

A Community Remembers
Interview: Myra Smith 1, 2, & 3

LB: [...] We're good.

MS: Oh!

LB: You've got your own mic.

MS: Oh my!

LB: Yeah! Two recorders...

MS: Two recorders. Wow...

LB: Just in case of disaster

MS: I'm impressed. Ok.

LB: So, good. Tell you what, Myra, why don't you start by telling me something about how you grew up?

MS: Mm hmm?

LB: And tell me about your family.

MS: Ok. I grew up, and when I was born, my parents lived on Rosewood Avenue in the West End. And I think when I was about six months old, they bought a house in the West End for \$11,000. Can't do that anymore. Um...on Greenville (?) Avenue. And so, my mom, my dad, my brother who is four years older than I am, and myself, and I pretty much lived there until I was 19. So, in our neighborhood, there was Amelia Street School, was right across the street. And [?] School was right down the street, so I walked to a Amelia Street School for, um, for elementary school. Um, my parents – my mother worked at what's now called Virginia Health Systems which was MCV. And she was LPN. And then became a technician and that's how she retired. My father was a letter-carrier. My parents moved here when they were, um, right after they got married. And I believe it was '55.

LB: Where had they lived before that?

MS: Both of my parents were from Amelia County, Virginia, which is about, mmm, 40 miles to the west. That's where I currently live now. [?] my parents house. So, they grew up in the same neighborhood, got married, and came to Richmond. And that's what a lot of people did. You know, they moved to Richmond for the opportunity to work. Because in that sense, it was farming and days work – oftentimes individuals who lived in the counties. There was not a lot of plumbing for individuals in the

counties. So a lot of people came to Richmond to work. So mom decided to be a nurse, and so she went to nursing school. And she worked at St. Philips, which was the segregated hospital at MCV. So...

LB: Tell me more about that.

MS: Well, she was in the LPN program through the Richmond public school system. And there was segregate—so St. Philips was the hospital where, um, African Americans went to, um... African Americans went to, uh, to be taken care of. Yeah.

LB: So she worked there. Your dad was a letter-carrier.

MS: And probably one of the first African American letter-carriers in...in... this area.

LB: Really?

MS: Mm hmm.

LB: Tell me more about that.

MS: Well, um, you know, it's a funny thing with my dad... My dad was a young man, he worked, you know, on a farm, helped on a farm. And in the Korea—Korean War was going on. And the guy he worked for said, you know, "I can get you out of this. You can stay here and work on the farm." And my dad thought about it for a long time and was like, "No, that's not what I want to do with my life. I don't want to stay on the farm." So, he went to, you know, the Korean War and then, um, think he had some jobs, but went into the post office. So... which is pretty interesting. He worked—he retired from the post office. His route was Lakeside. And so, he was one of those guys who knew everybody in the neighborhood, and he enjoyed his job.

LB: I'll bet he did, it looks like a really fun job to have.

MS: It was fun, it was fun. My dad was one of those guys who was pretty well-respected. Um... amazing thing, when he retired, um, he got plaques from businesses. You know, I's like, "Can't just retire, you got plaques?" But, his—his customers really liked him. And my dad was—had a great personality. He was extremely respectful. You know, I'll never forget the day when – this was always so interesting – my dad died in 19...99. No. My father died in 1996. And I was sitting in the funeral home in Amelia County and my father was [?] and people were coming in and out, and a gentleman came in. Caucasian gentleman. I didn't know him. Um... he came in, he kind of sto—walked up to the casket and looked—I was sitting there by myself cuz I was in the room by myself. He walked and looked at the casket. And he looked at my dad. And he turned around and he introduced himself to me. He was the manager of the Bon Air branch Post Office. He said, "Your dad was a great man. They shoulda built a statue for him. He was extremely nice. He was the nicest man I knew." And he left! I was like—and I haven't seen him since. It was just an amazing

thing, and that's the one thing I really took from my father was about respect. My father respected everyone. He was one of those guys who would talk to anyone. Um... and oftentimes people would tell me, they'd never met a nicer guy... than my dad. [?]

LB: Ok

MS: So... and—and, that was my dad. And so I got a lot of that from my dad. Respect is a very high value in my life, and I teach that to my daughters about respecting. You don't have to agree with everyone. But respect their opinions. Respect them as people. And so that was always my, um, my grounding when it came to my parents

LB: So, tell me—you're growing up in this family...

MS: Mm hmm.

LB: And you're growing up in a Richmond that was very different in many ways than it is today.

MS: Right, right.

LB: Can you tell me about what Richmond was like when you were a child?

MS: Oh, wow. Uh—growing up—I always say, I had the best childhood. We lived in a community, it was 21 house—21 ranchers, they all pretty much looked alike. Most of the people who lived in our neighborhood were, uh, worked in the Post Office, or they were teachers, or they owned their own business, or construction. Um, and so, it was that kind of neighborhood. The kids – it was like a lot of kids—and we played kickball in the streets. And it was always a deal, you know, when the streetlights come on, time for you to come to the house. So that was always a thing, but it was just a pretty neat neighborhood. We had a ball in that neighborhood. We rolled out bicycles everywhere. Um, we had—our recreation programs... the city of Richmond had a serious recreation department. And so, after school, you went down to Maymont (?) School and there was always activities going on. There was always a sense of, we don't want you on the street, come here, we do arts and craft, we do programs, we did dance, we did all kinds of things. Another key thing for our neighborhood which always makes me smile was that the Bookmobile... the Bookmobile would come to our neighborhood every Tuesday at three o'clock. And, that's where I spent—I couldn't wait—and I just read and read and read and read. Cuz there was no library... in our neighborhood. And I don't think there's still a library in that neighborhood. So... the Bookmobile just opened up a new world for me, and that's why I really got into reading was because of that Bookmobile.

LB: That's great. Um... so, your neighborhood sounds very, very close-knit. Did you spend most of your time in your neighborhood as a child?

MS: I did. I did. I—most of the kids were right there in the neighborhood, and that's where my friends were, and I went to school with them. So, most of the time, I spent my time. We went to—another thing about the neighborhood, it's two blocks away from Byrd Park. So, we spent a lot of time riding our bikes through Byrd Park, and going out to the spring, and going up to Maymont Park. And that's— that was a pretty neat neighborhood. It really was. You know, I told someone that... in the time that I was in my neighborhood, which we moved when I was 19, there was only one murder. One. That I can ever remember. One. And that happened on the playground. Just one. I can't remember any. So it amazes me... of the state of the, um, the state of, um, our region when it comes to murder. There were none. And the other thing about it: your parents raised you, but the neighbors raised you, too. Don't let them see you doing something you're not supposed to be doing, or they're gonna tell it. So, and we always knew, eyes were always watching us. So we didn't do things we weren't supposed to do because we know—cuz all the parents knew one another, and not like, they were real close. But they'll pick up the phone and call each other, they all knew one another. So it was always a sense of, you know, you can't really do anything cuz the neighborhood—they always talk about a village? It was a village. Uh, most of the, you know—there were a lot of postmen in our neighborhood. So my dad knew all of those guys. Um... there were quite a few nurses in our neighborhood. They all knew one another. And so it was very much a community, unlike when I moved to—when I got married and moved to Chesterfield. You really didn't know—we didn't know our neighbors. But the key thing—someone always told me, if you have kids, you learn your neighbors. So, there was lots of kids. And so we had, um—and we had a neighborhood store around the corner where we all went to buy our Now-and-Laters, and, you know, our Blow Pops and all those good things, but, uh, it was *fun*. It was fun growing up in Richmond.

LB: It sounds great. What was your school like, where you started.

MS: Um, I started—well, first thing, I went to kindergarten... I went to a church in Church Hill. A van came and picked me up—kindergarten.

LB: Which church was it?

MS: Well, I'll bypass that name... because my parents weren't delighted with my experience there. So... they moved me to Fourth Baptist (?). Um, Reverend Robert Taylor, who's known very well in this community, uh, was the pastor there. And I'll always remember, when the van broke down, Reverend Taylor would come—I think he drove a Cadillac—and he would drive—my mom said it was always this amazing thing—he would come to the house, pick me up, put me in the car, and take us. I mean, then, you didn't have to worry about people messing with kids, I mean, not like you do now. So, I mean, he would pick the kids up and take them to, you know, take us to, uh, the kindergarten class. And that was a great experience, cuz I—it was in... Church Hill. And so they would come and pick me up and that's how I went to kindergarten. And... and I think it was pretty cool. Then, starting at, um, JP—it was called JP 1 and JP 2—and I started that at a Main Street School. So it was Junior

Primary 1 and Junior Primary 2, and then you went to second grade. So I think it was the very beginning of kindergarten in the Richmond Public School System. So you had the same teacher in JP 1 and JP 2, and then you went to second grade. Um, JP 1 was Peggy Smith. Peggy Smith lived in our neighborhood. And she was just a remarkable lady, and she was—she was just always kind and she—I just thought... she was great. I was a kid and young, but you know, I just remember her growing up cuz she was still in the neighborhood, and actually her son was in the same class as my brother. So, she was just... I always just thought that—felt that the teachers really cared about us. Now then, you could get cracked on the knuckles. Um, then, um... you would get sent to the principal. Then you would learn the 23rd psalm. Then it was a totally African American School. And everyone—all the teachers were African American. Um, pretty much all women, if I really think about it. And so it's one of these unique schools that—the PTA was very strong because the PTA were the people who lived in the community. My mom's friends. You know, they all knew one another. And not saying they all agreed, but they were always there. And so my mom was always class mother, so I always had to behave myself because you never know when my mom's gonna show up at the door, cuz she worked, you know, night shifts, so during the day she could just bop in. So, she was—she was the class mother. And it was just neat. Now, there were kids who were, you know, from affluent families, and there were kids who weren't from affluent families. And it didn't make any difference. We were all the same. Uh, we all, um, played together. And the key thing with that—a lot of the kids I started JP 1 with? I graduated from high school with. We all kept moving around. And we all moved together. So, it was—it was a neat school. The teachers were really great. I remember um, it was Peggy Smith and the second grade, it was—Peggy Zeigler. Oh, she—Peggy Zeigler, she didn't take—I mean, she was a great teacher, I thought. And she was a great disciplinarian. You didn't act up in Peggy Smith's class. Um, after that, it was, um... I'm... think—can't remember the third grade teacher—Irma Dillard (?), who's pretty well-known in the Richmond community—was my fourth grade teacher. When I was in—when I was in... I guess I was in—there was also summer school. So, you went to summer school. Summer school was pretty neat. And they took you on field trips, and... I remember going to Dogwood Dell when I was nine. To see a play. Dogwood Dell was just right across the park. And, at Dogwood Dell, that June—I'll never forget it because it was the same summer that man landed on the moon. And I went to Dogwood Dell and I came home, and I had strange appetites. I ate something and ice cream. I don't know what it was. And I went to sleep that night and woke up and I was sick, like I had the flu. And my mom—I laid on the sofa. Cuz, you know, when you're sick, you kind of... and lay. And mom—I didn't learn until later, my mom saw me have a mini seizure. And so she said I was sick, so she took me to the doctor the next morning. I'll never forget, I went to doctor William Johnston on Monument Avenue. And mom took us—it was kind of like flu-like symptoms. And she took me to the doctor. And he was on vacation so there was a man by the name of Dr. Fiddler (?). I'll never forget that. And so he checked me over and he made me walk this line in the floor and I kept falling over like I was intoxicated. And he said, "close your eyes and touch your nose." And I was poking myself in the eye. So, he said, "Mom, come with me." And so my mom came back in the room, says, "We got to

go to the hospital.” Like, “huh?” Had meningitis. I contracted viral meningitis. And more than likely, I contracted it at Dogwood Dell. Now, I had viral, not bacterial. And, uh, they put me—went to the hospital, MCV, huge place, the big old building on Broad Street. They rushed me in the back door, took me to this room, and this was probably the scariest thing I’ve ever done because they pu—took me in this—I’m just a little kid, I was very skinny. Uh, knock-kneed, and um, they took me in this room and they, um, gave me a spinal tap. I didn’t know what was going on. Now, my mom knew – she was a nurse. And, you know, they had to go find my father off the route, so they had to drive out and find him to get him off the route and they were both there. And so they put me isolation. I think I was in isolation for about five—for, for about a week. And it was... interesting. It was—it was... uh, when people heard meningitis, they said, “Oh God, she’s gonna die,” but it was viral and not bacterial, so, it wasn’t the real, real bad kind. And um, of course when I got home, I could get—eat anything I wanted to and get away with most things for a while. And I remember laying on the bed after I got home and watching, you know, Neil Armstrong step onto the moon on our little black-and-white TV. And that was—that was interesting. But my friends sent me cards, the class did neat things and sent me gifts, and it was pretty... I felt bad, you know, I didn’t feel horrible. But I know that I couldn’t be around a lot of people. And so, um, I missed a lot. The biggest thing I missed a lot though—certain—amazing how certain things you remember? Chitty Chitty Bang Bang came out that summer. And the class went to see it and I missed it. That was probably the biggest disappointment for the summer for me, is that I didn’t get a chance to see that movie. Um, which I like that movie now, but it was neat that, you know, when I came home, the neighbors came – cuz it was such a close neighborhood, and people checked on me. And it was kind of interesting. I—I—I don’t know anyone else that’s ever had that. But some kind of way I contracted it. Um, growing up in the Main Street School, it was a community school. And I understand when people talk about community schools, cuz it really was community. Um, all the parents worked together and the PTA’s, we had carnivals and, um, library fairs, and—it was just a lot of neat things going on in school. It was a great place to be, I was always excited about going to school. And, um, it was pretty cool. I’ll never forget the time my uncle came home from the Vietnam war. And he came to the house. And I was at elemen—I was in elementary school.

LB: So what year would that have been?

MS: That probably was... ’68. Or ’67. Cuz he got married in ’68. So ’67, ’68. So, you know, he got off the plane, he lived in Amelia, so he came to the house so my parents could take him to Amelia that afternoon. So I’ll never forget when he came, he was there that morning, and I was like—I love my Uncle Aubrey (?) and I still love my Uncle Aubrey, and... and, uh, he had his uniform and everything, and I said, “Can you walk me to school?” And he walked me—oh, it was like, I was queen. My uncle was walking me to school. He’d come home from the Vietnam War, and... which was just exciting for the entire family, but the fact that he could walk me across the street to my school... And then in the afternoon, we took him to my grandmother’s house and that was pretty cool. I’ll—those just little things that I remember growing up in

Richmond. Staying at a Main Street School and learning that I could not anymore because of busing.

LB: What year was that?

MS: That was between my fourth and fifth grade year, so...

LB: So 1970?

MS: '70, '71, somewhere around in there. Um, so, course it was like who—where you gonna go, where these kids gonna go? So, they decided that our group was going to go to Robert E. Lee. On Kensington Avenue, which was a part of Richmond I did not know about.

LB: Which end of Kensington?

MS: Um...

LB: Down in the Museum District?

MS: Yes.

LB: Yeah.

MS: Yes. Used to be that little bookstore across the street—Narnia something?

LB: Mm hmm.

MS: I think? That area.

LB: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Still there, but it's condos now.

MS: It's something else—there you go, it's condos now. So we all got—so I think the city did not have school buses yet? So, what we called was then VTC, now we call it GRTC, was Virginia Transit Company. So VTC buses took us to school. So I got on the bus across the street. Um, and leaving Amelia Street—and I'll always remember—I can vaguely remember the story... I remember my parents being upset. Cuz that school, in Amelia, my parents—our parents raised a lot of money to get things for us, and nice things for us. They did a lot of fundraising and bake sales and all kind of things and donated money. And for some reason there was going to be a move of taking some of those things out of that school and taking them to another school and bringing some other things back and the parents were not happy. And I almost remember my parents being at the door. Kinda like... I don't think they blocked the door, just a faint memory of them not... kind of standing in the way from them not taking the stuff out of schools, cuz there was feeling—cuz there was a lack of trust

then. That they're gonna take our good stuff and give us junk. And so, they really fought that. To keep the things that they'd bought for that school to stay there.

LB: Do you know if they won?

MS: I think they did. I think they did. And I was pretty young, but I just remember my mom—my mom was... my dad was pretty quiet, easy-going kind of guy. My mom was... I don't know how to say this. She was... I don't want to say the word *aggressive*—she stood her ground. And when it came to standing her ground, she had not problem with that. Um, so, she stood her ground. She didn't mind doing that at all. Um. But we went to Robert E. Lee. I remember I got my arm broken that year, um, outside in playground, but I remember fights. Um, we had not—I'd not been around white kids before. I mean, honestly, I had not. That wasn't my social fabric, of being around white kids. Um, I'd been around my mom's friends—my mom had friends in the hospital, so I had been around adults, but not really children. And so it was pretty choppy there for a while. And that was just cuz we didn't know each other, and it... was kinda hard. I had a teacher by the name of Brazilia Davis. And Mrs. Davis was something else, and she was, um, she was a good teacher. Um, she was an African American teacher. And she believed in us - all of us, *all* of us. And—and she was—she was a pretty neat teacher. She really was. So, we got through the fifth grade.

LB: How—how did Mrs. Davis kind of cope with having this classroom of kids who had probably never been in contact before?

MS: Yeah, you know, but outside - inside the class, it was pretty cool. It was on the playground, you know, and recess was where the issues really came out. But within the classroom, there wasn't too much problems, in the classroom itself. But just on that free time? It was just, you know... little dicey. It was a little di—I wasn't scared to go to school, but it was dicey. Unlike being down on Main Street, so—

LB: It sounds very different from what you had grown used to.

MS: Yeah, yeah, and but—I—but, also, the con—the continuity was an African American teacher. I was used to that. Now, that was the fifth grade. The sixth grade, they decided that Westover Hills was gonna be a total sixth grade school. Everyone in the school was in the sixth grade. The city was trying to figure this all out. So we were all—so we would get in the bus and go across the which was then the Nickel Bridge, and go to Westover Hills. Now, this was my first experience having teachers that didn't look like me. And that was an interesting experience. I remember a teacher—I couldn't—I was a pretty good student. I got A's and B's. I was pretty good. I didn't—couldn't get past a C with that woman to save my life. And I had come to the conclusion—I don't know if this is true or not—that it was because of my color of skin, and she was older, she was about to retire, so I'm sure she wasn't used to kids like me. And I just always had the sense that no matter ho—how hard I tried, I was never gonna get anything higher than a C. Which is, you know, when I think

about that, I was like, wow... That was a strange feeling. Um, but the entire school was sixth grade. The entire school was sixth grade. It was—it was—it was pretty goo—it was a good experience.

LB: It sounds like a pretty wild experiment.

MS: It was cuz—cuz by everyone in sixth grade, now you had kids from all over the city, not just, you know, a couple of neighborhoods. Kids were from all over... in Westover Hills.

LB: So how did that work out socially?

MS: Socially... I think it became more integrated. I think that we—we—we'd gone through the fifth grade year, and then sixth grade... one of my dear friend's name was Joanne Levine (?) - I would love to know where she is. She was white. Well, she is white. Um... and we were in a lot of classes together, and we got to know one another, just based on who we were. But I tell you, I had friends who gave me grief. Because Joanne Levine was my friend. I got grief for that. Joanne Levine and I would hang out together, her mom would bring her over to my house. Um... I'll never forget, we went to see the movie *Been* (?) together. And I took her—her mom picked me up and we went down to Broad Street to see *Been*. Now... there's a sea of African Americans at the movie theater. And I just told her, "Stick with me." And cuz I could see the look on her face... said, "You're ok. Just stick with me." And we went to the movies and we came out and we went out. Um, but, I did get grief from friends in the neighborhood, friends that I had in the fifth grade at—at, uh—in the, uh—in the fourth—kids I grew up with since JP1... Well, Joanne was now my—also—*also* my friend, not *just* my friend, but *also* my friend. And I was called on a couple occasions "honky lover." But I was determined that was not going to persuade me one way or another, and we were friends. After sixth grade, she went somewhere else, and I went somewhere else and we just lost contact, but I'll never forget that friendship we had. Joanne Levine. I don't know what happened to her.

LB: I wonder if you could Facebook her.

MS: Well, I—you know, I have tried. I have tried.

LB: But there are so many Joanne Levines.

MS: And so, and—and she's probably married, or--

LB: Married...

MS: Yeah. I l—would love to know where she is. Yeah, but I got a lot of grief on that one. But I had a little bit of my mom in me. It's like, ok, yeah right. I'm not gonna change just cuz you don't want me to be her friend.

LB: So this was a time when there were a lot, a lot of changes going on...

MS: Oh, gosh. Oh, gosh.

LB: ... in Richmond. Tell me about those changes, and tell me about discussions that you heard in your home, in your neighborhood, at church...

MS: Mm hmm, mm hmm, mm hmm. I—I think—my parents—my parents were very open in their conversations about it. And I remember when busing was going to start, and I was in, um, the Girl Scout troop at Second Baptist Church at Idlewood and Randolph. And, um, Mrs. Brown was our Girl Scout leader. And I remember before that—before busing started, there was a march... picketing at the Lee Bridge. And people having signs, you know, 'We don't want busing.' But I... thought so much of—it wasn't the fact that they didn't want to be bused, because I couldn't figure out what was the problem with busing. Because all of my cousins lived in Amelia County, they always rode the bus. In rural areas, everyone rode the bus. So, what is the problem with busing? And so the fact that they didn't want to be bused, and they—they were on the picket lines, I turned that to be, you don't want to go to school with me. And I remember Mrs. Brown having that conversation with us at Girl Scouts. She said, you know, people have different thoughts about other people in the community, which you can deal—and they may have some ideas about how African Americans are... Your goal, which *you* need to do, is go to school, do the best that you can, be respectful, and do the best you can. And then don't worry about that. Because that's what that's all about, it's about you, and not what they want and what they say. And so, that' helped a lot, um, getting ready to go to school. Um, but that—I could never understand why—you almost think, what's wrong with me? Why do you don't want to go to school with me? Um...

LB: How did you parents talk to you about it? How did they prepare you for it?

MS: Well, I think my p—parents were... I'm sure they talked with me, but I can't remember what they said. But I think that they were always very supportive. And they were very active. Now, when we moved away from the Main Street School, my parents involvement pretty much ceased. Cuz there was no strong PTA at Rober E. Lee. There was no strong PTA at Westover Hills. That strong PTA kind of went away when we moved out of the neighborhood setting. So their involvement in schools changed totally. It really did, um... But I—I'm sure my parents were supportive. Um... my parents have been very open-minded people. Um... they didn't—they weren't against busing. They were more concerned that we got a good education. And so, I don't remember any conversations with my parents. But we were one of those households, we always talked. We always watched Walter Cronkite, we always talked about, you know, current events. Um... you know, my father read the paper every afternoon—don't mess with his paper, don't ball it up before I—he gets to it. Um, but we—we—we had that dinner table conversation always. And I'm sure that, um... I'm sure they were supportive of that. I do remember when, um, when I was in second grade, I guess it was '68, when Martin Luther King died—was killed. And... I

just remember my mom coming home and laying on the bed and crying. And then I remember hearing sirens all over the place. Cuz there were fires being set in different places in town. And my mom told me that, you know, the next day, it was almost a different atmosphere when she went to work on Broad Street. Um... people were real fearful... of that, cuz we went to school but the school—I was still in the segregated school, so I remember that—I was still at the Main Street. And I remember we all sat in the room and watched the funeral... um, when I was in class. I do remember that. You know, one funny thing, I told friend of mine the other day—you know I was—I was one of those kids who... pretty out—kind of pretty out gro—out—out-going. Um, I had neighbors across the street who were, um, I think kind of involved with the Black Panther movement. And they talked me into – hey, I didn't know the difference – they talked me into selling their newspapers.

LB: So how old were you then?

MS: I was in elementary school, so probably in third grade.

LB: Wow.

MS: And I took those papers to school. And I was selling them to teachers, and they bought some. And then I remember Ms. Holly, who was the tea—the principal said, [knocks], “Um, Myra, you can't sell these papers here.” “Ok.” I didn't understand why. I took the papers back to Mister and Ms. Hine (??) and said, “I can't sell them at school.” Now I realize! But, you know, I—I remember reading those papers. Um, course, I don't remember what I read, but, um, I couldn't do that anymore. So I could—I probably have a f—a FBI file somewhere.

LB: [Laughs.]

MS: [Laughs.] So, it was—it was—it was interesting childhood, it really was. I didn't have, you know... I didn't see anything... I don't want to say *obvious* when it came to racism. Uh, I remember growing up, my best friend Valerie Johnson – we were born on the same day—

LB: Are you still in touch with Valerie?

MS: I haven't talked to Valerie in probably about five or ten years. But, we were, uh, we were born on the same day, few hours—same hospital which was funny.

LB: Wow.

MS: And we were in the same class. And, uh, on Saturdays, this was on our Saturdays – on our Saturdays we would get our little money, we would get on the VTC, we would go downtown, we would watch a movie, and then we would go to Big Boys, which was right next to the John Marshall and get one of those great hamburgers. Then we'll leave Big Boys and go to the nut—there's a—um, Planters Peanut Shop

on Broad Street and get our cashews, and get back on the bus and go home. Um, that was—that was Saturdays. So, I—I—we didn't see—I mean, I didn't remember anything about riding on the back of the bus and all those things. I think I was, you know, past that point, but, um... it was pretty neat. Now, funny thing that—my mom was always a person that wanted us to have a little bit of culture. Um, she took us to nice restaurants for birthdays because she wanted us to know how to eat properly. She sent me to—you can tell by my posture—she sent me to, uh, Charm School - at Sears. Sears on Broad Street had a Charm School program. And she said I need to go to Charm School, cuz will tell you, I was a serious tomboy. My mom had to make me stop playing football in the front yard. So, I guess she figured, oh, I need to send her to Charm School. So, it was - of course, I was the only person of color in the room, and a couple of days I ducked out and didn't go. But, um, it was an interesting experience to go to Charm School.

LB: How old were you then?

MS: Oh my... probably fifth grade?

LB: So this would be—I—I've been trying to do the arithmetic while you talk—were you born in—

MS: I was in 1960.

LB: '60.

MS: Mm hmm.

LB: So, that—that would have been around '70, '71?

MS: Yeah. Mm hmm, mm hmm, mm hmm. And they weren't friendly. Um... I hung in there for a while. You know—you know, it was like—you know, their hair wasn't like mine, so you can't talk about hair care. Their makeup wasn't like mine, and so it was like, I almost—I almost felt like I was like this duck out of water. But I was in a fashion show at the end.

LB: [Laughs.]

MS: My mom—my mom bought this dress and it was a little expensive and she kind of, "Eeeehhhh," but she's like, you know, I'm not gonna—you know, you gonna buy this dress—I love that dress—and I was in a little fashion show. And then it was over with - I was so glad it was over with. I was like, I'm done with this. Um, but she was always trying to expose us to different things, which I thought was pretty cool. I appreciate it now.

LB: She sounds really interesting.

MS: Oh, she was an interesting lady. She was. She was. My mom was, uh... um... she was pretty interesting. You know the interesting thing about my mom – I don't know if I should talk about this. My mom was—I didn't understand the relationship. My mom and I had a daughter... mother-daughter relationship, so, you know as you get older, your teen years, you get a little crazy. Um... my mom told me—and I don't know—this is the story she told me. She said, "Myra—" and this is, like, a month before she died. She said, "Myra, do you realize I was intimidated by you when you were a child?" And I'm like, "huh? What do you mean?" "When you were in elementary school, they gave you guys these IQ tests..." and, she said, "They told me your score." And she said, "When you walked into the room after they told me that, I looked at you go—and w—and said, 'I don't know if I know this person or not.'" I never knew what the score was. I don't know—now that--now that kind of helps me understand things. And I don't know, there was some kind of testing they were doing when it came to IQs and things like that, which I thought was kind of odd. It was odd. And the—that—that impacted our relationship. But we had a good—great relationship, but my mom, you know... she had confidence that I would know things about life instead of telling me about life. That I would—I was so smart that I would figure things out, which is ok. She got sick when I was sixteen. She was diagnosed with Lupus. So she had Lupus for twenty-five years. She was on steroids for twenty-five years. She had fourteen surgeries in her lifetime. Um, so, at the age of sixteen, my mom became pretty sick. And she kept working in and out, in and out, but at that point, um, when it came to my education and the future, I was pretty much on my own. So I figured out... school, and planned for college, and all those things. Cuz I didn't have that. Um, I had a pretty decent guidance counselor, but all those things were pretty much my responsibility. Unlike when I look at my relationship with my daughter now, you know, we're all into her, you know, applying for this and getting a scholarship for that. I didn't have that cuz mom was so sick. And my dad was busy taking care of her. Um, but, you know, I guess I probably—based on that time, I must—probably could have gone out and just gotten really wild, but I didn't. And you know, we never had curfews because we just never stayed out late. And uh, it was—it was—it was that, I pretty much grew up fast.

LB: I'll bet you did.

MS: On my own. So, uh, it was—it was—once again, it was a great childhood for... [?]. It really was. My parents would take us to, um—they had friends who lived in Easton who would run bus trips to New York. So they would take us to Broadway plays and off-Broadways plays when I was growing up. Um... and so they—my parents have always about trying to expose us to different things. My dad would take us to, um, the Richmond Robins hockey games. We went to Parker Field, not the Diamond, Parker Field. Um, went to the Arena to see, you know, wrestling. Uh, we stayed busy! My parents, you know, kept us—one thing about growing up in Richmond, people always remember—I'm sure people would know—there used to be a fire show at City Stadium. This is where the fireworks and the fire department would put on this huge fire show. It was great! It was like, the ultimate experience.

And it was, like, um... fireworks! And you go and it's like, the police department and the fire departments—it's the public safety folks.

LB: But—but, fireworks in a stadium?

MS: Yeah! Yeah. Cuz you're at pa—in—in City Stadium. City Stadium, now. It wasn't turf. It was real grass. And that's when they stopped doing it, when they got turf, cuz it melted the turf. But the fire... the fire show was just... annual event for everyone in the west end to go see the fire show. It was pretty cool.

LB: It sounds like it.

MS: It was cool. It was cool.

LB: Were you at Fourth Street Baptist the whole time growing up? Was that your church?

MS: No, actually, church was in Amelia County.

LB: Oh.

MS: So we went to church in Amelia County, but I went to Fourth Street to go to um, school – nursery school.

LB: Ok. But just the—that's right. But it w—I thought that—that was cuz it was your church, but no.

MS: No, mm-mm, mm-mmm. My mom was just trying to find a good program for me to be in.

LB: So you traveled forty miles?

MS: Oh from West End. We were still in Richmond, so West End to East End, so, no, it wasn't that far.

LB: Ok.

MS: No, just probably... fifteen-minute ride.

LB: No – but to go to church.

MS: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! To go to church, yes. My father belonged to Pleasant Road Baptist Church, and in rural churches then had one-Sunday-a-month service. Cuz oftentimes, the minister had more than one church. So my father's church was second Sunday, and my mother's church – the church that I joined – was fourth Sunday.

LB: What did you do first and third Sundays?

MS: First and third Sunday, I would go with my friends to, um... I would go with Valerie to Sunday School at Riverview Baptist Church... on those days. Or just, be at home.

LB: So you were traveling around a lot to these different churches.

MS: Yeah. Mm hmm, mm hmm.

LB: Do you remember Civil Rights being discussed in church? Do you remember any of your pastors – your many pastors – discussing Civil Rights?

MS: I do not. Well... not Civil Rights, but... African American heritage... and being strong, and—you know, a fire and brimstone pastor, you know, you know, you know...you know, fire and brimstone, you know, you shouldn't go out dancing, you know, Saturday night and think you're gonna come into church Sunday morning. And a lot about African American heritage was more about from the light... from the dark to the light. And that's as a people, how far we've come. I've heard that a lot growing up. And being thankful and being blessed on things the way things used to be, and things the way—the way that things are now. I heard that through my entire life when it came to church. Not so much of Civil Rights. Um, other than that, you know, praying for our leaders. But it was always about how God has brought us this far... from slavery – cuz in Amelia County, my descendants are from plantations in Amelia County. So, it was like, in—my entire—the majority of my church—I would say 99% of the members of Flower Hill Baptist Church are related to me.

LB: [Whispers] Wow.

MS: I think there are two people in the church that are not related to me. So, it's—we all have the same history. But it was always about, you know, where we've come so far, cuz my grandmother grew up in the community, my great...great-grandfather helped create that church. So it was a family church. So, there was always that sense of history, but also the sense of, that we've come so far. And I still hear it. Which is good. And it—it—always gave me a great appreciation, to hear my grandmother tell me the stories of when they were growing up. And, you know, my grandmother, um... she was pretty mad when she found out that somebody told us the story, but—my grandmother got arrested once cuz—my mother got her fire-and-brimstone kind of like attitudes from my grandmother, and they—she was in a car somewhere in Richmond, and—and policemen pulled them over, pretty much because of they were African American. And my grandmother refused to give them information and they locked her up. And, um, they eventually let her go, but, um, she was not happy that we knew that story.

LB: [Laughs.]

MS: She was a cool lady.

LB: Well, it sounds like, just—you've got this incredible family stretching back generations and generations.

MS: Mm hmm, mm hmm.

LB: Are you still at the same church that you grew up in?

MS: I am still at the same church.

LB: Wow.

MS: I am still at the same church. And my relatives are still at the same church. And its, um, 'bout... about 175, 150 years old... um, church is same building. Um, my parents, uh, are buried in the cemetery. Um, my grandparents are. My great-grandparents are, and my great-great-grandmother is.

LB: [Whispers] Wow.

MS: And, I h—[laughs]—and this had not a lot to do about this, but it's—you know, I like projects. So I learned how to clean headstones. There's a process to clean headstones.

LB: That's a great project.

MS: So I started cleaning headstones in the cemetery. I cleaned my geat-great grandmother's headstone.

LB: When did she die? When was she born?

MS: Oh, wow, she was born... she was born during slavery. Um, she was considered, when I did my research, considered mulatto. Uh, her name was Lucy Tinsley. And, uh, I have a picture of her. And, um, she's buried there, uh, in that cemetery. Um... I—I, you know it's—our history is deep there. It really is. Now, my dad—that's my mother's side. My dad was—and this is, um, kind of interesting. My father, um, *was* adopted. And I don't use the word *is*, cuz you just get adopted once. My father was adopted. Um, and my father was born in 1931. And his birth mother was sixteen years old and she had been adopted. And the amazing thing, she had been adopted from a family in Amelia County. So she was living with school teachers on Leigh Street. And she became pregnant. So back in the day, they sent you away. So they sent her to DC and she had my father, and came back to Richmond. My grandmother, adopted grandmother's relatives lived on the same street. My grandmother that I knew - husband had just died not too long ago. So sh—there was no men in the family. And so her sister-in-law, brother-in-law called and said, "Are you interested

in a little boy?" and she said "Yes." So my father was sent to Amelia County with he was five months old. To Goodman's - that's my maiden name - with a note. Which, I have that note in a frame in my house. "Here is Melvin Lorenzo, five months, I give him—I give him all to you." But—

LB: Hang on one second... oop. Darn it.

MS: What's wrong?

LB: Um... that's ok. We'll keep talking using this one.

MS: Ok. Ok. I'm—you know, he's yours. That was 1931. Now, of course there was no legal papers or anything.

LB: You know what, you don't even have to use the mic anymore.

MS: Ok, so that's right there. So there was—there's no legal papers or anything back then. So, uh, he was adopted. Um... and that's pretty much who, um - the family I knew. The strange thing that his birth mother was, um, the sister to my mother's uncle. So that's why everyone in church is related to me because all sides—

LB: Yeah.

MS: ... are related to me.

LB: Adoptive, birth.

MS: Birth, yeah. All that. All that together. So, um, he went to Amelia County and they pretty much lived in poverty. Um, and um, I found out later that he was adopted. And also had the privilege of meeting my birth grandmother before she died. Um, so that was a pretty interesting story. Um... Yeah. I had a chance to meet her. Which I thought was pretty interesting.

LB: What was that like?

MS: Oh, wow. Um, she was living in New Jersey. I think I was in college. And she was sick, and she wanted to see my father before she died. Cuz they always knew each other. And my father—her brothers, um, my dad called them uncles, you know, aunts and uncles, cuz, that was—you know, birth family, um he didn't really have a relationship with her. My father was pretty not happy and angry, the fact that she had, quote-unquote, given him up. And so, she asked to see him. So I drove my parents to Newark, New Jersey. And... uh, my dad went to see her, and he came in—downstairs, he said, "you want to go see her?" I said, "sure." And it was the most amazing thing. I walked in the room and saw myself laying in the bed. I was—I—I—she—I looked so much like her. And I—people used to tell me, "You look just like Rosalee." And I'm like, "Why'd they tell me I look like Rosalee?" I looked like her. It

was wild. I mean, I looked like her. And so, it's—it's—and then she died a while that. Um... but, I thought it was really crazy that I looked so much like her.

LB: That is completely crazy.

MS: It was—it was—it was, like, wow. I s—I see myself at sixty.

LB: [Sighs]

MS: And... and relatives use to always say, "You look like Rosalee." It's like—now, I will make this point. Because my father had such... not—she didn't—he didn't like her. I mean, they'd had, you know, she tried to reach out to him, he would throw away the Chr—I never saw the Christmas cards she sent cuz my father would throw them away. That's how angry he was.

LB: And she was living so closeby.

MS: She was in Newark.

LB: Oh, so she moved.

MS: She moved to Newark.

LB: Ok.

MS: Right, she married a preacher—now, I don't know if he ever knew about us or not, but... she lived away. Um... and so, yeah, my mom told me he used to, you know, he—he'd throw away the Christmas cards and stuff, and was just so angry, but he said, after I adopted our daughter - my daughter - he said he had a total different appreciation for adoption. He got it. He said, "I'm not angry anymore." He got it. So, um, it—it ch—it—it—it impacted his life when we adopted Lauren, um, because he stopped being angry.

LB: What an amazing moment of transformation that must have been.

MS: Yeah. He stopped being—he stopped being angry. He said he got it. So my parents were pretty neat people. They were. They were. We had fun.

LB: It sounds like such an eventful life growing up. What do you remember as your big turning points and the turning points for the community as you were growing up?

MS: The big turning point was when busing started. It really—it—it really changed. Um... I think it changed the community. Especially when it came to the parents having a common cause to rally around - they didn't have that anymore. Cuz we were no longer a community school. I think that, um... um... I think a big ch—turning

point was when it began to change things like the recreation programs began to start to cease and less hours...

LB: Because I'd imagine the programs that you went to that were at Maymont School, right? I mean, those segregated, right? Completely?

MS: Mm hmm. Mm hmm, mm hmm. Yes. Yes. Yes. Totally segregated. And so, I think budgets started to get cut back and a lot of those things started to happen. I think the—that was, I guess that was a big turning point. Most people didn't—a lot of people stayed in the neighborhood for such a long time. I mean, people stayed there, it wasn't a transient neighborhood. Folks raised their kids there. Um, I think when busing started, it kind of changed it. It changed it. Cuz some of my friends went to TJ, and, um, and different schools around the—around city. I think it changed, um, a lot.

LB: And where did you go?

MS: I went to Huguenot. They bused me—after Westover Hills and the entire Westover Hills being sixth grade? They sent us to—to Thompson. So Thompson was seventh and eighth. And then ninth to twelfth was Huguenot... which was right next door to them, so that was a long bus ride. That was a long bus ride. Uh, I—I remember, um—and that's when, you know, the friendships really began to—now that we're all comfortable with one another, and—and different races being together, and it just got better over time. So you didn't see that divide the way you did I—when we were in the fifth grade, cuz we were still separate but together. Time... time... got us together. I took time. Um, like most things. It took time for us to realize how s... how much the same we were. We weren't different. We lived in different communities. But we were pretty much the same kind of kids. We liked the same things, uh, music was a little different cuz I didn't really experience, you know, music outside of R&B and Soul, but then began to, you know, hear other kind of music, like, oh ok. Um...

LB: Was the Teepee (?) still a—an active club when you were in high school?

MS: The who?

LB: Teepee. I just interviewed Carmen Foster's best friend from high school who talked about everyone, black and white, going to the Teepee to hear music in the late 60s. So it may have been closed by the time you were old enough.

MS: That doesn't ring a bell at all.

LB: Huh.

MS: The Teepee? Well, Carmen's—Carmen's... few years older than I am.

LB: Yeah, she graduated in '68.

MS: Mm hmm. Mm hmm, mm hmm, mm hmm. Don't know Teepee. I don't know that one.

LB: Did you go out to hear music?

MS: Dogwood Dell. That was the place to go... to hear music. Dogwood Dell.

LB: Did bands used to come there?

MS: Mm hmm. Mm hmm, mm hmm, mm hmm. And you know, every holiday there was a pageant. The holiday pageant, and I was in the pageant a couple years. Um, but Dogwood Dell was the place to go hear music. Um... yes. That was the place. Um... yeah, that was it.

LB: So what—what stands out in your mind when you think about middle – you know, that sixth grade experience, middle school, high school – you know, those years of busing?

MS: Middle school is probably the worst years that I had. I—I did not like middle school. I really didn't. It was... I don't know why I didn't like middle school. It was just... I—I guess it's probably just, you know, how you mature, how you change. It wasn't a great—I—the-those years were kind of awkward—awkward, cuz I was awkward. And also the other thing was, I was a kid from the West End. I was skinny. Uh, I had buck teeth, so then I had braces. And so I was the only kid in the neighborhood with braces. And then I needed glasses. And then I had—I was—had braces and glasses. Equals geek. Um, so, that's probably why, you know, I was just, I had a difficult middle school years. I was so different.

LB: That sounds tough.

MS: I was different. And I got teased. Major. So other than, you know, having a white friend, which I got teased about, then having braces, and, you know, being skinny as a rail... And also, it got to the point where it wasn't cool to be smart.

LB: So that came around middle school.

MS: Yeah, that came around middle school. I bought into it.

LB: That's very tough.

MS: I bought into that.

LB: So what did you do, stop doing your homework so much?

MS: Well, I didn't try as hard as I could have.

LB: Yeah.

MS: ... I didn't try as hard as I could have. Got back on track in high school, I guess. Um, but, the other thing was that when we lived so far away from the schools, there weren't any after-school things. Cuz you got on the VTC to go to Robert E. Lee, you got back on the VTC and come back. I mean, there wasn't anything – there wasn't anything after school. Same thing Westover Hills. You went to school, you came home. And so there was no... clubs or anything because we didn't have transportation to do that. Um, until you got to high school where there was an afternoon bus that took you home, but outside of that, there was nothing in those years. So maybe that's another reason why I was kind of like, all you did was go to school.

LB: Not as much fun,

MS: No, it really wasn't.

LB: But you still hung out in the neighborhood after school, right?

MS: Oh, absolutely. Oh yeah. Oh yeah, we still hung out. We was always hanging out.

LB: Um... how do you think all of these experiences shaped who you are today?

MS: Um... you know, one thing when I was growing up, my mom by being a histologist technician (?) at MCV, a lot of interns – I guess residents – would do different things in the lab. And she would bring them home. For dinner. So I would get to know a guy from Japan. I would get to know somebody from, you know, England. I would get to know people from other countries. Which also I think helped me to recognized difference but the same, cuz they were pretty cool. Um, they would bring me gifts. Like, I had Japanese dolls and a kimono and all—I mean, pretty—I guess that's the thing you wear. And it was neat meeting different folks. Guy from Japan, I always remember, I had the game Operations. And we would play Operations. And he, of course, he was good cuz his hands were steady, but, you know, having that experience and being around different people... I was probably more open than a lot of my friends. And I think that's another reason when it came to Joanne Levine – she was different but that was ok, because I was used to different people being in our house. People from, um, people from, um, from my mom's job. Uh, but I – tell me your question again?

LB: Just how – how did all of your experiences growing up shape who you are today, cuz you came of age during a period of so much change.

MS: I did. It was... I think the opportunities that I had really shaped me. Um, between junior—the—the opportunities that my parents gave me and... the friends – I'm a big friend person. I believe in friends. Um... uh... I like friend movies, like Beaches,

and those things. Steel Magnolias, those are my favorites. But, you know, I believe in friends. I believe in, when it comes to respect, for my dad, um, respecting everyone. Um, that had a lot to do with me, uh, being a little tough, not as much—probably more so—more on the soft side. But I think being exposed to different things. Um, because growing up in Richmond, um, seeing a lot of Richmond—cuz my parents had friends in Northside and East End and we traveled a lot around, um... taking us to New York and realizing there's other things outside of Richmond. Um, there was always the thought that—my parents never asked us if we were going to college. It was just given. We were going to college. And they were determined we were going to college cuz they didn't.

LB: How did you decide where you were gonna go to college?

MS: I applied to two schools. Um, one reason I think I stayed at VCU, because my mom was sick. And, um...

LB: Did she get... really sick? Cuz I know with—with Lupus, um, you know—

MS: Remission?

LB: ... you've got those periods of illness and then periods of remission.

MS: Mm hmm.

LB: Did she get sick and stay pretty much sick?

MS: Sick—she's sick for—stayed sick for a long time. And then she went into remission later on. But she would always—she would be sick and then other things would happen.

LB: Yeah.

MS: Like, you know, my mom would... my mom sneezed and it broke her rib. I mean, it's—it's—it's always something would come up. And she was always determined to keep working. Um, but she—she did go through a lot. She—and she never complained. That's another thing. I don't believe in complaining. My mom didn't complain about stuff, as much as she went through. People know that my mom didn't complain about things. Growing up in—you know, growing up in Richmond... during the Civil Rights Era, we were very... insulated, I guess, because we were in a segregated community. It wasn't until I got into the fifth grade and integration started, when I realized that, how different people were and how people thought about me. Or what I thought, the way people thought about me. Um, I had the pleasure of, um, between my s—junior and senior year in high school, to go to Open High for summer school. Um, before that, I had done—my first job was at the YMCA North Richmond Branch, uh, with kids from Gilpin Court, Northside. Um... but I went to—decided to go to Open High for that summer, and I took Government. So I took

classes like Nuclear Prolif—Proliferation... and Law... But part of my classwork was being an intern to the first two African American females, I believe, on City Council. That was Claudia Black McDaniels and Willie Dell (?). I was their intern that summer. And they had just come aboard to City Council. *That's* what changed my life to what I want to do for... the work I wanted to do. So, um, before that, I guess that junior year is when I met—I got involved with the Youth Services Commission and Youth Advisory Council for the City of Richmond – I sat on that. And I was appointed by City Council when I was eighteen to the Youth Services Commission. But with Willie Dell and Claudia Black McDaniels – Willie Dell was Northside, Claudia Black was on the Southside. Um... understanding politics and city services and those things really piqued my interested. But I decided I wanted to be a police officer. Um... I was involved in—in different things in school, but I changed my mind before I started VCU and went to Urban Studies and Planning. And it was a lot because of Ms. Dell and Ms. McDaniel, that's the route I took. And that changed my life a lot, by being engaged – I was telling someone earlier today, you know, by being on the Youth Advisory Council—in—in el—in the eleventh grade—place I met my husband—that it was... I've always been engaged in something. I've always been on something, doing something. Um, that was—cuz I also saw my parents, when—the PTA, they were always doing something. My mother helped start a mothers' club at the boys' club down the street. She was always doing something. Um, so that had a big impact on me. It really did. And so, here I am.

LB: And you worked with John Moeser (?), right?

MS: John Moeser was my professor at VCU. And, um, John's a good professor. And John got me an internship with Lieutenant Governor Dick Davis... my senior year. Actually, I saw my supervisor who was Eva T. Hardy (?) – I saw her the other day, she said, "Myra, you were my intern... 1982." She remembers the *date* which was amazing to me. Um, and that was a great opportunity. And John just gave me an opportunity, now—I—that was interesting... being down at the Capital. I had a couple problems. You know, I was this little skinny black kid. Um, and, um... I got a little grief from folks sometimes. And sometimes I felt—I never—I—I never—one thing I will say about growing up in Richmond: the worse feeling I could ever have is feeling less-than. And when people make me feel less-than... it just... it just, it doesn't anger me, it just saddens me. And I—sometimes down at the Capital, I felt was kind of talked to like I was less-than, and treated less-than. And to the point that I really didn't belong there. And so, uh—and Eva helped me get through that. She did. Um, we had a c—um, one incident that we had and she helped me get through that. But, um, I was determined because my mother told me I wasn't less-than. And that I could do anything I wanted to do. Um, and that really disturbed me. Um, especially when people don't know you. But they treat you, because they put you in a box with everyone else. And put the stereotype on you and think, you know, that way. And... I was in college. I was about to graduate. You know, I'm still dealing with this? And so, um, that was kind of interesting. It was.

LB: Are there things that you'd like kids growing up in Richmond today to know?

MS: I'd like kids to know that they have the opportunity to make a change. Um, we were talking about this earlier that, you know, oftentimes kids have a sense that they're the recipient of services. But they also need to know that they can make things happen. I had a young man who was valedictorian of a high school here in Richmond couple years ago, and I told him how proud I was of him. And he said, "Well, you know my valedictorian is not the same as other's kids in other schools, you know, it's not as high as it could be" and I said, "Why do you think that way?" Said, "well it's the city—Richmond City public schools." I'm like, "you shouldn't think that way – that you're less-than? Because you go to Richmond public schools? You're valedictorian of an entire high school and you're feeling this, that you're less than someone else because it's Richmond public schools? I—don't ever feel that way." And I hope he's still in college. But the—it shh—it hurts me that s—some kid who just has a 4.5 average thinks he—he's not capable of being successful because of the school system he's in because he hears what people say about it. That bothers me. Because I am a graduate of Richmond public schools and I... had a great education. And I know there are teachers that care. Um... and, you know, people point fingers at what the problem is, but, you know, I think people need to come to the co—people need to have a dialogue. And a courageous dialogue about different things in this community when it comes to our kids. Um, we have some great kids in this town and I think they get labeled... um, of being less-than. Some neat kids in this town. And it saddens me. That a kid who has a remarkable grade point average, who is top of his class thinks that he is less-than, than a county school valedictorian. That saddens me. That does. Um... but I want kids to know that they have all kinds of possibilities. And you know, I just—we have all kinds of possibilities. Um, I think that, um, the dynamics of our communities have changed. Um, our schools aren't there to raise our kids. Parents need to be. And I think that when it comes to parenting... um, some parents aren't great parents. People hate—hate to say that, but... um, some kids—I grew up in a house that had books. There are a lot of houses that don't have books. It was just a given. I read—I was—ok, I was a little—I told you, braces and knocked-kneed and geek. I read the encyclopedia from A to Z when I was a kid. Cuz reading was just a joy. But there are some—and I had a Bookmobile. I don't even know if the Bookmobile goes to these communities anymore. I go—I've never seen a Bookmobile, I haven't seen a Bookmobile in a long time. Maybe not. Um... but, you know, it was that, it was that window to the world. And uh, oh, I don't think there are bookmobiles anymore. So you know there's not a library in every community. But then we wonder what's wrong. A lot of the services, the recreation programs that I had in the schools, after school, that kept us off the street... little league football—we had little league football and we were the cheerleaders and we were going 'round and sell popcorn and get our little outfits. You know, you learn how to be a leader with the other kids in the neighborhood. I don't know if that still exists as much as it did. Um, I know growing up and being in Chesterfield County, you had to be in those associations and stuff to do stuff, but then, you didn't have to pay. It didn't make any difference. And—I will say that growing up in the West End, there was—even though we were—as African Americans in a segregated community, we were segregated within our segregated community. There were affluents over here,

and there was poverty here, and we're kind of like the working-class, middle-class family, and which, you didn't go down to that neighborhood. And those folks didn't associate with those folks. And I have been told that, you know—I—I've had ss—you know, people who were the higher end of the economic scale, you know, kind of, didn't want their kids to play with me cuz I wasn't in their group. So there was segregation within segregation. Um, I don't know if I can say if that still exists - I think it does. Um... and that's weird, I think. Um... because we went with kids—I went to school with kids who dads were doctors. But also I went to school with kids who dads hung out on the street all the time. To us, we didn't—it didn't—we didn't care. So my parents cared, but we didn't care. Um... I don't know if kids get a chance to deal with kids from different sectors of our community like we used to.

LB: I know when my kids were at John B. Cary—

MS: Mm hmm.

LB: ... you know, my daughter had... you know, Doug Wilder's nephew—

MS: Mm hmm.

LB: ... in the same class as her and other kids whose parents were janitors—

MS: Mm hmm, mm hmm, mm hmm, mm hmm.

LB: ... or other things. It was a real—

MS: Real one.

LB: ... mixed bag. Which was good.

MS: That's good. That's good, that's good. Now, John B. Cary's one of those special schools.

LB: Yeah.

MS: Like Mary Munford. They're schools that have very strong PTAs and parents are extremely involved and so, you know, you know, you have parents that are involved and aggressive oftentimes you get the resources that you wouldn't at other schools. So, uh, John B. Cary was always that, you know... when I was growing up in the West End, it was a special school... um, for the kids on that side of the park. Now, remember I was on the other side of the park. It was a different thing on that side of the park. So, um... but, yeah, John B. Cary's a good school.

LB: Do you think there're things that we as a community are in danger of forgetting that are important to remember?

MS: Um... I think that we're in danger of not hearing to all the—not listening to all the voices. Um, I think there are oftentimes when it comes to conversations, it's, you know, I said, it's the suits. And you're not bringing to the table the folks who are not in the suits. Um, there is leadership that, you know—LMR was created because there was a need for diversity in leadership in this community. And it was pretty much predominantly white men who were making a lot of the decisions back in the 60s and 70s. And fortunately, there were wise individuals say this, you know, this is changing, we have to change, we have to divers—number one we need women at the table, we need people of color at the table, then we need people from different economic areas at the table. And I really want people to keep remembering that because sometimes I think – what I all the white glove treatment, you know, people, I'm gonna come over here and help you, now I'm gonna go back to my little place over here. It's—it's let's get everyone involved. Let's have all the voices to the table, and there are some great programs in this town that—that do that. You know, I went to a meeting today and I was like, you know, it's about... a community conversation. And I'm looking behind me and I see a bunch of suits. And I'm like, "What community are you referring to?" It's—and so we're talking about the betterment of our region, but... everybody looks alike—I mean... where is everyone else? I think we have a danger of ignoring people in our communities. Um... but I think wise people are not ignoring their voices. I think that's one big thing we're in danger of. Um... another thing that I—I'm always concerned that people who rise up and influence and in service... are serving the people they need to serve and that's serving themselves. Um... that concerns me. So, um... where we're going as a community, but I think what we can remember the most is that, um, we go through difficult times. That was tough. We got through that. And we—we have the ability to get through new difficult times, cuz there will always be things that will happen. I think we got through that and I think we continue to get through that. Um... the Richmond City is my home. When I travel out of town and people say, "Where you from?" I don't say I'm from Amelia County, I say I'm from Richmond. I'm from Richmond. Um, it is our core of our region. And we have great things here, great amenities here. We have great—it's a great com—it's great—and I think the other problem is I think people will, um, look at the assets and not just keep looking at the problems, and pointing fingers at one another, um, we would get so much done. We would get so much done. Just, let's talk about, you know—let's have our small winds and let's have our conversations respectfully, openly. Um, I think things could be so much better. I really do. Um, but growing up in the 60s in Richmond... you know, I didn't have anybody to call me the N-word until I moved to Chesterfield County standing on my stoop. I mean—I mean—I—I didn't! I didn't have that. Cuz people said, you know, "you were sheltered." I don't know... I mean, I don't remember my parents having—I've heard stories of before, you know, before I was born, but I don't remember my parents having serious difficulties. Um... I don't. I—you know, sometimes I think—was I—was—was I sheltered? Or maybe some things happened that I just didn't see? But... I had a pretty cool childhood here. It was—it was—a—the biggest thing for me was when busing started. And feeling, um, less-than. And that's just not a good feeling to feel. Um, and I still have that problem. Feeling less-than. And that's why I've always been a big—big proponent of respect. For my dad.

Yeah. It's pretty cool. I had an interesting life. I didn't tell you everything. But, I tell you the most of it.

LB: [Laughs] You told me a lot. That was a great, great interview.

MS: Yeah, I—I have other stories, but I'll just kind of keep some—keep some of those to myself.

LB: Well, now you've piqued my curiosity, but you know I—I—of course.

MS: Only if—you cut off the mic, I'll tell you.

LB: [Laughs] Ok, I'll cut out the mic.

#2

LB: Ok, say that all again, please.

MS: No, one thing I do remember growing up was Curtis Holt (?) and the lawsuit. I remember *that*—I don't know why I remember that so well. Um, the lawsuit came about because of he was fighting the, uh—he was fighting the, uh, annexation. So that was a big lawsuit going on and a gentleman by the name of Curtis Holt was in the midst of that. I think he was fighting it, in essence. And, well he didn't win, because in essence, Richmond annexed part of Chesterfield County. And that's how I ended up going to Thompson and Huguenot because they were in Chesterfield. They were Chesterfield schools. So, I remember tension around that – the annexation. Annexation which led then to integration of schools. So, um, I remember that was touchy. And, course, after that annexation, there was no more annexation in the state of Virginia, I believe. But, I just—for some reason, I just remember, Curtis Holt, the lawsuit, my parents talking about annexation.

LB: So that must have been around, what, '69?

MS: I guess so.

LB: '70?

MS: I guess so.

LB: Cuz everything started happening at the same time.

MS: Everything started—everything started happening. And, it was a busy time in the city. And there were different opinions. And, you know, City Council—the complexion of City Council changed totally. It went to the w[??]—one thing I do remember when it also comes to the schools is that when City of Richmond decided

to have cluster schools... they put Huguenot Wythe as one school, and Marshall—they—the—they're always trying different things. I remember going to the superintendent's office pleading for them not to do it. They did it anyway. But we had learned that we had a voice—

LB: How old were you when you did that?

MS: I was probably in the twelfth grade. Cuz it happened after I left high school. But, once again, growing up in the household where my mom, you know, spoke out, I realized I had a voice, and meet—went down there to meet with the superintendent and told him, why did he think it was a great idea. It happened, it lasted for a few years and then went back to single schools. Um, which is—uh—well, that happened that way, but, um... it—it's—it's—it's—it's—yeah, for some reason the Curtis Holt story just rings a bell. And then I learned more about it when I went to—went to college.

LB: Now, I don't even know who Curtis Holt is. That's the first time I've heard that name.

MS: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. That's the annexation lawsuit.

LB: Ok.

MS: Mm hmm. African American gentleman.

LB: So—so, was he a lawyer? A local law—

MS: No, I think he was a community—I think he was a community activist. I really do.

LB: Interesting.

MS: I think he was. I think he was. Mm hmm. I think he was... But, you know, going back to the point of hearing all the voices. It's—it's—it's—we have to—we can't be arrogant that we think that we know everything and we know best for all, and we have to listen to what people have to say. And, um, I think that's pretty important. Especially now. That's one lesson learned. You know, the funny thing, the kids in the class – not kids – I can't believe I called them kids. Uh, members of the LMR class, last year... and I remember talking to some individuals that—majority of the people who were in the class were not from here. And they can't figure out why we keep talking about the Civil War. And why we keep, you know, dredging up history. But history reminds us that we don't want to repeat it. That's why I think history is so important, but they don't get, you know, all the things that we kind of went through. This part about growing up in Civil Rights Richmond is like, "What? What are you talking about?" Because, like you said, people think about Civil Rights, they think about the water hose and the dogs and those, but there were subtleties. Um... there

were subtleties, especially—I do remember going into the stores downtown, there were subtleties. Um, not getting waited on. I remember subtleties like that. Uh... but...nothing, you know—we weren't—you know, we have southern hospitality here. We—we're hospitable, you know. We're nice. So, we don't... you know, we didn't do, you know, really loud things, I mean, I'm sure you talked to somebody—you talked to Francis about the Woolworth. I think she was involved in that. But, um, we're a pretty calm community – I think. Um... so we didn't see blatant things. No, not really. I didn't see that. But growing up in Civil Rights Richmond, um, I did see – and let me say this: I saw African American leadership. That's one thing I did see. I remember when we were in elementary school when Lawrence Douglas Wilder was a hero. I do remember that. Arthur Ashe was a hero. Um, that's the other thing – we had great role models, growing up in Richmond. And then when City Council members... that was pretty cool. But also the thing was that when I grew up, the principal and the school teachers were African American. I mean, you had a whole lot of heroes to look to and a lot of people were successful that you knew that there were possibilities, um, of things to do. So, I think that's pretty cool.

LB: Well, thank you so much, Myra.

MS: I hope this helps.

#3

MS: I have a couple things that belonged to my aunt. She—she worked in the house in Windsor Farms. And a lot of women worked in Windsor Farm, being domestic. And she—I can't remember the name of the family, but they were pretty well-off. So, the lady who lived there, um, got a new fur stole. And she gave my aunt the old one. And I have it. In my—I don't know what to do with that... thing. But I have it. Um, and so, she was, and I remember my aunt died, this young man came to the funeral, white guy, was the only one there. And he was, like, tears running down his face. I'm like, who is this? She was who raised him. It was amazing. I wish I remembered the name and I wish I knew where he was. You know, it was—it was—she was—she raised those kids. I got a suitcase. I don't know where she got it from. Um, but I did some research on it. It's this old suitcase, and somebody probably just gave it to her, and, um, the name was Shelby MacNamara or something like that. And so I did some research, and found out that this man – he and his wife lived in Florida. And he was the manager of JCPenney's in Florida. And he was in the military. And so I guess he was—went—left JCPenney's and went to Europe. And he got sick in Europe. And he died. And so he's buried in that—that, um—cemetery in France that has all the, um, Americans in it. And that's where he's buried. So I found a newspaper article that sh—that talked about when he died. He was—got sick and died. And his wife was moving to Richmond to be with her family. I have his suitcase. I don't—I can't find where she went to. I knew it—my aunt had to get it. Somebody probably gave it to her. I have it sitting in my family room. Real old suitcase. The company is still in business in Florida. And I found the article and I... I don't—I'd love to know. I can't

f—I've done research and I can't find anything else, but... as—as—she was always getting things. She—they were always giving her things. Um, things they didn't need anymore, or... And she was always bringing home things. So, um, that was always the case.

LB: But she really, really didn't want you to be living—

MS: Oh, gosh, no. She was like, "Oh, please don't. Don't do this. You—I do not want you cleaning houses." She was very adamant about that. Very adamant. And she died my... junior year in college. So she knew I went to college, and she was very proud of me. But she was determined I could not—I could not live that life that she did. And so, she, you know, she moved from one apartment to the n—next, she didn't have kids. Um, that was her life. Mm hmm... NinaLeo42!

Uh, she used to tell me stories. I don't remember them distinctively, but I just remember the stories she would tell me of, um, raising the kids and... cleaning silver and... cooking all the time and stuff like that. That was Richmond. That was Richmond. And Wednesday was the day off. Where women went down to 2nd Street and men went down to 2nd Street and that's when they socialized. On Wednesdays. And so, uh, that's the life she lived and most of my, you know, people did that. Mm hmm. Mm hmm. And a little girl named Debbie. Don't know who she was or where she is, but she was always talking about Debbie. That was a kid she raised. Yeah. So! That's—that's—that's me.