

Laura Browder: So Mrs. Thompson, can we start out by you telling me your full name and the date?

Mary Thompson: Okay. My name is Mary White Thompson. And today is May the 9th, 2018.

LB: And now can you start by just telling me something about how you grew up and your family?

MT: I'll be happy to do that. It was a joy because of the family that I was a part of. I was born in 1937 and I was born into a fam... well finally we had not eight children in the family—five boys and three girls. My brothers, four of them, were much older than I. 'Cause my older brother was at least nine or ten years older than I was. So when my sister and I, I had two sisters and myself, when we were born—all of the four boys were much older. We loved each other but we really didn't have a lot of interaction because they were much older. The boys bonded together and the sisters bonded together and my sister was really my joy. It was a wonderful family to be a part of. Now I'm gonna tell you about my mom and my dad. My dad was an advocate [sic] sports fan and he more or less interacted with the boys because boys love that type of thing. And my mom was a homemaker at the time. She had a third-grade education but I'm proud to say that she was a woman of wisdom and she was a discerner of people. And I think that's a gift. For you know why. The uniqueness about my family is the eight children were all named by my father. We all have biblical names. The children used to tease us—I have to laugh—used to tease us in the community because we had biblical names. But we were very proud to say we were named by our father. And everywhere we went and we told that story—they wanted to know: "Well tell me what your names are." And they made up a little song in the community because we had, my brothers and sisters, we were named James, Obadiah, Malachia, Joshua, Samuel, Sarah, Ellen, Mary Magdalene (that's me) and finally Esther. It just was a joy 'cause we just felt that we were unique because of that. Mhm.

LB: Do you remember how the song went?

MT: [singing] Obadiah, Malachi, Joshua, Jim, come on Sarah, Esther and Mary. But they forgot all about Samuel. 'Cause Samuel was the last one to be born. Mhm. And I was ten years older than Samuel when he was born. But we just had a great time growing up in the family. My mom and dad were disciplinarians. But my mom was really the strict disciplinarians. She basically could look at us and you knew something was wrong. I was one child. I learned to be obedient very early in life. I never wanted anybody to hit on me or... I just you know my skin would crawl. So I learned how to be very obedient early. I would say to my sister whom I love so dearly, I said, "You know what—why don't you stop being hardheaded? Because I don't want to see you get punished." And so she got quite a few little spankings. And so did my younger sister. I think they always saw me as being a little bit different from them. But I was not. I just learned early that it was better to obey than to sacrifice.

LB: Did you grow up in Church Hill?

MT: I've lived here all my life. I came into this area in 1952. But I grew up over... They really call that Church Hill... Now they call this the Fairmount part of the East End. But I was born in

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the 1600 block of 28th Street. So I knew about that community over there. I lived for a short spell on 32nd street and then finally when I was about seven years old... *eight* years old... my parents found the home on 29th street in the 1300 block. So basically, my formative years were on 29th street and then I moved over in this area in '52. I was going on fifteen years of age at that time. But what I wanted to say about the Church Hill area... That's why I'm so passionate about it now, because they're my roots. That's where I went to school, at George Mason Elementary School, and that school is still there now. I went to school. I had a few friends. I never was a person that ran with a crowd. In that area I was able to enjoy myself. I could find enjoyment with me. I enjoy being with me every day. I had the opportunity to be free, to go in the community and do what I need to do, walking along Nine Mile Road, coming up to 25th Street with my sister, and so I just had a wonderful life in the Church Hill area.

LB: What was it like when you were growing up when you were a young child? What do you remember of your neighborhood?

MT: Well, I knew that at that time there was segregation. But that did not bother me. We were instructed as to what we need to do: We need to be respectful of any and every one—even though sometime we might have been mistreated. But there was no option for us to retaliate and do the same thing to people of the other race. And so basically, I don't remember any bad things happening to me because, as I said, if anything should occur, I would get out of that situation quickly. And I knew my mom never wanted us to be a part of confusion in the community so we were able to get along with the families in the community. We didn't have a lot of children. But the families that were there, they had a lot of children. But different families, who would, you know, have a lot of children, that was not so. We just only had a few children. So when we were out in the community, Mom always knew where we were. We had to... We couldn't just walk off and do our thing like the children are doing today. But we always had to report back and let her know what we were doing. In other words, we had to get her approval before we could do *anything*. That's why I say I learned how to be obedient very early.

LB: It sounds like it.

MT: Yeah.

LB: So when and how did you notice changes taking place in your neighborhood, and in the city of Richmond?

MT: Well it was just about in 1950... in the 50s. I don't put a particular date on it. I say in the 50s. We knew that families were moving in and out of the community. More were moving out than in the community and at that time they call that period, "white flight." Basically, the community was mixed. The whites lived south of... let's say south of Broad. They lived in that area. And we lived north of Broad. It soon became... how do I want to put this... homes soon became vacant. They were just moving out in groves [00:10:07 sic. sounds like "groves" but I think she meant to say droves?]. We more or less stayed in our community. There were some families that moved [00:10:19 unc. intrally?] in the community. As homes became available, then they would purchase those homes. I've only lived in three homes in my lifetime. And this very home that we are in today—my mom found it in 1952. We had gone with my school on a

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trip and after we returned I had a friend, a school friend, who lived in this vicinity. And of course, we brought her home that night. When we left her, she lived on Burton Street. When we left her home... and we were just riding through the neighborhood... and my mom said, "That house is for sale isn't it?" She said, "Mary, write down the realtor's name and the telephone number." She said, "I'm gonna call tomorrow about that home. My daddy said, "You gonna do what?" She said, "I'm gonna call about that home because I like that home." That was in June, the last part of June 'cause we had gone on a school trip. And, as I said, we were bringing my friend home. So, my mom did call the realtor and they came over to look at the home and by October I was living here. In another home. That was a joy. Even though I was a teenager. But that was a joy for me to upscale and come into this community.

I've been here ever since. This is my family's home. I stayed here with my mom and dad. I got married here. My husband and I raised five children all in this community, a beautiful community it was. We stayed here and when my mom health, my dad health, both of them began to fail, and she said, "Well Mary," she said, "Are you and George gonna go out and get yourself another place?" We went and looked at several homes. But you know that saying: "There is no place like home"? That's the way I felt. And I said, "Well, why am I leaving the community?" The other homes that we had gone to see, they were in no condition as well as what I already had. I told my husband, "What do you wanna do?" He said, "If we can stay with your mom and dad, and help them because they're getting older, why don't we do that?" So that's what we did—we stayed here. And helped them and as I said, Mom and dad got into very poor health. In fact both of them, they died. My dad died right here in the home. So that's why we stayed here.

I've had a passion for this community. I love where I live. I'm right here on the corner. Nobody worries me or anything. And so I began to know the neighbors. What I loved about this neighborhood at that time... You knew your neighbors were there for you but we did not go in and out of each other's homes. It was like more or less on the outside—"Hello, how you doin'?" And talkin' like that. And we helped to raise each other's children in the community. That's why I'm really passionate about where I live. And I hope to live here the remaining of my days, even with all of the migration of people in and out of the community. I'm here. I've been here sixty-six years. And I don't regret a moment of it. I love it.

LB: It sounds like you've seen some amazing changes in the community during that time.

MT: It's a long story. But let me say this to you... In 1992... I tell it like this... it was almost like Rip Van Winkle wakin' up. The children in the community prior to that time, they grew up, my children grew up, along with the neighborhood children. They had wonderful activities in the community. All of the adults in the community took responsibility for the children. After our children grew up, went off to college, then our community looked like it began to die. Because we were getting older and some of the other homeowners were much older than I. And, as I said, I suddenly woke up one day and I said, "What is happening to our community? Homes have become blighted. And children were not coming back to the community. As a result of that, I said, "Something has to be done. I don't know what but something has to be done." Better Housing Coalition was the community developer. That presence was already here. We had a meeting at Mount Olivet Church for the community. After they came in and they talked with us about the condition of the community, and what they would like to do to help the community.

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After that meeting I said, “I’m going to see if I can contact them personally to see what they are planning to do and to see what the members of the community can do. You know it’s good for people to come in and help you. But you ought to want to help yourself.

So when I talked to T. K. Somanath and he came here and talked to me and I said, “I want to set up a meeting and I can call some of the residents together, those who are willing, some of those who had lived in the community for quite some time.” And so, we had a meeting at Mount Table Baptist Church, which is on 23rd Street, no... going back that way... 21st Street. We had the meeting and it was a real productive meeting. But what warmed my heart when T. K. Somanath, who was the CEO of Better Housing Coalition, he asked one question: “What do you want?” When he said that, I knew that we were on the right trail.

As a result of that meeting, we formed the New Vision Civic League of East End. I served as president. I was having so much fun I didn’t realize how long. I served for twenty-three years as our leader. We’ve done many wonderful things as a group working with the developers and because of New Vision Civic League and the efforts of Better Housing Coalition, Southside Community, Elder Homes, and Interfaith was working with us for a short period of time, we could realize now, over 200 brand new homes and quite a few rehab homes. Most all of the homes on my street, except for maybe three or four, they’re brand new homes. And all of that has come about since 1993. We really got involved in 1997 because I was working with the East District Housing Committee. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I was willing to learn. As a result of being a co-chair-person, along with another member of my church, her name was Mary Robinson. So, they called us the M&M team. And as a result of our effort and our desires to want to do something, the East District had a Board. And we became members of the Board. And we were appointed to chairpersons of the Housing Committee. We got together and the first thing I talked with her about, I said, “Well Mary, I don’t know anything about this. What do you know?” She said, “I know less than you know.” She said, “But we can do it.” And I said, “Well you know the first thing I want to do? I want to pull all the community developers who are already present in the community. Let’s pull them together, have a meeting and see will they become partners, form a coalition or a team, whatever they want to call it, and ask them to work together to rebuild the community.” And that’s what happened.

So when we started rebuilding in this community, the community was 85% blight. You see it now. How beautiful it is. And to show our signature product is refurbishing and rebuilding in the 1300 block of 26th Street, 27th Street, and some parts of 28th Street, that was our signature event. We say we wanted to take at least two blocks. Each community developer was asked to build x-number of homes. And then they would try to market those homes. That idea went over so big. And the 1300 block of 26th and 27th Street is just beautiful. That’s right around the hospital. And so I know dreams can become a reality. I go in that vicinity every now and then. I was over there yesterday just looking around to see what’s happening. And it just keep hope in my heart. It’s keepin’ me... keep dreaming. ‘Cause I know it’s gonna come to fruition.

And you know we’re gonna have a beautiful grocery store in the community. I’m so excited about that. That just let me know—don’t talk negative about where you live or what you’re goin’ to do in life. Just try to make it happen. ‘Cause it can. And I, I’m a firm believer—you can talk

00:23:06 about a thing, you can dream about anything, or you can wish that it's gonna happen. But you have to say: "What part am I gonna play? What am I gonna do to make this what it ought to be?"

LB: And you really did.

MT: I love it.

LB: So I want to keep taking you back if you don't mind...

MT: Yeah.

LB: ...because I am still interested in your childhood and your youth and about the kinds of changes that you saw taking place not just in the neighborhood but in the whole city of Richmond.

MT: Well, you know, I don't think I was... I was so comfortable in my community that changes were happening but I didn't, I didn't really put that much thought into it. All I knew that I was safe. And I could go where I want to go, do what I want to do. No one interfered with that. I wish that all communities could be like the community that I grew up in. We didn't have... I didn't have any idea that leaving my home and going to my school or leaving my home and coming up on 25th Street, that I would encounter any child molesters, or anyone trying to do anything to me. And no one was fighting each other. Crime was not as prevalent as it is today. 'Cause it's really... It's gotten really to a maximum. Didn't have any problem with anyone playing with guns. The things that are goin' on today—that did not happen in my community. I felt safe. And I was happy.

LB: And there were a lot of thriving black businesses then, weren't there? Could you talk a little about that?

MT: Very much so. Very much so. We had black businesses. We had, of course we had corner stores. Because we didn't have any market per se, like a food market and so forth, but there were a lot of little corner stores. Not only black businesses, but the Jews were part of the community. And they were real respectful to us. We had black entrepreneurs on 25th Street. I don't know what happened. Some of them... I guess when the community started... persons moving in and out of the community... maybe they didn't see that, economically, that this was to their advantage so we did have some stores to close. Was so very sorry that that happened. But I guess that was just the way of life. It had been predicted that this would happen. We would have white flight. Blacks would come in. And then—didn't know it—at that time, they said that the whites would return to the community. But I didn't have that on my mind, you know, being a young child, I didn't have any of that on my mind. But as I said we were able to thrive in the community. I was thinking about that this morning. We are a family who didn't have a lot of means, but I've never known a hungry day in my life. And I've never been in want of anything. Mom worked from my early age up until the 50s. My dad, he worked, didn't have the greatest job. But what he and my mom were able to bring in, it was able to substantiate what we needed in the family. I can remember, about the children, our ages being so different, you know, far apart. I have never known all eight of us, sitting, at one time, say around the family table.

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Because by the time that we were able to do that, the older siblings, some of them had joined the United States Armed Forces. So we were not there, basically, together. But we had that love, even in the absence of the siblings, we still had that love for one another. And all of my siblings, except for my two sisters and I... we're the only ones left... my brothers are all gone. My older brother, he was a historian. So basically, he knew everything that happened to me in my younger age. And he said that, "Mary you don't know but you were a smart baby." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes. I used to take you to my aunt's house on 27th Street," and I lived on 28th Street at that time. And he said, "I would put you in the pack and I would say, 'Go ahead baby, take us to Aunt Marie's home,'" and [he] said, "You would go straight to that home." And I said, "How old was I?" He said, "You were about two years old." He said, "But Mary you always have been a very bright child." That's what my family always tell me. So I think if you hear it enough, you feel that you are.

LB: Which is a perfect segue into your education and what you remember of your education growing up?

MT: Oh I'd love telling you about that. As I said, I went to George Mason Elementary School. My first day at school my cousin and I were in the same class. I don't know why, but that day, I think I was a little shy, that day I stood behind his chair and I cried from nine o'clock up until 10:30. What I was crying about, I do not know. And I remember Ms. Sackhouse saying to me: "Mary, come on and play with the children." And I just shook my head and cried. She said, "Well why are you crying?" "I don't know." So finally, about eleven, cause I think the parents came back about eleven, and I had cried so much I was ashamed that I had cried so much. I looked up and I saw my mom's head among, above all the other mothers. And then I just [00:31:23 unc. blossomed?] out. 'Cause she was there to pick me up. 'Cause we were only goin' to school a half a day. So I left with her and goin' home... Well the teacher of course told on me that I cried. And she scolded me. She said, "Why were you cryin'?" I said, "I don't know, I guess I missed you." She said, "Well, you know you have to go to school and I don't want this to happen any. More." So, I had a wonderful time from then on. The thing I like about it—some of the people I started to school with, they're still present in my life today. Andrew Epps, do you know him? Mr. Epps?

LB: I know the name.

MT: Yeah, okay well he is a long friend of mine, was a neighbor and everything. So, as I said, I went to George Mason School and I stayed there until I graduated in the seventh grade. Then I went up to Armstrong, the old Armstrong on Leigh Street. And we stayed up there for one year. But exciting times came in 1952 when I came back to the Hill to attend Armstrong High School. It was a brand-new school. And you know we were overjoyed by that fact, that we were gon' be able to experience going to a brand new school. So I completed all four of my years at Armstrong High School. Had some friends there. Not a whole lot. 'Cause I never ran with a crowd of children. While I was at Armstrong High School, it was like there was segregation there. The children who lived on the North Side and the children who lived in East End... somehow, the children from the North Side thought they were better than we. They sort of clung together in their little groups. Because see they came from professional families. Most of their moms were teachers and a few lawyers. Might've had one or two doctors. We didn't have that in

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the Hill. They really thought that they were a little better than us. But we didn't let that get us down. Because I knew who I was. Nobody had to define who I was. I was poor but I didn't know I was poor. I was nurtured. I had a loving family. I had loving friends. So that helped to build me as far as my character and so forth, like that.

I graduated from Armstrong in 19... well I got two dates. I finished up all of my course work in 1954. But all of my activities was with the Class of 1955. As I said, I had a few friends during my school years and they became my friends forever. My friends, three girls in particular, they were in my wedding, I was in their wedding, and we have kept that friendship to this day. Something I was getting ready to say... I forgot that thought. Go ahead and ask me something else, maybe I can think of it.

LB: Were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

MT: Oh! That's what I wanted to talk about. There are only a few extracurricular activities because my band was the family, my family. I was... that was... one of the courses we could take. I was in Band for four years. That became a family within the school. We just did so many wonderful things. We, our band, was excellent. We participated in all types of state competition. Our final entertainment was that Mr. Williams took all of the band members. And I think we were like, about 75, in the band, he took us to Atlantic City. We marched in a parade on the boardwalk. That was the joy of my life. I didn't have time for other curriculum activities per se—like the Red Cross and the other little clubs. And I didn't miss it. Because I just enjoyed being with the band. I played the clarinet. I was the second-string clarinet player. And I wish I had had time to pull all those pictures out so you all could see. I enjoyed that immensely. It just was a wonderful life for me. I guess, for me, it was better for me to be faithful to one thing than to try to be halfway faithful in many other activities. And then one thing about that—I completed my coursework in 1954. I went to summer school two years. The reason that I did not get my diploma until 1955 because I only had to complete one course and that was English 12th. But I sacrificed. I went to... I took that in summer school because the last semester of 1954 I chose to stay in Band. If I had gone on and taken my English 12 course—I would've graduated in '54. But I wanted to be with my band family. And that's what I did. I sacrificed that. Went to summer school and took English 12.

LB: It sounds like an amazing band and also huge.

MT: Mhm. It was really... I mean we had everything going for us. One thing, we had a wonderful director, Maurice Williams. He was really great. You know our teachers, during my time at school... they were really wonderful teachers and they had us in mind. I only had one teacher... and you asked me a question about bad leadership... that one teacher, she did something to me... that I really didn't like her. When we came to her class the first day she said, "Now, you're here to learn. And you need to do your part. Because I already have mine, my education. And you have yours to get." I didn't like her for saying that. Because I know she was trying to encourage us. But there's a way you can encourage people but not in a negative way like that. You know, perhaps you could say, "Well, we're not gonna have any nonsense because I want you all to get the very best that you can get. I'm here to support you." But it didn't come across like that. It was revealed when my mom went for parents' conference day. She came back

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and she said to me, “Mary, why do you not like your teacher Ms. Cook?” I said, “Who said I didn’t like her?” “She said you didn’t like her because you don’t participate in the class. She will ask you things and you will tell her you don’t know.” And Mom said, “I know you know. Because you are an A student. So why did you not respond?” I said, “Mom, I just don’t like Ms. Cook. I just don’t like her.” So she said, “Well I tell you now, you gonna have to get a better attitude, because you can’t do that.” So I did try to do a little better the last of that semester. Then what my mom was getting at me about, because citizenship was part of your grade. And I think that year I got a C, because of my attitude. But I just didn’t like Ms. Cook.

But let me tell you about the two that I really did like. Ms. Bettis [sp?] taught me seventh grade English... not seventh grade... I don’t know why I keep saying that... it was eleventh grade English. Our semester courses, the first part of the semester you would have grammar. Second part of the semester you would have literature. I never really cared too much about literature. And the reason because there was a lot of reading to be done. And that’s my, that’s my downfall. I always ask myself, “Well why don’t you like literature?” It requires me to be still too long. And I’m always goin’. My mind’s always thinkin’. So that’s why I somehow didn’t like it. But I loved grammar. And part of that course was we were supposed to have a debate. Before you passed that particular session, you had to have a debate. I happened to have been on the debate team. But I had to do the rebuttal. And after... I can’t even remember... I was telling my daughter the other day—I cannot even remember what the debate was all about. And I didn’t prepare for it or anything. But when... and I was shaking in my boots when I had to do my rebuttal. But when the teacher was critiquing us and she had gone through all of the children. Those who were the affirmative and those who were, you know, the other phase of it. And when she called my name she said, “Mary White. A. A. A.” And I, I didn’t even have confidence... confidence enough to think that I could’ve done that well. I didn’t know that I did that well. But that just gave me some hope right there.

And the other individual that I liked so much that I felt she was a good, she was a strong teacher, was Ms. Diamond. She taught geometry. When I went to her class and it looked like I... geometry, I was not getting that as well as algebra. She told me the basis of what I had to do in order to be successful in geometry. She had me to participate in a [00:45:00 unc. size? sides?] project. I didn’t want to do that. But I just went on and, mediocrely, I went on and did it. She, somehow, Ms. Diamond followed me in my life. Ms. Diamond ended up teaching my daughter, Myra. And Myra’s a math whiz. Ms. Diamond was a math teacher. And this was latter years that that happened. But I just felt that she and Ms. Bettis gave me hope. To let me know that I could do, but I have to want to do. But as I said, I just had a great time in school. My education was good. And I’m glad that I had that opportunity to be able to have that in my life.

You see some of the children today, I don’t know whether they care whether they go to school or not. But we had a thirst. A thirst for knowledge. We went to Armstrong because there were two schools in the community... not in the community... that we had the privilege of going to—Armstrong High School, and from Armstrong High School, Maggie Walker evolved. Armstrong was for the children who were going to college, expected to go to college, college preparatory. Maggie Walker was for those who were going into a vocational education. Latter years it changed. ‘Cause they were only given vocational certificates when my brother was in school. But latter years then they went to the collegiate certificate and the vocational certificate. But I

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chose to go to Armstrong because they said that was where the brainy people were going. So I thought I was brainy; I went to Armstrong.

LB: Did you have any interactions with fellow teachers, or students, or administrators, while you were there, that stick out in your mind?

MT: Well I didn't have a lot of interaction with our principal, but I knew he was a great individual. He was goin' to bat for us for educational materials. The teachers and Mr. Peterson, they always would involve the students in activities outside of the school. And you heard some of that in the... when we had the time capsule open and one of the papers revealed about some of the awards the school received and so I see him as being a great administrator and someone that all of us shall remember because he really had us in mind to help us to evolve in what we should, whatever your gifts were, then you'd go on and do that. And he was a great inspirator for helping us in that way. And we should never forget him. He even, his children attended the school with us and his daughter was in the same graduating class as I—Joyce. And she was friendly. She was good. Mhm.

LB: So... how are the changes that were going on in Richmond during this time discussed in your home when you were growing up?

MT: We knew these things were happening. If we didn't read about it or hear it on the radio or that's how we more or less were knowledgeable about what was going on. My mom and dad were from the old school. What they really wanted us to do—be in control of yourself. Don't you add to any confusion. But be the best that you can to bring about a change. That's how we always were taught. She didn't mind us being involved, but she didn't want us to be the part of the confusion.

LB: What do you think she meant by “confusion”?

MT: You know, out there, she felt that when you go out into the community, or wherever you went, you were representing them. So be on your best behavior. That's why I say that there was... I don't remember fighting and fussing in the community. If it did occur, we had to remove ourself from that very quickly. That's what she meant about “confusion.” ‘Cause she knew that we could not bring that kind of attitude into the home. My home was really a home of peace. I told you, Mom and Dad were the disciplinarians. So they weren't gonna have it otherwise. She didn't want us to go out in the community or wherever we went that somebody had to come back and report negative things about us. So, as I said, it was better to obey than to sacrifice. Mhm.

LB: What were some of your personal turning points during the Civil Rights era in Richmond?

MT: Well you know that started in the 50s. By the time... cause see I graduated in '55... I was really not in school when Rosa Parks, that incident, came about and things about Martin Luther King... I was more or less an adult at that time. I had heard about things that were happening and students from Virginia Union University, they became involved in sit-ins and rallies and what have you. But at that time, when I graduated, I went to work for about two years, and then I got married at the age of 20... 21... 20... I was almost 21. So then I married a gentleman who had

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two children. He had been married before. So I got right into parenting. See? I was married with two children. And then he and I had three additional children together. So I was into parenting up until... well I went to work in 1964. So I didn't have a lot of time for outside activities. I was focused on getting my home started and when the children came by, you know, came into existence, you know what my priorities were then. I wanted to make them the best that I could make them be. You know. Mhm.

LB: Where did you work after high school?

MT: I worked at Capitol Inn on Main Street. 12th and Main Street. And guess what? My husband worked across the street.

LB: Well that was my next question.

MT: I was in the 1100 block. He was in the 1200 block. Right on the corner—1203. And I met him when I went to the bank one day to pick up some change for where I work. And coming across the street, diagonally, he was goin' to pick up some lunch I think. He looked at me and he said, "Are you... do you know Obadiah White?" I just looked at him and I said, "Obadiah White." I said, "Yeah. He's my brother." He said, "I thought so. Because you look just like him." And so he kept on goin'. And then I went on back into my place of employment. And so from that day, when he would come across the street, he would look up in the building at the restaurant. And I was a counter girl, so I was up at the front. He would look there and he would smile and I would smile back at him. He would go on along his way. So I think that went on for about two or three weeks and finally he asked the lady who worked there, where did I live. And she said, "I do not know. But I think she lives on 22nd Street."

He decided to get into the telephone book and look for Whites, the Whites. That was my maiden name—the Whites. And he found two, two Mary Whites. One lived in the 1500 block. That was her married name. And I lived here in the 1100 block. He called to that home. She said, "I know exactly who you're talkin' 'bout. But she doesn't live here." I think she lives in the 1100 block. So he got in the phone book and he found somebody who lived in the 1100 block. He didn't know it was me that he had contacted. He called and he asked to speak to Mary White. And I took the telephone. And he said, "This is George." "George who?" "The fellow that you see on Main Street in the Melody Nights jacket." He was in a little club and that was the name of the club. And I just went on and talked to him. So then he said, "Well do you mind if I come around to see you." I said, "I..." I hesitated. I said, "Well I don't know." He said, "Well I would love to come see you." And he said, "What are you doing next Wednesday?" I said, "Nothing in particular." He said, "Well you mind if I come around for a while?" I said to myself—I might as well give up. "Yes, you may come."

So he came. And I said to him, "I have to say this to you. I have a boyfriend." He said, "You do?" I said, "Yes I do." And I said, "He is in service." And he said, "Oh." He said, "Well can we just be friends?" I said, "I don't know. But I just want you to know upfront that I have someone." But George was so charming and respectful and even when my mom saw him, like I told you, she is a discerner of people. He had ways so much like my father, just gentle and kind. And so George and I got together. And the boyfriend in the service, he had to go his way.

00:58:31 Our first date was, we went to a concert at the Mosque. It was called “The Mosque” at that time. But this is hilarious—guess who went with us? The boyfriend’s sister. The boyfriend’s sister went with us on the first date. And she fell in love with George. And George fell in love with her. And that is my friend to this day! That is my school friend and she along with the other two ladies I was telling you about—all of those ladies loved my husband. Because George was so outgoing and just friendly. And so somebody, my girlfriend, asked me, she said, “Mary you really have some nerve.” I said, “What you mean?” She said, “You gon’ go on your first date with your boyfriend’s sister?” And I said, “I didn’t see nothin’ wrong with it.” Because I was not obligated to him. I didn’t feel like we had that kind of relationship. So that’s how that all started. And my husband and I were blessed to share sixty years together.

LB: That’s wonderful.

MT: Yeah. And he passed this year. January the First. But we celebrated.

LB: Wow. I’m sorry to hear that.

MT: But he was wonderful. We celebrated our fiftieth anniversary in 2007.

LB: That’s a beautiful picture.

MT: 2007. Yeah. He was the joy of my life and he said he had prayed for me. It was at church. That Sunday. And he said... he told God, “I need somebody to help me to raise my two children.” At that time they were only like one and two, I believe, getting ready to turn two and three. And he and I went together for two years. When I married him the oldest boy was four, he turned five that year. His girl was three, going on four. So I’ve had them all my life. So that’s why I say I raised five children. I raised a family of five. And that’s what they were. Didn’t have any step children. They all were sisters and brothers. And that’s how they knew each other. There will not be any step-anything in this family. Yes and so... I’ve just had a good life. I ramble when I talk because my mind just goes so quickly but I’ve had a good life.

LB: Can you tell me about some of the turning points in the community and in your life during the Civil Rights era?

01:01:59 **MT:** Well, I didn’t have... I guess some of the turning points were—we were able to go downtown and enjoy some of the other things that others had been enjoying in the community. I can remember when we would go downtown to shop—Thalhimers and Millers & Rhoads, they were the leading retailers there. I couldn’t go up on the third or fourth floor to shop or anything. I could go up there but they would not give us any courtesy. They wouldn’t... didn’t even want to wait on us. We basically shopped in the basement of Thalhimers. That was what you called the “bargain basement.” That’s where we bought different articles and so forth like that. I didn’t visit Miller & Rhoads too much. Because that seemed to have been a little step above Thalhimers. With prejudice and... I couldn’t deal with that kind of stuff so I stayed, as I said, I stayed out of confusion.

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MT: I can remember going to Woolworth one particular time. There were booths in there where the Caucasians could sit down and eat... maybe a hot dog or what have you. But I had to go and stand up, around the counter and get my food and eat it all. I could buy whatever. And as far as they were concerned: "Buy what you need and get on out of the store." I've always been a very prideful individual but I try to mix pride with humility because you know the Bible talks about our fall. Pride can cause you to fall. I've always tried to be kind to others because I wanted others to be kind to me. It was beginning to break up, you know, segregation. Then it didn't really come into fruition until about end of early 60s. But it was... the movement was starting. I was glad to see that that was happening. We were able to go. We weren't able to go to the movies downtown. We had a couple of... well we had one movie house in the community which was the Robinson Theater. And then finally the East End Theater opened up. And we were able to go there. I don't remember... Well let's say I was not a partyin' person. So I didn't go to many places. It was just concise, the places that I really wanted to go to. I knew changes were taking place all around me. But I just went along with the program. I knew that one day it would be better.

LB: I remember talking one time to John Taylor III. And he told me about the department store that was here in Church Hill on 25th and Clay... and going to the movies one day and seeing his aunts out there picketing the department store.

MT: Well I'll be glad. See? I wasn't even a part of that. But I knew about the department store. His aunts, I think, they were around. One or two of them were older than me, but Maggie, his younger sister... or his aunt... she went to school with me. She was in my period in time. So yeah, there are many stories to be told and I don't know them all. I just know those that affected me. But there are many stories that I can hear now and I said, "That really happened?" Yes it did happen.

LB: One thing that's always confused me a little bit about Church Hill is knowing all of the segregation laws at that time about who could live where... it sounded to me as though Church Hill had some white blocks and then some black blocks and they were all kind of patchworked together.

MT: I tell you... over in the Oakwood community traveling south on any of those streets, 31st... well let me see.. it's further than that... Oakwood Avenue traveling south to Chimborazo... east of... really Chimborazo. Then traveling south to Broad Street. That was the white section. And I think that the... as we were called during that time: "the coloreds"... we lived from basically... 'cause my husband grew up over on 31st Street. I'm a say Leigh. Beginning at Leigh and traveling north to Nine Mile Road. *This* area were for the coloreds. Now where I am right now this didn't become populated with the African American until 'round '52. Because I told you I moved in this area in '52. Round '52. But west of 22nd Street down to... it was the 17th Street at that time that had some black families living there. 'Cause I have people in my city league and they talk about that. But I was not aware of all of that because I didn't come over here until '52. But those families, the children attended Buchanan Elementary School. I hear them talk about it. But I don't know about that. But they grew up over in this community. We had, as you said, we had black and white that was just divided by a thin line. They were living, you know, here—all over Church Hill. The part that was I telling where the Caucasians live... then they started

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moving out of the community, just like here. I understand that all of this, the Fairmount area, this was white. They began moving out of the community and that's how we moved in the community. Because a home became vacant sixty-six years ago, praise God, and it's my home.

LB: It is such a rich history here.

MT: So much history. I can remember some of the changes that happened when I was a child. The trolley car then became a bus through... The trolley car used to run down on Q, P Street, on up to Broad Street. We were just so elated when they took the trolley lines down and then we started riding buses. And you know what? I wish they could bring the trolley car back. We don't realize the blessings that we have had. We didn't realize it at the moment. But looking back on the changes that have come... I don't know sometime if they're for the good or not. 'Cause I refer back to my past and it was wonderful, to get on the trolley and ride downtown. Go to the Capitol Square. Feed the squirrels. And then return back home. You made your fun. It was just a wonderful place to live. Now some people have some negative things that they can talk about but I think my positive accentuate the negative. I just had a wonderful life.

LB: What do you think set you on your path to being the infinite Mrs. T in the neighborhood? And being such a leader and such a activist?

MT: I think I have become who I am because I've always wanted to see things happening. I never liked the words: "I can't," or "I don't want to." Because I think that, I feel that, together, all of us can accomplish something. Which really got me on the path. After I got married and raised my children and, as I said, then I saw my community turnin' into something that I didn't want... I decided then if anything is going to be done... I don't know how I'm going to do it... I'm willing to try. I'm going to do whatever I can. And so I became a community advocate at that time. It's like this—if you do one thing and you be successful at that, it becomes a stepping stone. You go on from that to this and to that.

As we see, and as we saw the community come alive again, then that led to the reality that soon goin' to be a new grocery store. 'Cause we had nothing. We had a little corner store here and a little corner store there. But basically I had to go out in the county if I was really gonna do any kind of quality shopping. I went out into the county. And then I thought about that: Why should I work in the city, pay my taxes, and then take my money and go out into the county and help to foster *their* economics? I don't see much sense in that. I ought to have my needs met right where I pay my taxes and all. And that's why we advocated for the store. We gonna advocate for some more things in the city. Our schools can be better than what they are. We gonna do that. I don't know how long I have to advocate. But I'm gonna do that because I feel that if we work as a team, we can get it done. And you take MLK, for instance, I really want that school. That's a brand-new school. I want to see it turned around and I want it to go on the *map* as an outstanding facility. And it can. But now how do we get that done? I envision getting into the homes, reteaching the parents. I don't know where that break has come. But that droop between 35 and... maybe my numbers are off, I don't know... 35 and 40. They're not teaching our children the things that we have taught ours: morals, respect... think something of yourself. You can be whoever you want to be but you got to want to be whatever. That's what I've been thinking about now. I'm trying to convey that to my city league and anybody who will sit and listen to

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me. If you can offer me any help to get this going, I'm ready. We need to get into the homes of the children and give them some incentives for wanting to do better. They can do it. But they just look like they on a path of destruction. But in that path of destruction there are some good, some good stock along the way. We just have to be able to identify, and bring out the best in the children. Some of the parents that the children have, I wouldn't want 'em for parents either. But yet that child needs the advantage of being able to reach their goal. Many of the young people don't have any goals now.

And I, I went over to Armstrong while we were working on that time opening capsule event. And I love Dr. Bell for saying... he said, "These are some good children." I looked at him. I said, "If you say so. But you know Dr. Bell, thank you for trying to work with them. Because perhaps you can bring out the best in some of them. Maybe most of them. But not *all* of them. But use the tools that you have to do whatever you can. To bring out that in them."

And it's wonderful that you all are there working with them. That's a wonderful thing. I wish you every success in the world. Because many of the children are coming from the public housing. That should not be... they should not be stereotyped for that. They have to live somewhere. But it's some good stuff that's come out of public housing.

LB: That's for sure. And I know at the end of the semester, our students and the Armstrong students got together and they talked. Our students wrote papers for us on what the semester had been and they all talked about how inspiring they found the Armstrong students.

MT: Well that's just wonderful. That is marvelous. You all keep up the good work.

LB: Now I have one question, which is, you really started going in the 90s, the early 90s, '92 right? I remember Church Hill during that time. There were some very challenging things going on what with the crack epidemic, and the guns, and all of that craziness.

MT: You know all of that was going on. And when we started... when we as a community came together and formed the civic league, the civic league which was formed in 1993... We sat down and we talked about drugs. We talked about prostitution. We didn't have many robberies and all that because the drugs and the prostitution were the #1 crimes at that time. And it's nothing for me on any given day to go out and see somebody tryin' to engage in drugs and the prostitutes soliciting somebody. You know what I did? I became involved in that. I would go out on that front porch. I would look them dead in the eye. And I have spoken. I became involved with the ladies of the day and the night. I learned their names. Deborah. Antoinette. Several of them. And I said to her one day, I was sweeping the sidewalk, and I said, "Good morning." She said, "Good morning." I said, "Let me ask you a question—what is your name?" She said, "My name is Antoinette." I said, "Don't tell me your name Antoinette." She said, "Well you wrong." I said, "With a wonderful and popular name... that's a famous name! You're in history." And I said, "You want to defame your name by prostituting?" I said, "You shouldn't do that." I said, "You're a beautiful young lady and you can do better in life than that." I said, "You think you can't but you can and you need to stop doing that." She said, "Yeah I need to think about it." I said, "Well in the meantime if you want to prostitute—don't come up here in my community and do it. I don't want to see you doing that." I said, " 'Cause I'm gonna have to call the policeman if

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you do that.” “Would you?!” I said, “Mhm. Yes I would.” I said, “So you move on down the road. Don’t bring that up here in my community.”

MT: I had another one, Donna. Donna was a beautiful young lady. I talked to her. I told her, I said, “Donna, you don’t have to do what you’re doing.” And she opened up. She came here one Sunday with me and we ate dinner and she opened her heart up to me and she said, “I really don’t know why I did this. I fell on hard times.” She said, “I used to work at the bank on Main Street. I don’t know what made me do this. But, as I said, I fell on hard times. I really don’t want to do this.” I said, “Well you know, if you don’t want to do it, you have to make up in your mind you’re not going to do it.” Ms. Carter and I were able to get Donna into a rehab place in Kentucky. And I don’t think she completed her program ‘cause the last I heard of it she said that she was going to leave. And she never contacted me anymore. One day I wish she would come back and just say, “Look at me, Ms. T, I’m a brand-new person.”

Then there was another one... Oh what was that little lady’s name? I’m a call her Brenda, I can’t think about it. I was out on the side... Usually I encounter them when I get out cleaning up around the block. When she came by I spoke to her, she said, “Hi.” I said, “How long are you gonna do what you’re doing?” She said, “What am I doing?” I said, “You know what you’re doing: prostituting. How long are you gonna do this?” “I don’t know.” I said, “Well you ought to think about it. ‘Cause let me tell you about me... if I were going to be a prostitute, I would be the best at my business! I would not be walkin’ ‘round here lookin’ like you with raggedy sneakers on and the clothes that you have on.” I said, “I would have beautiful furs. I would be lookin’ so beautiful. I would have my escort service pull up in front of my door, put me in a limousine and take me where I want to go. I’d be in a nice apartment.” I said, “I would not subject myself to do what you are doing.” I said, “Because you don’t care about yourself.” “Yes I do.” I said, “No you don’t. You’ve been out here for a long time.” I said, “I wish you would think about that. You don’t have to do that. You’re a beautiful woman.” I said, “Don’t give yourself away like that.” I said, “What’s going on in the community with those that you are interacting with? You’re just getting’ two or three dollars.” I said, “I would have plenty of money in my pocket.” So I said, “You need to stop doing what you’re doing.” I said, “Are you going to?” “I don’t know.” So I think I had warmed her up enough—she didn’t wanna hear no more. So she walked on. But I don’t know where she went. She’s not in this community.

We cleaned this community up of drugs and prostitution. It was over a period of two or three years. We got with the first precinct police station. I can’t remember the name at the time. But we had that rapport with the police department and all of the lieutenants that were assigned to our community, we got to know them. We could talk to them on a personal basis. They became a part of our civic league. And that’s how we cleaned up our community. We told them what we wanted. That prostitution has to go. That drugs has to go. Because we knew we had little children coming up in the community then and we just didn’t want it to happen. So it moved on down the line a little further. And I think it went down to T. 22nd and T Street. So now they’re trying to move that traffic out of their community. But the residents got to get involved! They have to be vigilant. And, as I said, when people who want to do wrong in your community... when they see that you are watching them and you are putting yourself into that activity, what they are doing, they know that you don’t mind calling the police... you don’t have no problem. But people want to go into the house, close their blinds, shut the doors, and think you’re safe. That’s not gon’

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work! You got to become active. And if anybody gonna do it, you have to do it. You know my bark is worse than my bite. But I'm not just gonna let people come into *this* community, and take advantage of me. As I said, I've been around here sixty-six years now. And I want to continue to live peaceful. So whatever I can do to get that negative activity out of the community, I'm gonna do.

LB: Mrs. Thompson, are there things that you'd like the generation of kids growing up in Richmond today to know?

MT: I'd like for the generation of kids to know that they are somebody and there are others out there will help you to meet your goals in life. I think the children of today... They don't think... I think some of them believe that we don't care about them. Do y'all feel like that? People... we have to show love for them. And my daughter tells me, she said, "Mom, you got to realize that the millennials are what you have to deal with now. Your way... you have to kinda compromise a little so that you'll be able to understand how they operate." I said, "Well I can buy that to a certain extent Myra. But I do not... I cannot buy into disrespect or doin' things that will harm others. But do what you know will help to make a community better that it'll be able to thrive. I'm for all of that. But nothing beat morals. Morals is the founda... they are the *foundation*, what you have *learned*. I don't know how many of them even look at things spiritually. If I could get more of them involved with that... Because if they... That's the basic [sic] for being able to be a good neighbor, a good citizen, a productive worker. If you stop feeding on the negative things... A lot of people, they don't see that the young people, they just wanna have a good time. I just... I have nothing against people that want to drink. But every time I look now there's another brewery goin' up. How many breweries do we need? How much beer can ya drink? How much wine can you drink? You can't even socialize now unless alcoholic beverages come into play. It was not so when I was comin' up. There were other things that we could come together. Picnics and hotdogs and hamburgers and soda pops and what have you. But we... I don't know. I just want to get back to basics. Not that we can go all the way back. But there are foundations that have already been laid. And I want the young people to be able to know what those foundations are, captivate on them, build on them, and help to strengthen our community and our world.

LB: Do you think there's anything that we, as a community, are in danger of forgetting?

MT: That takes some thought. I have so many thoughts about... Oh. I do know one. Our communities are endangering themselves by really not being neighbors to one another. For instance, in this immediate community... In the 50s, when I moved into the community, I knew everybody. Everyone knew me. We all sort of stood for the same principal: Raise our children, encourage our children to do their best, be respectful of one another, you're not gonna be fighting your neighbors in the community, you aren't gonna do anything. We gonna look out for one another. You gonna watch out for our homes when we are away from the home. We didn't have people comin' in, robbin', breakin' into the home. Didn't have all of that. And that type of thing is surfacing again because I've been tryin' to form a neighborhood watch since the organization started in '93. But persons who are moving into the community, you can't even get them together long enough to explain to them: "I'm not tryin' to get into your business. I'm tryin' to help make where you live safer. And those who would come into the community to do devastating things... They know that 'I can't do that because *that* community is lookin' out for

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one another.” But I can’t get ‘em to buy into that. I’m not to say that it won’t happen. Maybe I’m not the one to do it. You know, I feel that your destiny will carry you to a point in life and after that there’s somebody else has to take up that mantle and move with it. So that’s what I don’t really like about my community right now, I just cannot... they have their own little group that they cater to, their own personal friends. But your friends ought to be my friends. I don’t know whether that’s selfishness on my part, but that’s the way I came up. They say, “If you want to have friends, you first must show yourself to be friendly.” And I feel that I’ve done that. I have neighbors in this block and I feel like they movin’ in on my territory. Because I’ve been here. I’ve seen what it has been and what it has become. They don’t even lift up their hand and wave at you. You don’t have to talk to me. You don’t have to tell me nothin’ ‘bout your business. But acknowledge I’m here. I was here before you. But I don’t know. But I can’t let that worry me. I have to keep doing what I have to do. I’ll keep speaking to you. And I’ll take it as far as I can. That really hurts me.

LB: It’s a very different feeling.

MT: It is a different feeling. I can’t talk to that millennium back there she said, “You just have to understand.” But I said, “There are just some things that are. And I don’t think that you can make it any better than to show yourself to be friendly to one another. I’ll do anything for anybody in this community. But it leads you to a point that you are skeptical of doing anything ‘cause you don’t wanna feel that they feel you’re steppin’ on their territory or their space. You understand what I’m saying?”

LB: I understand, I think, perfectly. I remember a couple of years ago Patricia and I were working on an exhibition for the Valentine called “Made in Church Hill.”

MT: Mhm, mhm. I remember that.

LB: We worked a lot with Fourth Baptist on that. And one time we wanted to do oral history reviews with people in the community. We thought Family Resource Center would be a good place to do it. You would think so. It was a huge mistake. Because the Family Resource Center is next to the Subrosa bakery. So all the people who came in were these young, white millennials. And they all talked about, “Oh we love the community so much. We love the community.” But we figured out what they meant by community was each other. It wasn’t anyone who had lived here before them.

MT: That’s it. I couldn’t say it any better. That’s right. That’s their world.

LB: And that’s why we went over to Fourth Baptist. To say can we please have some real interviews?

MT: That’s their world. They are into each other. And they don’t want to broaden their stand to let somebody else come in.

LB: It’s a funny way to live.

01:38:17

MT: It is. It is. It is. And I guess maybe they see me as a has-been. I don't know. But that is a funny way to live. Because, you know, I can help you more than you think I can.

LB: No, because I've been hearing about you for years and years. [unc. name] Harris and David Herring telling me about all the...

MT: all that we'd do when were trying to rebuild the community and I... one thing that I have to say too that I didn't tell you about... I was privileged to serve in Richmond Public Schools for forty years as a school secretary.

LB: Where did you work?

MT: I started out at Fairmount Elementary School in 1964. That's how I began to know the children of the community and their parents. Parents were very much a part of the school life of the children. We had a wonderful PTA and I see some of those children now and they all know me, know Mrs. Thompson, Mrs. T. And they have grown up lawyers and doctors and, I mean, wonderful things! Because we encouraged the children during that time. I went to, after they closed Fairmount Elementary School, I was reassigned to a new school that Richmond Public Schools was brining into existence. It's called, "The Residential School Program." I didn't know a thing about that phase of education. But I was offered the job. Five schools closed. Five secretaries had to have a job. And of all of the five schools, I was the only secretary that said, "I will try." They started the school out on the grounds of the United Methodist Children's Home on West Broad Street. And that was just like a small part of heaven. Beautiful surroundings, green grass with little cottages on the grounds. And Richmond Public Schools rented three of the cottages because the children would live there, five-day residential placement, go home on the weekend. I just thought that was the most beautiful and just a place of peace on the grounds of the school. I loved it. They were emotionally disturbed children but they didn't interfere with me.

LB: And they were in a beautiful, peaceful place.

MT: Surrounding. Yes.

LB: That card is full.

MT: What? I talked y'all...

LB: No, it's good!

MT: I loved it so much I went there in 1979, then they opened up the second building over on the corner of Labernum and Hermitage Road and that was called Thirteen Acres School. Have you ever heard of that? I became secretary there in 1994, I believe. '94. I get my dates mixed up. Well anyway, I served as secretary at Thirteen Acre School. And finally in my latter years of my employment I was asked to serve as secretary of two schools: [01:42:50 unc.] School and Thirteen Acre School.

LB: So you went back and forth?

01:42:54

MT: Yes I did. And I managed. I worked on my own schedule. I worked on my own schedule. I had the best bosses anybody could have. Mr. Smith and Mr. [unc. Loggin.?]. Who is still my friend to this day. We just had such a wonderful rapport with each other. And I ran the schools like I ran my home. I had freedom. I've always had freedom in my life. You know nobody has really tried to contain me. They gave me what my budget was for the school and I ran the school, planned for the school, just like I planned for my home. The teachers never was in need of equipment or supplies, anything. I just had it all. And then in 1994, I believe, my boss came, and he asked me, he used to call me Mary White, "Mary White, what about trying to do a yard sale?" I said, "A yard sale?" He said, "It could raise some money for the school." Because by the children being there in residential care, we finally took over everything that... it was home away from home for the children. We had a behavior modification program. As a result of good behavior, if you did your part, then on Thursday you would get a treat. You would go out. We would go to the bowling alley. We could go swimming. We would go on little picnics. And at the end of each school year we would take them on a two-day weekend. We went to Busch Gardens and stayed overnight. We went to the Baltimore Aquarium, stayed overnight. We would just take them different places because of the yard sale. I became the coordinator of the yard sale. Our first yard sale was 54 presenters. The next year was 99 presenters. The next year was 125. And from that point on when we finally stopped doing the yard sale, I had 413 vendors. The yard sale participants, they became my family. There were yard sale person... there were vendors all over—North Carolina, Alexandria, Virginia. We even had one to come in one year from Florida. 'Cause the word just went out: "Have you tried the yard sale at Thirteen Acres? Call Mrs. Thompson to see can you get a space?" And we didn't outprice the people. And so that became really a wonderful family fellowship. They got to know me and I got to know them. It was always, as I said, no confusion, but respect of one another. That was another signature event in my life. I just am blessed. Whatever I try to do I'm gonna always try to do my very best. And you see how the time opening the capsule turned out?

LB: It was amazing.

MT: We didn't have any idea that that would be. And now in the community I don't know whether you've heard about it—we do a wonderful National Night Out. We been doin' that since, as a group, we been doin' that since 2011. Started out in my community. And then I got that bright idea. I said, "You know, comin' out for National Night Out. Just in those small community and residents comin' together. The same old same old people. I didn't see where that was accomplishin' much other than to come out and eat a few hotdogs and what have you's. A couple hours and then you go right on back to your individual homes. And the idea came to me after the 2010 [01:48:12 unc.]. I said, "We need to pull communities together." I said, "I'm goin' to see if I can get four civic leagues to buy into this idea. To let's find a place and do a major National Night Out." I was able to get three associations to join together. And then Robinson Theater heard about it. They called me and invited themselves in. I said, "Yes. The more the merrier." So we have been workin' together as the steering committee. And when we had our first National Night Out, 2011, I shall never forget it. We had over 1,000 people to come out.

LB: That's fantastic.

01:49:21

MT: And it's just growin' every year. We have not had less than 1,000 people every year since 2011. I just say. I just thank God. I say, "Lord, you do some most marvelous things." Now that we have a lot of... the percentage of... Caucasians in the community, that makes it even better. And so I have one young man that volunteered to say that he want to serve on the committee. He's a new resident and that's just wonderful. So we lookin' for another grand event on the 7th of August. And I know it will be just as fabulous. 1,000 people.

LB: It sounds wonderful.

MT: And Bon Secours is a great supporter of this. They funded for us. And then we have some of the churches who give donations. Organizations give us donations. We went from thirty service providers. Last year we had 43. This year we're planning to have ground for 50 service providers. So it's just growin'. And I, like I said, I'm blessed to be a part of some wonderful things.

LB: And to have created some wonderful things.

MT: I just love it, I love what I do.

LB: Now Mrs. Thompson, is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you would like to say?

MT: I think I've told you all the little details of my life. I just want to do... My next vision is with the grocery store coming, the culinary center coming, eventually [01:51:29 unc.] is gonna do an office, a medical office building, which is what we need. 'Cause I told them I was tired of goin' out to the county to get medical services. We ought to have it in our community. We're trying to build up 25th Street now. That's the economical vein of the community. Once it was once very active. That's when we had some black businesses and all on 25 Street. We want to bring that back alive again. We have one or two entrepreneurs on that strip that's trying to buy up all the property. We gotta try to get around that. Because we want to bring in some different type businesses. I want to see another nice ice cream facility.

LB: That would be wonderful.

MT: I think we gonna have it 'cause the lady right there by [01:52:40 unc.] building, right there at the corner of 26 and Nine Mile Road, she has a trailer out there now with ice cream. And I just give her all the support and encouragement. The building behind there used to be a dentist's office. She's gonna renovate that into the parlor. I said, "Thank you. I'm gonna see my ice cream parlor back into the community." We had... I would like to see something like a... some people don't think about it... we need another nice hardware store where I can get my nuts and bolts. I'm a handy woman. They say "handy man." I'm a handy woman. I can do all sorts of things in the home. I'd like to see that kind of thing back into the community. We had a wonderful bakery. Now Subsarosa [sic. I think she means Subrosa], they have pastries and everything. But we could have that down here too. We did have a wonderful bakery here. And I'd like to see, after the grocery store come to fruition, that complex. I'd like to see a new state of the art library. The library, they put some Band-Aids on it. That's all it is. But we need a larger library with more

updated technology. I don't know how we gon' do that, but I envision relocating Family Dollar Store, maybe on the corridor. And extending the library there. It can be done. I just need some money.

LB: Well... Bon Secours.

MT: I just need some money.

LB: Yeah.

MT: But the Family Dollar can be relocated somewhere else, if not out of the community because I think we gonna find all of our needs met with the new facilities at 25th and Fairmount Avenue.

LB: It's an exciting time.

01:55:40

MT: Isn't it? It's a great time, a great time to be alive. And all I want to say to the community—keep hope alive. Don't ever give up. Because we are steadily progressing and anything, like my pastor used to say: if you stand still, somebody will run over you. So keep moving. And we can do that. It's a great community and Councilperson Newbille said, "It's a great time in the 7th district."

LB: That's for sure.

MT: It really, it really is. Now... I'm on the sideline when it comes to politics. I don't wanna be truly involved in that. But I will be a supporter of those who desire to go in that direction. I have participated... I think I had... one, two, three... *four* political campaigns. And my home served as a station, not a campaign headquarter [sic] per se, but a station for those campaigns. But I just lost heart with our last election with Hillary and President Trump. I just... I don't know. That did something to me. 'Cause I just knew she was gon' be our first female. I am really a promoter of—let the woman do something. I don't care who the woman is. Let her emerge. Let her try her wings and see what she can do. Because there is a leader out there that can do it. I'm waiting. I don't know if I'll ever see that day. But...

LB: I sure hope so.

MT: You all carry on. And I hope that that woman will be godly sent and blessed to emerge as a great leader. I'm for that.

LB: Thank you so so much Mrs. Thompson. This has been a wonderful interview.

MT: I'm hoping that something I've said will be of some inspiration to someone.

LB: I think the big challenge is going to be taking what you've said and taking... you know editing some excerpts out.

MT: You've got to edit and condense it and put it all in content. But I've come from a wonderful childhood experience in the Church Hill to a grown... to an adult. And now senior citizen. And I put 'em all together and one has built on the other. On the back of another and I've had a great life. When I was awarded I was given... I've gotten many awards from the community. My last award was in August. List Organization awarded me... I was a recipient of a award for community work. I said to them then, "Let my life speak for me." And I pray that my life has not been in vain. People still call me to woman to do this and woman to do that. I said, "I can't do much." But that that I can do I'm willing to do. 'Cause I... we need to keep growing. We keep growing. I have hope. I tell God, I say, "Well, I don't know how long I have. But I do want to see fruition of my efforts, some of the things, as it's taken place."

LB: You've already seen a lot of fruition.

MT: I have. I have. But I'm greedy. I want to see more. I want to see more.

LB: Well thank you so much.

MT: Thank you.

02:00:23

LB: This has been wonderful.

MT: Thank you.

LB: And Brian Palmer is gonna come.

MT: When is Brian Palmer gonna come? Do you know what day?

LB: I don't know but I know that he or Ashley, the curator who's arranging it, they should be in touch with you. I know he's reshooting some of the portraits he's already taken. He's got some big special camera that he's rented. And so I think...

MT: Oh my... I'll have to have a little talk with Brian. He have to make me look good now.

LB: He makes everyone look wonderful.

MT: 'Cause I have a photographer at church, our church photographer, and I tell him, I said, "Uh huh. Now Frank you takin' these pictures now, but you gotta touch 'em up. 'Cause I gotta look good." And he really has taken some beautiful snapshots of me.

LB: I can't imagine you would need retouching.

MT: Oh yes, I do. Yes I do, baby, yes I do. Here's my photos of my wedding anniversary. Come over here baby so you can see. I'm glad I went on and did that. My husband said to me, "When... if we are still living when I'm fifty years old and we gon' be together..." I said, "Yeah! We gonna be together." He said, "I wanna get married at church." 'Cause I got married

in my backyard. And we... all of that happened here, Laura. When I got married. This is my... this is my wedding picture when I got married.

LB: Oh that's beautiful.

MT: '57. And that was my 50th anniversary.

LB: You can just see the look of love in your husband's eyes.

MT: Mhm. That's my precious George. Mhm. This photobook right here was when my photographer took this one of my husband and I. They gave us a celebration at church. He, I think... Daddy... George had... I had thirty five years teaching in church school. And George was up to like forty, forty-five years. And they gave us a celebration. Ooh Mary. So you know I'm getting so really discouraged because I get three and four cards a week sometime—"I want to purchase your home." "I would like to buy your home." And I'm not gonna sell my home. 'Cause my home is for my children.

LB: These are beautiful.

MT: Yeah.

LB: So you're at 31st Street?

02:03:39

MT: 31st Street Baptist Church. Mhm. But we're goin' through a little turmoil right now.

LB: Is Pastor Henderson still there?

MT: Dr. Henderson left...

LB: Oh, I didn't know that.

MT: ...the middle of January. We've gotta faction of people 'round there that really workin' against him to get him out of the church. And so he decided to go ahead and retire. He said 'cause he didn't want to bring any type of diversiveness [sic], you know, in the church. Well it's already divided. I'm on one side and they're on another. I think that's why I can't get my swag back because I feel so low and 'cause a church that I have known to be so loving and supportive of one another, now they have become divided. I've seen all of that kind of foolishness in my lifetime... in the Church Hill area.

LB: My friend Reggie Gordon, I know, is also at 31st Street Baptist.

MT: Oh yes. See and I'm telling ya. I just don't know what's going on.

LB: This looks like an amazing celebration.

MT: Oh it was. We all had a reception at the convention center. You know Laura... God... if you just try to do right and you have a... have that spiritual connection... you know you can really relieve in the things you want to do and it will come to pass. Now when I started out with that... and this anniversary and I said... well we wanted to have the reception at church but we knew we knew so many people and the church of course, George has always been there for his entire life. I said, "Well I want to open it out to the... up to the church." But I said, "We gonna have to do this by RSVP because I just can't do this." So we started out at 200. I said, "Well we gonna do a reception for 200 people." We did a reception for 325 people.

Woman 1: Woops.

MT: And the cost was just growin' and growin' and growin'. But God worked it out for us. And the day that we had that celebration I didn't owe nobody. Not one time. We had paid it all off.

LB: It's a beautiful, beautiful table.

MT: So I showed you this pictures to let you see my photographer. I think... look in the back of one of those books you'll see my photographer. Maybe that one.

LB: This one?

02:06:43

MT: Yeah. No. The other one at the end there. Maybe I don't got it. I don't have the right book. Look inside. The inside cover. The very back. Frank, I think. Frank picture is there. No is it? No. Oh no. Which... I don't know where he is. Well he might be in this book. I don't know. But he does such good work.

LB: Well this is, this is a wonderful memorial to him.

MT: That lady there, Ms. Monroe, she's dead now. But she gave a wonderful testimony and talkin' a shop! You know how Ms. Brown got up there and talked on the event, the time-opening event. That woman's a shop. She's a Armstrong graduate. Ms. Monroe was.

LB: Do you know who I'm interviewing tomorrow? Do you know Virginia Jackson? Ms. Jackson on Oakwood Avenue? She's 92.

MT: Ohhhh my you gonna get a wealth of information.

LB: I know it.

MT: And some of them older people they are so witful [sic]. You know they can tell it all.

LB: It's true.

MT: Mhm.

LB: Well thank you so much.

MT: So how many have you interviewed so far?

LB: You are #28.

MT: Ooh girl! Well you can take a little bit of what I say and just add it to the rest of the people.

LB: Well that's always the challenge. The way the show will look there'll be a big portrait of you. And next to you they'll be about 300 words that I've taken from your interview. And that'll be your text panel.

MT: Take the best words and put them together.

LB: It's going to be tough to choose. It'll be very tough.

MT: Take the best words! 'Cause I know I ramble sometime. But that's the way my mind is. I can be... I start out thinking one thing, then my mind jump to something else. [02:08:54 unc.] right now. Yeah. It is what it is. I guess that's what makes me who I am. Yeah.

LB: Well it was a wonderful interview and we really appreciate it.

02:09:07

MT: Alright. Thank you so much for coming.

LB: Thank you.

MT: And now I can rest. 'Cause I... you know I really... I can just talk, talk, talk. But I don't really like to be interviewed.

LB: Oh no.

MT: Isn't that funny?

W1: You did great.

MT: Just like I had to meet with a young lady yesterday from the culinary center. And she wanted to prick my brain... what can they do to get the information out and all. I said, "I have one suggestion to you—you want to talk about the advantages of the culinary school and you want to get the children in the community interested?" I said, "Go out there to Armstrong High School and talk to them..."

LB: That's a great idea.

MT: ... talk to that graduating senior class. And let them know what's available. Because some of them are not gonna be able to go, per se, into a college. Maybe into a community college. But this is something that they can do. Maybe if they're not able to pursue their education otherwise.

LB: Absolutely.

MT: Mhm. So they said they were gonna contact Dr. Bell.

LB: I really like Dr. Bell.

MT: Oh, he's nice. Really nice.

LB: I feel like he's really getting something done. Evette and Marvin say that he's making...

MT: I understand that that other administration that was there before was really hard to deal with. I don't know her and I haven't met her.

LB: It's been like a revolving door there for quite a while. You know, a principal comes for a year and then the next one's there and...

MT: Right, right.

LB: And it's really hard to build anything if you're doing it that way.

MT: Mhm, mhm, that's true. And you know that's what... I'm glad you said that. Because that's what I try to convey to the builders and the people in the community. We want stabilization. But it can only come through homeownership. Because all this rental property and apartments and everything—they are transient residents.

02:11:07

LB: It's a different feel.

MT: And they do not build a community. And I said that when we talked about rehab-ing the community—that's the first thing I said to T.K., "We want homeownership. 'Cause we want the community to become stabilized and we can't do this if we have a lot of rental property, and whatcha-call-it... rooming housing." I said, "We can't do that." I said, "'Cause these people goin' through the front door and out the back door and nothing has been accomplished. What advantages have they done as far as our community? We can't have that." Can't have that. Let's get some homeownership. And so let's start out with affordable homes. Eventually after you are certain percentage of the community have affordable homes—then we can reach out and branch out. And bring in the people on the higher income. They can come, if they want to invest in us, they can come and help to help make the community diverse in all ways. That's what we can do. Now that's what has happened. We've got 'em come from all walks of life in here now.

LB: It's a very different place than it used to be.

MT: It is. It is. And I can show you some pictures that you would say, "That's the community?" Yeah. That's the community. Mhm. So when I look around, I just say, "Thank you. I'm blessed. I'm blessed." So now... I don't know how I'm gon' do *this*. But I gotta figure out a way. I gotta go and pray about it. The developers have come in. They built these homes. And they are now jackin' up the prices. So I don't know how. We gotta figure out. The residents have to come

together and put a cap on the prices. Because we got developers who have come in and put up homes now. They want \$400,000 and above.

LB: Wow. That's crazy.

MT: Is that not crazy? I don't know what that's gonna do to my home as far as taxes. I don't know what that's gonna do. But I told my daughter, "Well we will continue to be thrifty." That we're not going to spend every dime we have. Gonna put some money in the bank. 'Cause we gonna keep the taxes up on this home. 'Cause I have vowed that nobody's gonna get this home. I've put too much in it. Energy in it. Getting ready to do repainting and all in here now where my husband goin' up and down the steps when he was sick. They rolled a wheelchair through here. They marred up some of my work and everything. So now I'm gonna get all of that stuff restored and we gotta go outside and do some work there. That wall that surrounds my house, that retaining wall, that fell in 2004. I had to restore that wall.

LB: That's a big project.

MT: Just to restore that wall was \$74,000 dollars.

LB: Wow.

02:15:06

MT: You tell me it's a big project.

LB: I had no idea it was that big a project.

MT: \$74,000. I said, "Lord have mercy."

LB: That's hard to fathom.

MT: Ain't that somethin'? But it fell. And by me living, I guess, so close. The home was so close to the wall and it was a blessing. 'Cause this section, about a eight foot section, up in this area, if that had fallen, the engineers said my house might've slipped right on off of the foundation. Isn't that scary?

LB: It's really scary.

MT: Mhm. And so the back portion of this house had to be rebuilt and it now rests on ten feet stilts that's down into ten feet of cement. So that's why everything was so costly. And I had to get a structural engineer to come in, pay him to just assess the matter. Shoo. I really been through something. I retired 2004 from the school system. My husband had his stroke July 2nd, 2004. And the wall of Jericho came down August 30th, 2004.

LB: Wow, what a year.

MT: All that happened in that year. But I got through it somehow. I got through it. And so now I'm gonna sell my home? Let you have my home? No. You can't give me enough money to do

that. And see people comin' in and... this is folks' lifestyle here. And they comin' in now to upset that. And we have Ms. Braxton, Ms. Roots I know is in the community. Ms. Keys over there. These are people are old as I am. In fact they older. 'Cause I'm 81. And so some of them are but a couple of years older than I am. Where are they gonna go and relocate?

LB: I know.

MT: Where are they gonna go? They can't even afford their apartments that they're building up now. You know, some areas, a one-bedroom apartment, to rent it is \$1500. Now where can you do...

LB: You can't do that.

MT: You cannot do this. And that's why I keep advocating. When I go to the meetings, I just say to them: "You all have to think about us. We were the ones that have already planted the foundation for you to come in now and build on the foundation. And now you gonna come in and kick us under the bus?" I say, "I will not have it. I will not have that." I hope some of the older people don't get tired but keep expressing and saying, you know, I'm gonna do what I can as long as I can, but... we just don't know. But I knew that this was gonna come. And so I'm just gonna put a little funds aside. Can't eat as much ice cream. Or eat at the fast food places. But put some money in the bank so that you'll be able to pay your taxes.

W1: Can I use your bathroom?

MT: Yeah. Go right in there and turn to your left.

W1: Down this hallway?

MT: Yeah.

W1: Thank you so much.

MT: Right inside this next room. Turn to your left honey. You all sure I can't get you some water or something?

LB: I'm totally fine but thank you.

MT: Mhm. So I think about all of that, Laura. I just... and I don't want to be wearied. Because I had a stroke in 2014. But it happened that it didn't do anything devastating to me. I don't think as quick as I want to think sometime. Had a pair of thyroid operation. But I'm bouncing back from all of that. So at times now, I can feel different places in my head where I may have a little pain. So I do have a neurologist and he wanted to put me on this medication but I don't want to get my body all drugged up on different medications and stuff.

LB: I understand that.

MT: I don't want to do that. I was on [02:20:06 unc. acrinot?] to ward off strokes. I gotta go to my doctors another week. I may have to go back on that 'cause sometime I feel little symptoms. Like when I had my stroke. Like a tiredness in my head. I feel that every now and then. But I just pray over myself.

Did you find everything alright?

W1: I did. Thank you.

MT: I pray over myself that God will just... because my healing is already there. I just have to accept it. So I take a aspirin a day.

LB: That's pretty basic.

MT: Take a aspirin a day. Don't y'all forget your cell phones. I know I'll have some nice phones if you do.

LB: I know.

END TIME: 02:20:58