

SHIRLEY EDGERTON

NAACP Oral History Project, 11/21/2017

Audited May 29, 2018, JM

Q: So I'm Judith Monachina, and I'm the Director of the Housatonic Heritage Oral History Center at Berkshire Community College, and we're working with Len Kates and other members of the NAACP. We're working on an oral history project of the NAACP, and I think you are our seventh interviewee, seventh narrator. So I'm interviewing Shirley Edgerton, and we're going to learn a lot about your community activities and other things.

With us in the room also is Wendy Germain, who is on the sound here. She's doing the sound for us, and behind her is Chaquoya Johnson, who is a student, a sociology student, at Berkshire Community College. She's a student, and she's taking this sociology class, and as part of that class she's doing oral history. And Len Kates, who is the liaison to the project at the NAACP, he's at the NAACP. I guess that's it. We're in the *Berkshire Eagle* Studio, and it's November 21, 2017, and so everybody in the room, do we have permission to record?

ALL: Yes.

SHIRLEY: Sounds good.

Q: So it's a biographical interview, so we're going to go more or less chronologically, Shirley, but it doesn't work. We'll pop around a little bit, but we'll try to sort of document things more or less in the way that they happened. So the first question: Can you tell me where you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

SHIRLEY: Okay. So I was born in a very small town called Hemingway, South Carolina, and it was not named after Ernest Hemingway. I was raised by my maternal grandmother. My parents were 16 years of age when I was born, and in the south, during that particular time period, it wasn't the most positive thing to have a child out of wedlock and as a teenager. It's still not an acceptable behavior today, but it certainly wasn't seen as a positive for my mother.

So my grandmother was very religious and a very strong woman. Her husband had died when her youngest child I think was—they had eight children, and her youngest child, I think, was five years of age when her husband died. He was a mechanic, and she utilized the insurance money to purchase a home in what was regarded as the black middle-class community, at that time, in our community. Basically, the educators lived there, funeral home director, and folks of that professional ilk.

Then my mother had another child a year later, and so my grandmother decided she needed to head north to work and to help take care of us, and she did that. I started school when I was three years of age. I told people I repeated kindergarten for about three years, because there was no daycare. My uncle was a schoolteacher, and because of that he carried me to school every day, and I was in kindergarten.

Q: So were you still in Hemingway?

SHIRLEY: Yes, still in Hemingway, yeah, because, again, there was no babysitter. There was no daycare, and so extended family is extremely important, and that was the decision, that I would go to school with him every day, and that's what happened for about three years. And then by the time I was nine years of age and my

sister was eight, my grandmother made a decision that we headed north, part of the Great Migration.

Q: Can you tell us about when that was?

SHIRLEY: That must have been about early '60s, and the thought of the big city, the promise of what could happen for families of color. My grandmother, at that point, was working, as they said then, in white folks' houses in the south, but, like I said, she was always upwardly mobile. Religion and education were paramount in our household. You had to go to church, and you had to go to school. There was no discussion there. So we grew up understanding that those were two things that we had to do.

Q: What kind of church? What was your church like?

SHIRLEY: Methodist. I grew up as a Methodist. So when she made a decision to move to New York, because my mother was there, at that point, in Westchester County, in Mt. Vernon, she had married, had other children, and was pretty well established, so we moved there. My mother's oldest siblings, younger siblings, at that time, were pretty much all young adults.

Basketball is a theme that also runs in my family. My uncle, who was a schoolteacher, he went to college on a basketball scholarship. I had another uncle who was an outstanding basketball player also. So we moved to New York, lived with my mom.

Q: Was it Mt. Vernon?

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: Mt. Vernon?

SHIRLEY: Mt. Vernon, New York, lived with my mom for a period of time, and my grandmother settled in, found a place, and a church, and I pretty much grew up in Mt. Vernon; stayed there until I was. Well, actually what ended up happening, I graduated from Mt. Vernon High School, but my grandmother died when I was 13 years of age, so my youngest aunt, I think a year before that, had married, and her and her husband lived in the South Bronx, so they gave me a choice to move with them, or I could have moved in with my mother. But I didn't really have much of a relationship with my mother, being that I was with my grandmother, and that particular aunt pretty much all of my life.

So I opted to go live with my aunt, and, at that time, my mother had already divorced and was having some alcohol struggles and financial struggles and so on. And I was pretty much very integrated into the church, Methodist church, again, because that was the mindset of my grandmother. So I moved to the South Bronx and maintained my back and forth between South Bronx and Mt. Vernon with this life my grandmother had basically created for us there.

My pastor and his wife became mentors for me, spent a lot of time and energy on me. I traveled with them to conferences. They introduced me to just some fascinating things in terms of culture. There were other women in the church. This was a very large Methodist church, and there were a lot of professionals of color, and there was a clear theme that you embrace young people and you mentor them. I traveled, because of them. I was exposed to leadership training. As a matter of fact, I became the president of the Regional Youth Council for the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York.

Q: So now when you say you were going back and forth between Mt. Vernon and the South Bronx. So you were living in the South Bronx, and what were you still doing in Mt. Vernon when you went back and forth?

SHIRLEY: Because I was so integrated into the community, I wanted to continue the high school there, so my aunt and uncle approved of that, and everybody figured whatever needed to make it happen, they would make it happen, so they taught me how to travel on the subway from the South Bronx into Mt. Vernon, and then because of how involved I was in the church, I continued that relationship, and all my friends were there. So all I basically did in the South Bronx was sleep there, because my life was still in Mt. Vernon.

Q: So the church, it was a big church.

SHIRLEY: Yes. Yes.

Q: Can you sort of describe it in any way?

SHIRLEY: Well, the AME Zion denomination, it's African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Episcopal in terms of the leadership or the bishop; Methodist, because methodical in thought; African is because of our heritage; and Zion was to distinguish us from the AME church. The AME and the AME Zion denominations were founded a year apart. The AME Zion denomination was founded in New York City. The AME denomination was founded in Philadelphia.

Q: Interesting. I didn't know that. So it was a big church.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: This is the pastor who was your mentor, pastor and wife.

SHIRLEY: Yes, especially his wife. I was very close to his wife. I became their babysitter. I think, in some ways, sometimes that was an excuse for them to give me money, because they would pay me to babysit, but yet they were always doing all these things for me, but they were paying me to babysit their young children.

Q: So they took you under their wing.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely.

Q: Can you remember their names?

SHIRLEY: Oh, yes. I'm still in contact with them. Shirley Jackson, her and I share the same first name, and she was just a—she is, not was— a very smart woman, very open and loving and caring, structured, disciplined. I remember an incident when we went to a conference in Buffalo, New York, and by then I was really feeling myself. I first arrived in New York, I was painfully shy, but through the nurturing and the exposure, my confidence clearly grew, and I got a little cocky.

So we were at this conference in Buffalo, New York, and we were visiting Niagara Falls. A part of the grooming in the church is if they identify you as a potential leader, then there's this expectation that you keep moving as an adult within the denomination. So there was this conversation about me becoming a young adult and running for these major offices in the denomination. So we were at the Falls with a group of us, and I'm bragging to them, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that," and everybody's kids, they're all looking at me, because I'm being cocky, and my pastor's wife, she looks at me and she's like, "Shirley?" "What?" She's like, "Pop," [ph], just took her hand and just kind of bashed me like that, and I was like, "What?"

She's like, "Shirley, listen to what you're saying," and it was that moment, I

think one of the first moments in my life I learned about humility, because she was trying to tell me how cocky I was sounding and how arrogant I was in the conversation. I'm trying to make myself the top of the heap with the other young people there.

Q: So that's interesting. So how does that feeling sort of inform you now, the humility that you learned?

SHIRLEY: Because I'm constantly reminded that I'm doing a service, that it doesn't make me better than anyone else, but I'm fulfilling my life goal and my purpose, and so there's no reason for me to feel somehow that I'm better than anyone else. This is my job. This was my responsibility. That's why I'm on this planet, and that keeps me grounded.

Q: When did you sort of learn that? When did that occur to you that this was your sort of calling?

SHIRLEY: My calling?

Q: Yeah.

SHIRLEY: Because, well, that's a good question, because I think two places: the church, because that was a constant message, humility and service; and then I attended Atlanta University School of Social Work. W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the professors, back in the day, so, of course, I was exposed to a lot of his teachings. I was in Atlanta, so I had an opportunity to hear a lot of the black leaders. Coretta Scott King and people like that, they were constants at the Atlanta University Center, okay, Spellman on one side, Morehouse on the other, and the graduate school in the center where I was attending, at the time.

And so there is where that theme was perpetuated. The message was: you have an incredible opportunity, and it is your job now to go back to your community and serve them. That was the message, so here I heard it in church all of my life, and then now here I am in a historical black college and university, and that's the same message. So that's what I know, and that's why I have lived my life as I live it, because I believe it. I truly believe it.

Q: So you were very young when that started to become who you were.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: There may not even be a moment when you realized it.

SHIRLEY: Right.

Q: It was just in you.

SHIRLEY: Right, exactly, but then when I think about that incident, that was one of the times I can remember I was just feeling a little arrogant and a little cocky, because you guys didn't get to do this. Well, I've been here, and I traveled there. She just totally just bruised my self-esteem for that moment.

Q: How did you react?

SHIRLEY: I was like, "Miss Jackson?" I was very respectful, because, of course. But I was like, "Huh?" and the kids laughed, so they were laughing at me, so, of course, at the moment, I'm like, "Why would you do that? I didn't do anything."

Q: That's humiliating.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, which was her point.

Q: Kind of humiliating and humility.

SHIRLEY: But just incredible people, so I was extremely fortunate in my life that even though the death of my grandmother and having a point there where I wasn't sure where to go, that my life just kept moving in a very positive direction.

Q: So you were 13?

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: And this is when you decided where to go live?

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: And that was a big decision.

SHIRLEY: Major, major decision.

Q: So it seems like it's the decision that feels like it was the right one.

SHIRLEY: Oh, absolutely, . = And at that time, like I said, my mother was having some major battles with alcohol. She was separated from her husband, and life deteriorated for her as she had grown to know it. So 17, I graduated from high school, and then my uncle and aunt, whom I was living with, decided to move south, so at 16 they made that decision. My sister next to me in age decided to go with them, but, again, because of my strong involvement in the church and my school, I was playing sports, I played volleyball and basketball, and my friends, again, were all in Mt. Vernon, it's like, oh, there's no way I can do this, so I moved again with another uncle and aunt in the North Bronx.

They were living very close to Mt. Vernon, so that made it even easier for me to access my life, and so that's what I did. I lived with them for about a year, and then when I was 17, I graduated. I knew that I wanted to go to one of the city universities, because even though I had an opportunity to go to the church college, which is in

Salisbury, North Carolina, I just wasn't quite ready to leave the church and the community, so I made a decision to go to Herbert Lehman College, which is part of City University of New York, and that way I could maintain my relationships at the church.

Q: Still be in the Bronx and still be close to Mt. Vernon.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: So what did you study there?

SHIRLEY: Sociology.

Q: Okay. There you go.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, studied sociology.

Q: And did you like that? I guess, because you decided on social work.

SHIRLEY: Yes, and I actually had decided on social work, but they didn't have a major, so I opted to major in sociology, and I had kind of been through a lot, in terms of my childhood, and then I saw a lot. My mother had her issues with alcohol, and I got very involved with my younger siblings. I ended up having a close relationship with their social worker. So, I think just my life and seeing so much that I decided that that's what I wanted to do.

Q: So you became sort of a helper with the young ones.

SHIRLEY: Yeah. The psychologist said - Department of Social Services, that's what they called it then, eventually took my younger siblings from my mother, and the psychiatrist had asked if I would come to a meeting. I said, sure. So basically he had explained it that my mother and I had switched roles, that I had become the mother, and my mother was behaving like a child basically. So I was running to the schools trying to

represent my siblings, helping them with their work, trying to buy things, because I was going to school in the daytime, working as a waitress at night in Mt. Vernon.

Q: You were busy.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, and then I had my own apartment. When I graduated, I got my own apartment.

Q: So you were really a grownup early.

SHIRLEY: Yes, absolutely.

Q: And yet you still managed to go to school.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: It could have been easy to just say, I've got to go work, but this was something important.

SHIRLEY: And then the social worker helped me with that, because I thought about, I contemplated not going to college to take my siblings on, and to have them live with me, but she convinced me that I could be of more use to them if I continued with my dream to go to college, and that's what I did.

Q: That's a really important conversation that you had.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely.

Q: So then you decide to go to graduate school.

SHIRLEY: Yes, right, because I wanted to be a social worker, so I went to Atlanta University. I got my first job. I think a friend of mine from the church, his mom—as a matter of fact, he's a bishop today in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church—helped me to get my first position, first job, and I worked in a health center as a medical receptionist or something. I'd take people's cards, medical cards, when they'd

come in, so I was doing that, because initially I felt like I couldn't find a position. I eventually became a caseworker, and then I realized my mentors, again, told me, "Well, you need to get your Master's if you're going to be in social work," and then that's why I decided to go to Atlanta University School of Social work.

Q: So how'd you decide on the school?

SHIRLEY: Because by then, I really wanted to have that HBCU experience, and my mentors had that experience. Some of them were from the south who were in the church, and I started doing the research, and Atlanta University had this incredible history, and Du Bois had been there, and it was just one of those places just that had all this great leadership. So I decided I wanted to go there. It was an incredible experience. That was another eye-opener, being in Atlanta, all that richness around history and culture. It's interesting the things I remember. I remember little things and each experience.

Q: Yeah. Tell us some.

SHIRLEY: I had this professor, and just like now, I'm pretty opinionated, and I was pretty opinionated back then, in terms of my development. I grew into someone who could really say what I was thinking and feeling. So we were in this class one day, and this professor, Professor Scott, I will never forget him. We were having this discussion about reconstruction period, and I was an avid reader of black history, even dabbled in a little bit about black Muslims, just kind of reading, but I would never go that way, because of my belief in the Methodist church, and also because of the way, in my opinion, the role of women, and that just wasn't acceptable to my way of thinking.

So anyway, we were having this discussion in the class, and I can't even remember what I said, but his response was like, "You know, Shirley," he said, "a few years ago, you wouldn't even be here," and, of course, I'm like, "What do you mean? What do you mean, I wouldn't be here? I have the grades." He's like, "I'm not talking about your grades." He said, "I'm talking about the complexion of your skin," and he said, "because it wasn't so long ago that only light-skinned blacks came to Atlanta University," and he got me, because it was the truth.

Q: Did you learn how they actually determined who was a light-skinned black?

SHIRLEY: Well, the paper bag, was it the brown bag test? So look at my skin and a brown bag, and I would not have passed the test, and that's basically what he was telling me that day, so it's all those little things like that.

Q: What did that shift in you? Can you sort of remember?

SHIRLEY: It was kind of a reality check of the black community. Well, now we call it colorism in terms of the conflict that occurs sometimes between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks, and it's as old as slavery. It was the great divide, the house in and the field in, so it's just been kind of a generational thing, and he kind of just hit me with it that day in class, and he was right, and it did shut me up for the moment.

Q: But not for long.

SHIRLEY: Not for long, but he was an excellent professor, because he was provocative. He would push me. He was excellent.

Q: You could stand it.

SHIRLEY: Oh, yes.

Q: You could handle his confrontation-type approach.

SHIRLEY: Yeah.

Q: So what else about the university? Can you describe what it was like physically, or was there anything about it? Did you actually live on the campus?

SHIRLEY: Yes, and the graduate students lived—our housing was about, I don't know, maybe five minutes away from the campus, so it was a part in a building; I had some great friends; students from all over the place were there. I learned a lot. Because of the fact that I had moved to the north so early, there were parts of my roots being a southerner that I had kind of missed out on, even though probably when we moved to New York when I was about nine, up until my grandmother died, I'd spend the summer months in the south, because she maintained her home. The family still has that home to this day.

I always called it the best of both worlds, but kind of having the conversations and sharing with some of my classmates, I think it gave me some more information that I might have missed out on from not being in the south full-time.

Q: So what do you think you might have missed out on?

SHIRLEY: Well, just politically and socially, how things were transitioning. I had transitioned that whole process. I consider myself as being part of one of the Great Migrations, so what was left there? How did people survive, who didn't make that decision of going for the American dream. So it was a great experience, really great.

By then, in my mind, I was already trained, that when there were opportunities to go to workshops and conferences and listen to people who had something to share, to make sure that I was there, and I did that. I joined women's groups.

Q: You just were all in.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, totally, totally focused on school. And then during that time period when I was about 18, my younger sister found our father, and that was interesting, and we had started a really close relationship with him. Him and I became, I guess when I was still in New York, just absolutely inseparable. We had such a close relationship. When I first met him, he was with his wife, and then, at some point, they had separated, so I would go over and stay with him and met my siblings that he had parented. That was great; met my grandmother. Every Monday we had this standing dinner date, so he would pick me up, and I would go.

Q: Now where were they?

SHIRLEY: This was in the Bronx. He was living in the Bronx also.

Q: That was interesting.

SHIRLEY: It was.

Q: That he was also in the Bronx.

SHIRLEY: Yes, the whole time evidently. We just didn't know it, because that was another part of the—my grandmother had these standards, and his family didn't quite meet the standards. It was like the Hatfield and the—

Q: McCoys.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, so my grandmother had moved us into this middle-class black setting, and my father's family were farmers. They weren't poor people, but they were farmers, and that just didn't count into the plan for her in terms of being upwardly mobile, education. Well, she also wasn't happy that my mother had two children by him either out of wedlock.

Q: So what's your father's name?

SHIRLEY: Samuel Burgess.

Q: And your mother's name?

SHIRLEY: Ellen Session [ph]. That's her maiden name. Green is her married name.

Q: What a life, so many chapters that just sort of—and then to learn that your father's been there all along, and you developed this relationship with him.

SHIRLEY: Uh-huh.

Q: So going back into Atlanta, did church stay with you during that time?

SHIRLEY: Absolutely, yeah. Of course, I didn't have to find it. They gave me the information before I left New York. Okay, this is where you need to go. This is the AME Zion church there, and I joined the church there under what they call Watch—what's the terminology? They might have changed it now—Watch Care, meaning that you're apart, you're temporarily apart, and you just need someone to care for your spiritual needs while you're in this area.

31:07

Q: What a nice idea.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, but that was smart on AME Zion's part, because that way they maintain their membership.

Q: Well, of course, I mean, but if you don't have a strategy for doing that, guess what? It's smart to have a strategy that's actually also kind of kind.

SHIRLEY: Yes. Yes.

Q: And helpful.

SHIRLEY: That's true. That's true.

Q: It could be something else, but it actually helps you.

SHIRLEY: And then, of course, women out of the church, some had family members there. During the holidays, I'd go back and I'd have dinner with some of the members from the church.

Q: So then you're becoming a social worker. You're in Atlanta. There must have been a few steps before you got to Pittsfield.

SHIRLEY: Oh, there were.

Q: Okay. So what happened?

SHIRLEY: A few steps. Let's see.

Q: What happens with graduation?

SHIRLEY: Well, my father, which is probably why I started to tell you this, he was 43. I had finished my first year. I was getting ready to do my internship, and he was diagnosed with cancer, and that was probably one of the only times in my life that I ever felt cheated, and I felt like I had just met this man. I had a closer relationship with him than my mother, which was really I always thought was kind of strange, but it is what it is, and it was real. I had this incredibly close relationship with him. They said I looked like him, and then he was a salesperson.

He would go to these social functions, and he would take me with him. He was a very handsome and debonair man, well dressed, so my young college friends had crushes on him, and he just thought that, he just loved that. He was a short guy, shorter than my mother. I always thought that was interesting, shorter than my mother. So when he was diagnosed with cancer, it was pretty devastating, and I just couldn't finish my internship, so I ended up back in New York, because it turned out that he was

misdiagnosed initially. By the time he went to Sloan Kettering, he was at his last stages of prostate cancer, because then he was misdiagnosed initially by the physicians that he was dealing with. So I went back to New York. That was horrendous.

Q: Now were any of your other siblings around, at that time?

SHIRLEY: Yeah. There was a brother, one of my father's children, who the two of us kind of dealt with everything, along with his mother. And it was horrible to watch him, this vibrant, handsome, outgoing man just shrivel up to someone who couldn't even go to the bathroom by himself. It was pretty bad, and he was pretty much the patriarch of his family. He had a very outgoing personality. He was a really interesting guy, really was.

So here he was 43 years of age, and he died. Then I was involved with someone out of the church, because that was one of the things that my pastor's wife told me: "You're in the church. You need to marry someone in the church." It's a message young people often get in church, and I married a minister.

Q: And where were you living, at the time?

SHIRLEY: I was still in New York. Well, I had moved back to New York, so we married and stayed in New York probably for at least three or four years. Then he went to seminary at our AME Zion College, and by then we had my oldest daughter, so we went to Salisbury, North Carolina, where he went to seminary, and I couldn't find anything in the social work field, at that point. I basically stayed home, took care of our daughter while he attended school and worked, and then was a youth pastor.

Q: So he was a youth pastor?

SHIRLEY: Yes, at one of the AME Zion churches.

Q: Near Salisbury?

SHIRLEY: Right.

Q: What is Salisbury like, Salisbury, North Carolina?

SHIRLEY: Salisbury, North Carolina, it's very small, not much there.

Q: Is that actually where the seminary is, in Salisbury?

SHIRLEY: Yes. Livingstone College is the AME Zion Church's college, and then they have a seminary, Hood Theological Seminary that's right across the street from the undergraduate campus.

Q: So this is during the '70s or the '80s?

SHIRLEY: Yeah. This was the '80s, yes, and actually I was probably bored out of my mind.

Q: But you had your kid.

SHIRLEY: Yeah. I was about to say, so I spent a lot of energy teaching her, spending time with her.

Q: What's her name?

SHIRLEY: Aquilla [ph]. Yeah, so I was kind of a stay-home mom.

Q: She lucked out.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, she did.

Q: That's kind of nice.

SHIRLEY: And we lived in the campus housing. A lot of the young ministers had campus housing, so I kind of associated with the other young ministers' wives and was learning my role as a young minister's wife. That's a whole story by itself.

Q: I can only imagine. I'm just beginning to wonder if your outspokenness, if that might be a problem.

SHIRLEY: That was a problem. That was a problem I had to get under control, and I had to change my dress. I was not a hat person and just not a traditional pastor's wife, so I learned how to tone it down, not be so opinionated, not always have a need to express my opinions, at least in the church, very clear who the leadership is.

Q: Right. So it's another one of these, in a way, right? (gestures the "pop")

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: So what did you learn from that? It must have been a huge learning experience.

SHIRLEY: It was. I loved the denomination too. I grew up in it, and that's all I knew. But to this day, I think I discovered that I really don't like people putting me in a box. That was hard for me, but I did pretty good at it, but it was hard, and it felt like I was denying myself, to a certain extent, you know, and I had always been a pretty independent and strong person by need, and eventually, by desire. So it was challenging for me to kind of fit back into a box, put a hat on and nice heels and stockings. That was challenging. But loved my family, wanted to do what was necessary for my husband to be successful, so for 30 years I did what I needed to do, put it that way.

Q: So that's really interesting. So you were able to do that, but continue with your strong personality.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, not quite as strong.

Q: But I mean that's quite an accomplishment, actually be able to do that and not lose yourself in the process, right?

SHIRLEY: Right. This is true.

Q: That's not easy.

SHIRLEY: Well, this is true, but I think I did lose myself a little bit.

Q: You did?

SHIRLEY: Yeah. I don't think... I think when my kids got older that I began to venture out into the community, and I think I kind of regained some of who I was, because I did become a little quieter and kind of went along with things, for the most part. I was pretty fierce around my children. As long as the church folks didn't bother my children, I could pretty much go along with structure and how things went, but I was very protective of my children.

Q: Now you have more than one child.

SHIRLEY: Yes. I have three.

Q: You have three.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: So Aquilla.

SHIRLEY: And Jernn, she was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, because by then my husband was done with seminary, and he'd got his first appointment, which was at a very nice church.

Q: Wilmington is on the coast, right?

SHIRLEY: Yes, Wilmington, North Carolina; loved the beaches there, nice city, very, very beautiful place. And then Jerome, Jr. is the baby, a big baby, my 6'4" baby, right, Len?

Q: He didn't get his grandfather's height.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, exactly.

Q: Interesting. So there you are. You're in Wilmington.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: A slightly better place for you to be is what I'm hearing.

SHIRLEY: Yes. Yes. Started looking for a job, and couldn't really find anything, but I really got homesick. I think that was just kind of it for me. I just couldn't take just not working, not feeling as productive as I could be, and I shared that with my husband. I went home for a visit to New York, was with his family. I went and stayed with his family for a visit, and I was pregnant with Jerome, and then I just realized I just couldn't continue to do that anymore.

So had Jerome in New York, and then he made a conscious decision, because he understood what I was saying, and I'd been pretty cooperative all those years that he would come back, transfer back to New York to pastor. and that's how we ended up back in New York.

Q: So where did he become a pastor?

SHIRLEY: In Beacon, New York.

Q: Overlooking the Hudson, so you went from one watery place to another one.

SHIRLEY: Yes. So by then, he was a little restless with the denomination. He's an avid reader and was beginning to experience some other things in terms of his calling and what he was doing with his ministry, and questioning whether the Methodist way was the way for him. And he's a great speaker, and he got this invitation to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, to speak at the Second Congregational Church, and he started a relationship with the pastor there, at the time, and the pastor, Reverend Comathea [ph], at

that time, had decided that he was going to move to a church, into Albany. The congregation didn't know it then, but that's what he had decided, for whatever his reasons.

He started talking to my husband about applying for the position coming up and just preaching and just have a conversation with the people. And my husband was Zion, but the timing was probably perfect, because he was wrestling with whether this was where he really needed to be. He came up, and he preached, had conversations, and they extended an offer for him to become a pastor, and that's how we came.

Q: So can you tell me what the difference might be, one difference between the AME Zion and the Second Congregational?

SHIRLEY: Congregational, the people are the overseers of the church, and the Methodist, the bishops run the church; drastically different, drastically different.

Q: Hierarchy.

SHIRLEY: Exactly. And, of course, there was a big upheaval in Zion, because here are two promising young people. They spent a lot of time and energy on me, preparing me for the future and expected me to be the national officer. Actually, the expectation was I would become the national president of the Women's Missionary Organization. That was the thought. You know I was kind of climbing the ladder. I'd become a district officer as a young woman; still very involved, particularly once we came back to New York, and then this promising young pastor, now he's leaving, so it was—

Q: A shakeup.

SHIRLEY: Oh, yeah, it was lots of angry folks, lots of upset folks.

Q: Too bad. So you moved to Pittsfield when?

SHIRLEY: So that was about 25 years ago.

Q: So you've seen a lot in Pittsfield.

SHIRLEY: Yes, I have. We came here. We decided right away that this was a great place to raise children; pretty safe. We were pleased with the school system. Jerome, Jr. had meningitis as a child. A parishioner had come in and visited him knowing that she had meningitis, and we didn't know it, and she was visiting him on a regular basis in the parsonage in New York, and he developed meningitis, and, as a result of that, he had some neurological issues.

He had a major speech impediment; hard to believe now, right? He had a major speech impediment. We had to put him in speech. They started school in New York at Catholic school, because we just decided that that was a quality education for them. And so when he was in kindergarten, the kindergarten teacher told us to take him out of Catholic school and put him in public school so we would no longer have to pay for his speech services, because his speech, he had such a major impediment. You could barely understand him.

Up until he was about three or four years old, his sister, Jernn, was the only one in the household, in the community that understood him, and she would basically interpret for us, and she stuttered. She would say, "He-he-he said," and then she would share with us what he wanted or what he was saying. So before we moved here, I made sure that all his services were in place in public school since they had recommended that, and we put all of them in public school, and he had to go into special ed, because of his

speech needs, and they also told us that he would never be able to take more than two commands at a time; no, no more than one, so that we could only give him one command.

Q: Not true.

SHIRLEY: His father just like, “That is not true.” He decided that wasn’t true, and we both decided that the speech issue was not going to be an issue in his life, so we got all the services that he needed. We put him in karate. His father would go to karate with him every week and watch what the sensei taught him, and then bring him home and teach him, and practice it to help him learn being able to take more than one command at a time.

Q: What an interesting strategy, the karate idea.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, because I had started the karate in New York somewhere, and I read something, and it sounded like it would be something that would help him, and so that’s what we did. So I started it in New York, and then when we got here, I was able to get a job, and I was working in New York also as a caseworker, and here he decided that that was something that he wanted to do with him, so that’s what he did. My son stayed in it long enough to become a brown belt and black tip, and he would have been black belt, but he ended up being a basketball standout, invitations to travel, so on and so on, for basketball.

Q: So how do you think that having this situation to deal with with your son sort of helped you with your own decisions about life, or it affected your own decisions about life?

SHIRLEY: Well, because I think both parents realized in terms of their development, them being involved in extracurricular activities was important, so we had

a conscious decision to involve them in certain programs, and that was part of my responsibility was to go with them in the community. So as I was bringing them to different events and activities and practices and dance lessons and all of those things in the community, I got even a better sense of the community, and I also got an opportunity to see a lot of young people. There were a lot of things lacking. Bucolic Berkshires had some areas of need, so me, being who I am, born into the situation that I was, being trained and mentored with the mindset that my job is to serve, that's what I started doing.

Q: So what was your first little niche?

SHIRLEY: The first thing, was it Girl Scouts? It was the Girl Scouts. At the church, we started a Girl Scout troop, and I was one of the leaders for the junior group, and I also always enjoyed writing, so when I was a teenager in the church, I used to take Bible stories and turn them into modern-day stories. The story of the prodigal son, I took that and I turned it into kind of a modern-day thing. So I enjoyed writing, enjoyed creating skits, so I started doing that at the church, and that kind of drew some kids from the community in, because here I was creating these little skits. The kids enjoyed it.

Then I came up with this idea to start serving breakfast, because I saw that there were some needs there. So, Sunday mornings we would have breakfast, and then the kids would come to Sunday school, and we'd kind of do these different creative things with them. And we started the Girl Scout troop, so that was my initial movement in the community.

Q: So it sort of grew out of the church.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: So how was being a minister's wife different in this church?

SHIRLEY: Well, the role was basically the same.

Q: But you had a lot to do here. Was it because you had kids, getting really involved in this stuff?

SHIRLEY: Yes, and then also there was an opportunity, because there were young people in the church, and also my husband wanted to build the youth church, because he always believed in youth ministry. He was a youth minister. That was his beginnings, so because he wanted to do that, he encouraged me to get involved in doing things in the church. Things just evolved.

Q: So you'd started really right away getting involved.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: It was so organic.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely.

Q: With the skits, and then you're still doing theatrical stuff with kids.

SHIRLEY: Yeah.

Q: That's interesting.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely.

Q: I guess we have so much to talk about from that point on. Maybe we'll back up. So now you're working in the public school, right?

SHIRLEY: Today?

Q: Yeah.

SHIRLEY: Yes, currently.

Q: So how did you get to that? How did you get to that, I guess?

SHIRLEY: Well, after being here, I think, maybe a year, a year-and-a-half, someone told me about a position at the Department of Developmental Services as a service coordinator, which is pretty much related to being a caseworker, so I went and applied for the position, and I ended up getting it. They hired me as a service coordinator. Within, I don't know, three or four years, I became a supervisor. By the time I was in my fifth or sixth year, I became a director of the state-operated homes for adults with mental retardation. So I pretty much stayed in that position for about 15 years; that was middle management.

I had an opportunity to become a senior manager, but by then I had gotten so involved in the community, and my kids were adolescents, I didn't want to lessen my presence in their lives, as well as the community. So I pretty much stayed in that position until I retired about two, three years ago.

Q: Recent.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: So you've been doing all this other stuff while you were really working.

SHIRLEY: Yes, and the good thing is the state loved it, because it was good publicity for them, manager volunteering in the community, so they pretty much always allowed me to do whatever I needed to do. I was the director of the program, so that gave me some flexibility by itself, but then because the Boston office and the Springfield office very much approved of what I was doing, and then every time something came out in the newspaper, it always said employee of the Commonwealth.

Q: It was good PR.

SHIRLEY: You got it, so it worked.

Q: Luckily they mentioned it in those articles.

SHIRLEY: I know, absolutely.

Q: So tell us about the working with youth that you're doing right now.

SHIRLEY: My ex-father-in-law always told me that I loved children. He always used to tell me that, "You love children." He would say that, and I just never thought about it, and I think because of my upbringing, the trauma that I experienced, trauma I saw, my siblings experienced, other children, I think that I do have a stronger focus on young people than adults. And I also think it's easier to teach young people than adults, and I think young people are more open, and I enjoy teaching. I enjoy teaching. I love sharing. I love exposing and providing access, so I found that it was much easier for me to do that with young people than adults.

And I also recognize that I absolutely enjoy having conversations with adolescents, absolutely enjoy that. I'm not quite sure where that piece comes from, but I just find that fascinating just to help them open up their minds and have new experiences. So a lot of parents and young people feel like I'm doing so much for them, but I also find it very rewarding to have conversations and to expose them.

One of my greatest pleasures now, when I'm with the young people in a community, is watching them learn something new. Sometimes they think, oh, this is fun. In their minds, this is fun. I'm having a good time, but, in my mind, I'm like, oh, my God, this is incredible. Look what they're doing. You know, look what they've just learned.

When we went to South Africa two years ago, there were a couple of the young ladies that had serious issues with being there, because they pretty much, not pretty much grew up in the Berkshires, and they had not been exposed to a lot of people of color. Here they are now, they're in South Africa. Everything they see is black.

It was overwhelming for them, and they started having these struggles around that, because prior to that, two of these young women were saying, "I wouldn't go with a black guy. I don't like black this, and I don't like black that." And so we, the mentors, we heard all of this, and so we knew once they got there, they were probably going to have a real come-to-Jesus meeting, this self-discovery about who they are and their history and their heritage, because you'll have some young people now, "African-American, I'm not African." They'll quickly tell you that, so just to see that transition that these young women went through, having to acknowledge history, because we took them to the Slave Castle. You can't deny this, folks. Do you see this building? Do you see this sign? Entry of no return, that's where the slaves walked out of and were placed on those boats. Those were your ancestors. Do you understand this?

So it was just amazing, just amazing, and to see them struggle with that, and they struggled. They were angry. They were confrontational. Some of the young mentors, they were like, "Okay, we need a break." Okay. It's okay. You step back. I'll move in, and don't worry about it. I've got it. But the amazing thing is, particular these two young women, while they were there, they got their hair braided. Well, that was major. That was the first major step of me recognizing that they were beginning to accept who they are, their heritage, which impacts on their self-esteem, because if you're going to deny partially who you are, you're denying your being, you know.

So that part of the process is that we decided that the girls would tell their story; not the adults, the girls would tell their story, and we invited the donors in and people from the community. One of the mentors is a communication specialist, Roberta Dews, who works with the mayor. So she was there with the girls to help them write their stories. She didn't write it, but she helped them with the grammar and prepared them for their presentation.

When they made their presentation, there were some of us that cried, because they talked about their transition, and they were able to talk about being proud of who they are. They were able to talk about the history of the African-Americans, and they were able to say the words. They really had internalized it, and I'm sitting there like, yup, this is it. This is it.

Q: Congratulations, but you have to tell us about this program. Now our appetites are all, okay, so what is this program?

SHIRLEY: It's the Rites of Passage and Empowerment Program for Girls. So first we started Youth Alive Performance Arts, and that came out of the church. Basically, my oldest daughter and a friend of hers decided one day that they wanted to do a step at a church program. I'm like, "What do you guys know about a step? That's an HBCU phenomenon." They're were like, "Oh, we could do it." We were like, okay. So they grabbed up their younger siblings and a friend, and it was five of them, and they choreographed a step. That's really cool.

Q: I had no idea that's how it started.

SHIRLEY: So then they were like, "Well, we want to do it at the Gather-in," which is the oldest African-American festival in the county, so we were like, oh, okay.

So myself and another parent, we got together, got the little outfits, and they performed at this Gather In. The kids went crazy in the community, went crazy. They're like, "Oh, I want to join. I want to join." We were like, "Join? We don't have anything to join. This is just some kids in the church!"

So my ex-husband, he was like, "Well, then we've got to make a group." I was like, "Are you serious?" He was like, "Yes, Shirley, you could do this." Then my daughter comes to me, "Mommy, we want to do this. We want to have a step group," so I said, okay, and that's what we started doing. We created a place for them at the church to practice. Kids came in. Then we recognized that it was growing and that we needed to move it outside of the church, because we realized it could be a good opportunity for some of the kids in the community to be involved positive. That's what we did.

Then with my social work background I began recognizing that there were some other needs in the kids, academic and social, so I started just adding some different pieces to it, and it developed into a program. Over the years we traveled. We took the kids cross-country, got a grant, wrote my first grant; took them cross-country to California. That was incredible. Some of those kids had never even been out of Pittsfield, so it was incredible.

This one young guy, he's a young man today, he goes back to school the next year, goes back to Conte, and the teachers ask, "Oh, so what did you do for the summer?" He said, "Oh, I went cross-country to California." The teacher looked at him and said, "Richard, that's not nice. Don't lie like that." Yeah, because this poor kid, this poor boy, how could he afford to go? Basically, that's what the teacher—

Q: Projected.

SHIRLEY: That's right. You didn't go cross-country, so she's chastising him.

Q: So how did you learn about this? He came and told you.

SHIRLEY: He went home very upset, told his grandmother, who had traveled with us and who was very much part of helping organize the step group. She called me and said, "Do you know what this—" She was livid. She was livid. So I went to the school, and I talked to the teacher. I said, "You have to make this right. He is not lying. We traveled cross-country," and she was very apologetic, apologized to him. So these kids were doing things that people just made assumptions that they could never do.

So anyway, the step group continued, and boys, we started the drumline. Jacob's Pillow, every time they'd do something free, I'd take the kids. One day, the director of education came up to me and she said, "Who are you?" I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Everywhere I go I see you with a bunch of kids. Who are you?"

Q: Is that J.R.?

SHIRLEY: Exactly, J.R. Glover, so she said, "Who are you?" and I said, "Well, my name is Shirley Edgerton. We have no money, and I work with kids, so I have to try to find everything free," so she was like, "You're kidding?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Is that why you show up?" I said, "Yeah. It's opportunities for the kids. We don't have funds, and these are rich experiences," so that how we started this relationship with Jacob's Pillow. To this day, we still have a relationship with them.

Q: So what do you do up there?

SHIRLEY: We go to shows. We had a grant with them, which helped us in terms of traveling and doing some of the things we were doing back then. And the bucket drummers started, because Jacob's Pillow took a group of people from the community,

including the whole Step team, to New York City to Broadway, and we saw *Bring Up the*—what is it—*the Funk*, Xavion Glover.

Q: Because he's been up here, right?

SHIRLEY: Yes, exactly. So my son, some of the other young boys who were on the team stepping, at that time, saw Xavion on the bucket drum, and then tap dancing, all that. They came back to Pittsfield, and they decided they wanted to drum like they saw Xavion on the buckets and all these other young men on stage. So we got them some buckets and some drumsticks, and we created the first bucket drumming group in Pittsfield. That's how we started our relationship with Williams College, because a year after our step team started, Williams College decided to do the same thing. And then Maxine eventually approached us, and that's kind of how we started the relationship, and we maintain that relationship over the years with Williams College.

It was just with Sandy Burton and the dance program, but it's expanded much beyond that now. So eventually what I recognized, though, is that the girls, they were pretty much creating second-class citizenship for themselves with the boys. The boys would be practicing the drums and getting ready for a show. They would be all excited and focused, and the girls were being cute and paying attention to them. It's like, ladies, aren't you supposed to be stepping? Yeah, we are, we are, but they're doing everything they can to draw the attention of the boys and weren't totally appreciating the experience for themselves, because there was so much more they could be doing for themselves if they were more self-focused. 107:28

So I had said, wow, we need a girls' program where the girls are working on their development, where they are working on developing their voices and their self-

esteem, so I went to a couple of my friends, who by then, whenever I came, they were like, “Oh, God, Shirley, not another idea, okay, not another.” I said, “No, listen, just listen. If you think it’s a crazy idea, we don’t have to do it.” “What do you mean, we, Shirley?” So I told them. They were like, “Oh, my God, you’re right. Shirley, get out of here. We don’t want to see you.”

So, once again, about five of us, we started the Rites of Passage and Empowerment Program six years ago for girls, because we recognized that they needed something, from the boys, where they were totally focused on themselves. So we created this holistic program, and when we mean holistic, we mean spiritual, all of it, all of their being. And the focus was to mentor them, something that I had when I was growing up, and many of these professional women, they were all professionals, they had had similar experiences in terms of having women in their lives. So we all decided that we needed to give it back, and so that’s how we get started back then.

Q: And that’s how you started with this relationship also with Maxine and the whole South Africa thing.

SHIRLEY: No.

Q: That’s different.

SHIRLEY: Yes, a whole different—

Q: So the South Africa thing, the first time you went was how long ago?

SHIRLEY: The first time I went to South Africa was probably at least 10 years ago. That’s because I wrote a grant through the Women’s Fund of Western Massachusetts, and then an opportunity came up where they wanted to train women of color to be philanthropists, and I was on the Board of the Women’s Fund by then. I

started out as a grantee for the girls, for Youth Alive, just for the girls' portion of Youth Alive, because the older Step group, the adolescent girls, it was just total girls. And then they asked me; I was invited to be on a committee and they invited me to be a Board member.

Well, this opportunity came up, and I read this information. It was a nine-months program of training. And I was like, wow, that would probably enrich what I'm doing, so I applied. To my surprise, I was accepted. Women had applied all over the world, so there were 20 of us that were selected, and they flew us to California for one of the sessions, and then a few months later we went to Canada, and then we would do online trainings and workshops.

Well, I met the director. Then she was the director of the Women's Fund in Cape Town, South Africa, and we became good friends, maintained contact, and she invited me to come to South Africa. And I was like, oh, my God, I always wanted to go to Africa. I forgot when I was in college, I was involved in the church with a young man from Africa, from West Africa, so I really always had an interest. My father never wanted me to travel to Africa then, because he had this fear that I would go and never return. So because I pretty much just believed and wanted to have my father always approve of everything I was doing, I never went to visit. He didn't even want me to marry, because he said, "What if the kids need milk? How am I going to get milk over to you in Africa?"

Q: That's funny.

SHIRLEY: I was like, wow, South Africa, I would love to go there, and I did. So I visited Cape Town, South Africa; totally fell in love with it. It is beautiful. It is an

absolutely beautiful country, just fell in love with it, and it was so interesting. By then, the woman who was the director had been fired, so here I am traveling, thinking I'm going to meet her. She never showed up, but there was someone else who I met from there who also worked at the agency. So she had kind of a busy week, but she was able to interact with me a bit, and I just kind of explored on my own, you know figured out the train.

I stayed in Fish Hoek, which is outside of Cape Town, in a compound, very safe place. They provided the meals, so it was great. I had that experience, and then about five years ago, Susie Walker-Weeks from South County approached me. She said, "I love the things that you do with girls. What about going to South Africa?" I was like, "South Africa? What are you talking about, South Africa? South Africa, where?" She said, "There's this orphanage that my friend helped found, and they have girls there, and I think you could really help," and I said okay.

So I went to South Africa about five years ago. I went to South Africa again, but Illovo, where this orphanage is, and the director and I, it felt like we were long-lost sisters. We connected so well. Three of us would be sitting at a table, and the two of us would be sitting across from each other just sharing stories, and Susie was like, "Geez, I feel like I'm the odd man out here," you know, because it was just pretty amazing. It was like we were across the waters, but had these similarities in our belief systems and our life experiences, and it was just amazing.

So we worked together. I set up some programming for the girls, fell in love with the girls. The day I left, everybody's in tears. They offered me a job, and, I'll be honest, I seriously thought about it, because it was just perfect. It was just perfect. So

probably the only reason why I didn't accept the job was because then my youngest daughter, they had my oldest granddaughter, who's three years old. If she was not born, I probably would be over in South Africa. But I totally fell in love with her, and there was just no way in the world that I was not going to be able to see her.

Q: It's the opposite of the milk problem.

SHIRLEY: Yeah. You're good at connecting things.

Q: That's amazing. So then how did you get from going there and doing this work in the orphanage to bringing other—

SHIRLEY: Well, because it went so well there, the director and I decided we would maintain contact, and they wanted me to come back, and I said okay. I said, "If I come back, I have to bring some of my girls, because they have to have this experience, and I also think it would be great for the girls here and my girls to have an interaction and exchange life experiences, the way you and I have." So she agreed. She was like, "Bring them, bring them. That's what we need, so bring them," and that's what we did. We raised the money, and we brought the girls. We brought 10 girls and a parent, and it was just incredible, just incredible experience.

Q: And you went to the orphanage as well?

SHIRLEY: Yes, because what we decided consciously was, because my oldest daughter, when she was a senior in undergrad, she received a fellowship, and she studied at the University of Accra, so while she was there, she volunteered in an educational program. When she graduated, they invited her to come back and be on the Board, so she travels to West Africa every year. So what we had decided was that how we wanted to

introduce the girls to Africa. You the stereotypes that you have about Africa, so we figured, okay, well, we'll start off with a little luxury vacation, and that's what we did.

We took them first to Durban. They loved it. We were on the beach. We stayed at a very nice hotel. They shopped. They did all the tourist things. We took them to all the tourist sites and the big, beautiful city, the night lights. They were like, "Oh, my God, Miss E, this is like being in Miami." We're like, okay, okay, yeah, Miami. So we said, okay, so they were like, "Can we stay one more day?" Okay, fine, stay one more day, because we wanted them to see the difference in lifestyles and how most of the people were living. We loaded them up in van that Monday morning, rode out to Illovo, farm country. They could see the shanty towns. Do you know shanty towns?

Q: Uh-huh. Do you want to describe it, though, in case someone's listening who hasn't seen a picture?

SHIRLEY: Yes. Most of them are round. They're made out of whatever materials that they could get, tin often on the roof. Most of the time, there's just one large room that a large number of people are living in. It's out in the country or in the bush. It's very basic living. So as we left the big city, the kids began to see the differences in the community, and they were like, "Where are we going?" I said, "We're going to the orphanage."

Well, the orphanage used to be a sugar cane field, so you still have a lot of tall grass and things around it. It's enclosed, a security guard. We pulled into the orphanage, and they saw the houses, regular houses, sort of set up like group homes inside. That's how the orphanages are, and they each have a mom that takes care of about five to seven kids per house.

Q: It sounds like a nice arrangement.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, it is. I love the structure, because the kids call that adult Mom. We took one of our mentors, a clinical psychologist. One is an RN, and my daughter and one other young mentor---my daughter's an educator and a pastor--- and the other one, she works at Elizabeth Freeman Center, and she does trainings around sexual abuse. So part of my madness is I wanted a clinical psychologist to go, because I had been working with some of the girls, and a lot of the young women there were sexually abused. The majority of the young women there were sexually abused, because their parents had died from AIDS and from other pretty traumatic situations, so I felt if she came with me that she could help with the work that I had started. 1:19:45

What ended up happening, which was pretty interesting, she ended up doing a lot of training with the mothers, which was great. So it was good, because she did trainings with them in terms of helping them to work with the girls and the issues; and not just girls. There were young men that lived there too, from three to 21 years of age. So I continued my work with the girls, and then we had each of our young ladies to choose a task. So myself and the nurse, we worked in the field, because they had a large garden, which they ate out of it, so we worked in the field. We had some of the girls who volunteered to work in the daycare center. Others worked in the school setting, whatever they chose to do. It was just that everybody had to have a task.

Q: And how long were you there?

SHIRLEY: For 10 days.

Q: Enough to really get a sense, to really get into it.

SHIRLEY: Yeah, very much.

Q: What an experience, and so you've gone now twice with the girls or once?

SHIRLEY: The first was a group, went to West Africa. South Africa, this will be our second trip to South Africa.

Q: And this is when, South Africa?

SHIRLEY: We'll be going in April.

Q: Are you still raising money for this?

SHIRLEY: Yes, very much so.

Q: Right up until the day.

SHIRLEY: Yes, very much.

Q: So there are two questions that we would like to ask that are NAACP questions. One of them is—this is zipping really into another whole world—what was it like for you when the U.S. elected its first African-American President? This is something that we're asking everyone?

SHIRLEY: Extremely exciting. I felt like it was a pivotal moment in our history, and I think I was elated that it was Barack Obama, because he was such a well-spoken and an intelligent man. He had also had so many life experiences, and he's biracial. And I thought for the world, our society, that might make the blow of having a black man as a President a little easier, because he was biracial vs. a black man, but it was interesting. With some of the issues, the whole thing that Trump started with the birth check, questioning his birth certificate and so on, that it didn't matter that he was biracial. It was the bottom line was he's a black man, and that just disturbed that racist segment of our community, no matter what. It had nothing to do—just forget it, Shirley.

Your theory of him being biracial has no impact on the fact that he's black, and it just reminded me of that history of back in the day of I think it was one drop of blood, you were considered black, and to me that was the mindset that I recognized. It's like, Shirley, these folks are racists. Racism is racism. One drop of blood that has anything to do with being black, you're black, so it's not going to ease anything, because one of the greatest fears in the black community, particularly the older generation, is that he would never live to—

Q: Not just the black community. I have that fear too. I was petrified.

SHIRLEY: So older blacks, you could hear the conversations about, "Well, I don't know about voting for him, because they're going to kill him, and I'd hate to see that young man die." I never felt that, because I was very clear that this man and his wife knew what they were doing. They understood the challenges that they would be facing, so I thought it would make a difference in our history. I think differently now, but that's what I thought, at that time.

Q: I sort of knew you might come to that, because it's making everyone question. What's happening now is making people wonder, but do you think there's still a chance—I guess this is the little piece of optimist that crawls out every once in a while—that it did make a difference? It's just that there's a setback and that we go back. I don't know. I'm just wondering. I don't know if I think that, but I'm just asking you.

SHIRLEY: I still enjoy, I like history, so I still do enjoy doing research and reading, and I think I've come to the conclusion, at this point, that this is all a part of American history. This is who we are. We have a history of racism. It's systematic. It's been there from the beginning. I think there's a part of me that wanted to deny how

systematic it has been throughout our existence as a country, but I think until there's some drastic changes in our government, our structure, the capitalism, that it will always exist, because it's economically feasible.

Q: So capitalism is the culprit, in some ways.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: But I want to us to just end with one thing, and then ask for your comment. One of your NAACP colleagues—was it Will Singleton, I think it was—who said, “I want to know when all those people, the Irish, the Italians, the Polish, when they did become white, and I think that's a really good question.

Chaquoia: I think that's what I had asked you a couple of weeks ago, because it's the illusion of inclusion, so if you could make those people think that they're part of the whites, which only the English are pretty much the whites, that they could divide and conquer, so it's the illusion of inclusion. They were never really in there. The numbers started dwindling in the '60s and '70s, and they needed more white members. That's why they started counting half-black people, like she said. When I was coming up, it doesn't matter if you were related to five white people. If you had a black grandfather, you were black, so now they're trying to change up the characteristics, because their numbers are dwindling.

Q: Well, it's interesting, because I know ethnic groups of different sorts that aren't black, you can't identify them when they walk in the room as being not white, but also feel something of not inclusion, but not the same kind of not inclusion. It's not the same history. It's not the same thing at all, but it was very interesting to me that Will

brought that up, because I had never really understood that, especially southern Europeans were definitely not considered white, and that wasn't that long ago.

SHIRLEY: But I think she's right. It serves a purpose, and it's part of that whole economic package. During the unions, when the unions were being formed, all of a sudden, even beyond that, let's think about slavery. All of a sudden, folks of certain groups, European groups, all of a sudden, they utilized them to manage the slaves, and right then that was the beginning of that hierarchy. Just because you are of a different ethnic group didn't make you white. You're one of us. You're a part of our team, so you're a step above those people, those slaves, those blacks, so that makes you part of us. And I think from then on, there's been this conscious plan to ensure that those groups, the Irish and all the other Europeans that you mentioned, that they would feel like somehow they're part of the white elites, and that keeps folk divided.

That keeps them divided, and they won't be able to see that it's actually the elites that are getting all of the wealth, and it's not those folks of color that you're concerning yourself with, but it's so intentional, and it's so deeply embedded in our culture now, I don't know if we ever will really get rid of it unless there's a real shift in our government.

Q: So you think it has to be the government.

MALE, Len: An economic problem [ph].

Q: Yes, that's right.

FEMALE: This is kind of going back to what you said. You know how you said about the Irish and everybody else trying to feel like they're included in that? The more they try to include other European nations is the more that they try to break up the

black nations. They have black people in the Caribbean calling themselves Latinas where they're not in Latin America, they're Africans of the Caribbean mixed with (01:29:33) Indians, and the sad thing about that is that the slave trade. Here in America, we as African-Americans, we don't call ourselves English, because the English pretty much were in control of the slave trade here, but if you go over to the Caribbean, as I said, you go to Puerto Rico, you go to Dominican Republic, you go to Cuba, they could be darker than me, but they'll identify themselves with their oppressor instead of who they really are, so it's really interesting.

Q: That is interesting. I was in a country recently in the Caribbean that everyone says, I'm French. Same thing.

SHIRLEY: That's interesting. That's one of the things I learned in Africa also, particularly West Africa. A lot of the Africans identify with whites quicker than they do black Americans. It's really interesting, and my daughter tells me that part of that is because the history lesson they learned was very different than—that's right, and the reality of the history. Think about it. In our educational system here, kids don't often learn the truth. They don't learn the true history of this country.

Q: And that's something that other people have said, not necessarily in these oral history interviews, but people I've interviewed from the south who were African-American in the south a long time ago, so in the '30s and '40s, and how they, in a way, missed, when they moved north and came into the schools in the north, because they didn't learn their African heritage anymore.

SHIRLEY: That's right.

Q: And so there was all that. There were horrible things happening in their neighborhoods in the south, but they were learning sort of who they were.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely, and that's why I always wanted my kids to attend HBCU, because of that, because I knew.

Q: And did they?

SHIRLEY: Yes. Well, my oldest graduated from A&T, and my middle one graduated from Livingstone College, the AME Zion College. The youngest one, he got a basketball scholarship.

Q: He went where that went. You're making me want to go visit these places, because it just sounds pretty amazing. Have you visited any of these?

FEMALE: Yeah. African-American is so broad, because I know my mother is a black native from the Georgia and Florida line, so I know I'm African and black native, but it's so funny. If you go certain places, they use certain words that they think is endearing to a black person when it's not. They'll tell me, oh, you have beautiful hair for a black person. Black people usually don't have that kind of hair, or you have a nice skin complexion due to me being mixed with something, but if you look down my genealogy, I don't have anything that's white mixed in me. I looked for my grandfather, my grandmother. It's sad to say that black beauty is based off of white beauty, and that's the sad part.

Q: And white beauty is based on blonde beauty. Let's be real. There's a real hierarchy all the way down.

FEMALE: But they teach us to hate our looks. I remember going to school. You felt like your lips were too big, or my aunt, she felt her skin was too dark, or her butt was too big, and now you have people idolizing the big butts, the big hair.

Q: And the lips, they inject things into their lips.

FEMALE: It's like they teach one group of people to hate themselves, and then you teach another group of females, oh, you should hate them, but you should look like them.

Q: Well, the females I think all around, and we're sort of getting off the subject, but that's all right, we're always supposed to look a little different than we do.

SHIRLEY: That's true.

Q: But then there's another whole layer that you're adding on, a lot of layers, a lot of layers.

SHIRLEY: I know I was shocked in Africa, because I know here it's common to know people of color use skin-bleaching cream. There are women in Africa that use skin-bleaching cream. That totally threw me, because I think I had this illusion that in Africa people knew who they were. They embraced their culture. They were proud of their heritage, but it's not true.

Q: Colonialism.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely. That totally escaped me until I went and had visited so often, and now I get it that the impact of colonialism has been very similar to the experience we've had here in America. You're absolutely right.

MALE: That reminded me that African-American women were straightening their hair with (01:34:29). Malcolm spoke about that.

FEMALE: Because Malcolm was actually straightening his hair with
(01:34:34).

SHIRLEY: That's right.

Q: That's right. It's interesting, because that whole thing, the whole idea of hair,
that's a whole dissertation.

SHIRLEY: Absolutely.

Q: It's amazing.

SHIRLEY: That's right. Now you have situations where young women of
color, who are wearing dreads and braids, they're being thrown out of private schools,
because this hairdo still isn't acceptable in certain places, so you're absolutely right.

Q: Well, your work with kids, I'm so happy to learn about it. I'm so happy to
learn how it happened, because I guess I met you when you were doing the Step.

SHIRLEY: Yes.

Q: And I just thought you just started this thing, and there it was. It's interesting
to hear about how these things developed. I think we learned a lot. Did we learn a lot?

FEMALE: I did.

SHIRLEY: Well, thank you.

Q: I think we learned a lot.

SHIRLEY: I enjoy talking about it.

Q: We're really, really grateful for this. I'm sure we missed things, but we always
do.

FEMALE: It's actually nice to put a face with a name, because I go by my maiden name, but I'm married to a Borden, Willy Borden. I'm married to Willy Borden James [ph].

SHIRLEY: Yes, I know Willy.

FEMALE: I'm like, well, I don't know her. No, I don't know her. She was like, do you know her, and I was like, no, but I've heard of her, but I don't know her, so it's nice to finally put a face.

SHIRLEY: Nice to meet you again.

Q: You've got to know Shirley.

FEMALE: And I actually know your daughter, Jernn.

SHIRLEY: Oh, you know Jernn?

FEMALE: I actually do know her, because we used to work at the (01:36:11) a couple of years ago.

SHIRLEY: She's down in North Carolina. Did you ever meet Elise?

FEMALE: No. I have a two-and-a-half-year-old myself, so I guess we just started having babies.

Q: Got busy.

FEMALE: Yeah, we got busy.

Q: Well, thank you all. This is really, really great.

FEMALE: I thought it was going to be something different. I was prepared for a (01:36:37). I wrote four pages of notes.

SHIRLEY: Well, thank you. This was interesting. It really was. Thank you.

[end]

