with you because I've been there and I've seen the change in the kids. I see them being happy. I see them doing things.

SR: Feeling better about themselves?

PS: Yes. And I see the teachers, you know, really working with the kids. And I see their enthusiasm. And I think there the teachers are feeling good because the kids are responding so positively, you know, might have one or some. But anyway, I think overall, you know, I, I think it's, you know, a good thing. Someone asked me if I was advocating a segregated school. I said, well, I don't know what I'm advocating, you know. All I know is I came from the system and we did pretty good.

And I was talking to one of the permanent lawyers that's no longer here. He's in Charlotte now. And I said you turned out pretty good. You know, you came from (unclear-background noise). You know, in some respect I think, you know, I think we need it, you know, because my black teacher didn't take no stuff. I mean you had to ante up, you know.

And just a case in point, one of my church members tell me her son has had a black teacher for the first time since he's been in the system and this is his third year. And he's a whole complete different little boy. You know, maybe it was just because of him. I don't know. But his grades are improved, his behavior--. I mean, it was like a three hundred and sixty degree turn in that kid, you know. And his mother swears it's because of the, the black experience, you know.

And so, I'm saying, what you talk about (unclear). It's because he has a, you know, maybe--. So I don't know. The only thing I know is what you could see and I see what's working, you know. There was

a lot, like I said, a lot of controversy about that. But I said, let's, you know--. All I know is what we see is not working. Okay? So let's give us a chance for something new to see if it works, you know. You know regardless--.

I can understand the system and, you know, what the law says and all that kind of thing but that ain't working. It's just--. So, I would love to see, I don't know, something different in the system, school system, to challenge our young kids to--.

I talked to one ninth grader and her mother's a teacher over at AB Tech. I said, how are things going? She said, um. And I said, well, well, what's the deal on school? I hate school, you know.

And that just floored me. You know here's this ninth grader going to school every day and hating to go. When we were in school we got up and my mother never had to get me up. You know I got up. I had my clothes ready, my homework done and I was out the door, you know.

For instance, when there was like the blizzard that was here--. We used to have some doozies. Snow, oh, if Mr. Washington or Croftmore could get there and open up that gym we would walk to school in the snow. I never will forget running up Cortland. And we had a drugstore at the top of Martha then. We'd run in the drugstore and get warm and run to Kress's, no, Woolworth's, which is just as close.

And I'll never forget there was a real pretty lady in there named Dottie. I think she's still around here, too. And when she was made up she was so pretty. She would give us lipstick that's been broken up or something, you know. She'd sneak it to us. Oh, she was such a sweet--.

And we'd get warm in there and then we'd run around to Kress's. That was Newberry's. They had a Newberry's there. And then we'd run in and then we'd--. Some would run in Newberry's and some would run into Kress's. And then we would scoot down and run to Y My Drugstore. It used to be on the block. And then we'd stand there for a little while and get warm. And then we'd scoot to school. And it was fun. I mean it was fun. You know we would go to school in the snow.

And to hear a kid now tell me I hate school. I mean I hear it from, not only from her. You hear it from a lot of kids, you know. Something's wrong with that. You know this, to me, your school years, and especially your junior high and high school years should be some of the most important times of your life, you know.

I remember mine being a good time. The majority of folk that I've talked to who came up with us, we had a good time in school. And I don't hear kids having a good time. They're not having a good time. You know something's wrong. You know kids are failing classes, you know. Something's wrong.

And they made demands out of us. I never will forget having to miss many a lunch, you know, where we wouldn't call recess. We'd go get our lunch and them teachers making us come back and, especially math, because I was never a math student. And my teacher's making me take a test over, you know, till I passed.

SR: If you could change anything in the city now, what would you change?

PS: I don't know. I'd have to give that a whole lot of thought, you know. I, I would certainly like to see more neighborhood-ness, you know, whatever that means. I think, you know, when—and especially as far as the minority folk, you know—when, when our neighborhoods were done away with through urban development or whatever and just completely demolished and put people all over the city and just broke up those neighborhoods--. It's almost like breaking up a home to me. I would certainly like to see that happen, some of that happen again where you had your neighborhoods and people got back to caring about each other, you know, people caring about each other, what happens to them, you know. And it'd be a lovely thing.

Even though, to me, you know, we had our white community and black community, the people still cared about you, you know. I remember that the Lackeys who lived up in there had a service station. And they were always good, you know, nice to people, you know. I say nice. Hey, how you doing? Just caring conversation. I'm not talking about giving kind. But they would always take time to

speak and talk to you and, you know, treat you like a neighbor and a friend, you know. And the Whiteheads, yeah, just folk that I can remember that was always good to us. I want to say just nice, just nice, nice caring folk. So I guess, you know, I would like to see, you know, that neighborhood just coming back, you know.

Certainly would like to see something different in the school system, you know, be it more minority teachers or, you know, that special program, whatever it is that's up there in the sky, you know. Please come down and help, you know.

The political system in my opinion has improved. I'm not a political person. I've never been in that arena just to be on top of who's running and what they're about and what their platform or whatever is. But I've never been in that political arena, but I'm certainly proud of what I've seen happen as far as getting more people in positions.

SR: Well, we have a black mayor.

PS: Yeah. Yeah. That's one possibility there. And then, of course, you know with--. I certainly would like to see some changes in the morale of some of (unclear) people, you know. What's happening, you know, more involvement with the churches. Something, you know, because the--. It's, it's just so many young people, they're out there on drugs and young girls are coming up pregnant and half the mama's not at home. And just that whole conglomerate, you know. And just, something needs to be done.

I'd really like to see something. You know, more activities for our kids. And the whole, you know, all the kids, black kids and the white kids, you know. There's just, you know, very little, if anything, for them to do, you know, that's wholesome. I'd love to see the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts be more active, you know. I know they're out there but nothing like it "used to be". And things move on, but something fell down by the wayside. Some of the ingredients are missing, you know, that was out there that you don't see a lot of.

And the majority of our young people who are finishing school aren't coming back this way, you know. And I'm not encouraging them. You know if you can find something better down east or up north, you hang in there and get it and stay, you know. Because, you know, some of the pay, we have people come back here, you know, they don't want to pay them anything, you know. You don't have any experience, you know. They're getting mad and, you know, start them out ten, twelve thousand dollars a year is absolutely ridiculous, you know. So, I, you know--. Now some of them come back and are making it. You know making it pretty well.

SR: Well, Phylllis, thank you so much. I think we (unclear). I surely do appreciate your helping us out here.

PS: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW