

A Community Remembers

Interview: Renee Fleming Mills

Laura Browder: We're recording now. Renee, can we start by having you tell me something about how you grew up, and tell me something about your family.

Renee Fleming Mills: Ok. I grew up in Northside. Basically, Barton Avenue and Brookfield Gardens, is where I grew up. And my mother and a family of a—one sister, mother and father, and my mother was a teacher at... several different schools in Richmond. And my father worked at Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, which is... if not the oldest black bank, one of the oldest black banks in the country. Course, it's gone now, but... And, so, when I was small, from what I've been told by them, and their no longer alive, so, again, it's my memory, but when I was small, he worked [clears throat] at the bank, at an insurance company and at the Country Club on the weekends, so that that he could provide for us. And we had a very good – I say, good childhood. We... we—everyone we grew up in the area with we knew, you know, the neighborhood we knew, the lady who kept us while our parents were working, who lived on Barton Avenue – she lived right down the street, so she was a neighbor of ours. My aunt, my mother's sister, lived right across the street. So, it was a good, like, um... extended family, I guess. And... and I don't know, what specifically do you want to know about how I grew up – I mean, I don't, you know...

LB: Tell me about your memories of Richmond when you were a child.

RFM: Ok. Ok. I remember when they had the sit-in's at Woolworth's.

LB: How old were you then?

RFM: I... I had to be... if not in elementary school, probably before that. And the only reason—and I don't... particularly remember them. My father was involved in them. So I heard stories from him about it. And I remember us going downtown to Thalhimers and Miller and Rhoads and we couldn't go upstairs, we could go to the basement, and—but I remember, everybody used to like to go downtown. You know, that was that big thing. You got dressed up, went downtown, and... um... but it was—I think it was a very segregated... segregated experience because everything we did was sort of within the black community. Um, our doctors were black, um... I think even the pharmacies we used were black. Course, the schools were, um, de—were segregated. So, I didn't have a lot of interactions that I remember with any other race other than the blacks, and because in Brookfield Gardens, which I don't know if you're familiar with that or not, but it's off of Chamberlayne Avenue, and... it was a step above, I guess what they call the projects, so I guess my parents made too much money [laughs] to live over there, so we lived here. But they were houses that were... I—um... two houses were built together. And they were very small. But we never felt—I never felt deprived or anything because all of my friends were in the neighborhood, and so... I was—I think it was a very happy childhood. I didn't know

what I didn't know. Um, I remember in sixth grade, my father wanted me to learn how to play tennis, and the courts where Arthur Ashe learned or played tennis, that's where he would take me to learn, but I wasn't interested in tennis [laughs] so that didn't last long because we used to go before I went to school in the morning and I wasn't into all that, so... So that didn't last very long, but that wasn't very far from where I lived, so, um, I do remember that. And up until sixth grade, I was in a segregated school. I went to A.V. Norrell from first grade to fifth grade, and then I went to Baker School for sixth grade because Norrell did not have a sixth grade. And sixth grade is actually... when some of our friends went to Stuart. So our friends that lived closer to the Boulevard went to Stuart, and we went to Norrell. I mean, to Baker. And, so that was a little different for us, because we all had gone to school together and then they were having a different experience than we were having. Because Stuart, that was the first year, I believe, that Stuart was integrated. And it was very specific about who could go there depending on where you lived and that type of thing. So, um, and I do remember seventh grade, when we went to Chandler – all of us went to Chandler. And Chandler had probably been integrated maybe a year or two, maybe, um... but I remember that summer, we had to go and get our schedule together and one of my friends, she remembers the counselor saying, "Oh, you have all A's" because we always had all A's, we had all A's through school. And she said, "So you could be in advanced math or advanced science or advanced languages." And so my friend said – who was my best friend, um, through school – she said, "Well, I want to be in all of them." And she actually asked the question, "Well, what about the kids from Stuart? Do they have to just be in one?" And she said, "No, they can be in all of them," but she was inferring, we think, that, well, Baker didn't prepare us. So even though we got all A's all—the way up to sixth grade, we probably couldn't function if we took all of these advanced courses. But we took them anyway. So, we were—there were only a few of us who were in advanced courses. So I was in advanced... courses in seventh and eighth grade and then all the way through high school advanced and honors courses. So the majority of my classes were majority white. There were only a few of us who were in – a few blacks – who were in those courses. So, looking back, um... when people see me—when I see people from high school and junior high school as 'you were the smart one' because I didn't have a lot of interaction with other kids unless it was in my neighborhood or something like that. And I was trying to remember, but I think in seventh grade, my father had a house built on Woodrow Avenue which is right down the street from Chandler. And my first recollection of that was, um... that I believe we were the first black family in that particular block. And when they finished building our house and they built the... the walkway to the... steps, somebody wrote 'nigger' in it. And so they had to redo that part of it. And so—

LB: What year would this be?

RFM: I was in seventh grade.

LB: So that would be...

RFM: So that would be 19... I looked up to see when the house was built and the house was built in 1964, I think January? So it would have been, um... the beginning of my second semester at Chandler. So I would have been in seventh grade. And that was just a very weird feeling. And then once we moved there, other blacks started moving – and some started moving that year – started moving there and then of course the whites moved out. But we had one neighbor across the street, an older white family – man and woman – and they stayed. Until, pretty much until he died, I think. And he was Mr. Chenault (?) – I'll never forget him, he—you know, but he was a good neighbor and he didn't... I guess this was his house and he wasn't gonna let anybody, you know, run him out. So, um, so it was interesting just to see the change in the neighborhood and so the majority of the time, probably that I lived there... was majority black. Even though when we first got there, was all white. So I only had two blocks to walk to school, so that was a little different than my parents bringing me to school – every day. And—and I was involved in extracurricular activities there. I remember, um, one of the things I was involved with—and again, this is my friend... who was my best friends, and... her mother wanted us—wanted her to take ice-skating. And so I didn't want her to be the only black so I took ice-skating with her. And we'd have to ride this bus in the afternoons after school as part of the... I don't know what they used to call it, Girls Athletic Assoc—I don't know what it was called, but it was some type of extracurricular thing where they picked you up, took you to the ice-skating rink. And so we went there and neither one of us really liked ice-skating. And... but the bus ride was the most miserable thing because the kids really were not friendly to us and when we would get off the bus, some of them—and I remember some of their names to this day—would throw spitballs at us and things like that. And then she broke her ankle. And I remember taking that trip one time by myself and I told my parents, "I'm not doing this [laughs] anymore" because it just... was... too traumatic for me to have to go through that just to go to ice-skating which... I didn't really like anyway [laughs], so.... So I—that stands out in both of our minds because that was just such a... because then we had to go to school with these same people all the way through twelfth grade. You know, you'd have classes with them and you know what they've done to you and said to you, you know. Um... she and I also played violin. And we both were selected for the All-State Orchestra. So we—actually I remember traveling—and it had to be while we were at Chandler because when we got to John Marshall... um, we stopped taking violin because we were in all these advanced courses and it con—it conflicted with orchestra. And so we chose to stay in the courses. But, um, I remember, I think, staying with a family in Portsmouth. So that was a—and it was a black family, but it—that was a unique experience being away from home, and... you know, having to stay with somebody else, like, for a weekend or something because we performed down there. But... I rem—we were not—there were not too many blacks in this... orchestra either [laughs]. So and I don't know how we selected violin. But we played violin, I think from fourth grade up to eighth grade. And I took private lessons and all of that, and my sister actually played violin as well. So... think she got my violin [laughs], but, um, but it's not anything we ever... you know, pursued because we were all... I don't want to use the word *nerd*, but, that's [laughs] probably what we were, you know. Being—getting good grades was just important to—to me. So that's

what I focused on, is doing well. And... I don't—I—I'm trying to remember if I felt that it was harder. Um... I don't—I cannot remember if I thought it was harder than being at Baker and some of the other schools. I do know that my mother says that I would wake up—I used to study early in the morning, so I'd be up at two and three if I had to study and things like that because I wanted to make sure I always had my homework done and I was prepared for tests and things like that. So I continued to do well at Chandler, therefore being... in, um, advanced in all those classes at John Marshall. And I guess the... the mo—one of the most disappointing things to me and my ground of friends that I'd grown up with was that the principal at Chandler, who we did not like and we thought was very... racist... was then sent to [laughs] John Marshall. So we had six years of him. And... he just was not... I—I don't think he was ready for the integration and he was sorta... I mean... he just did not treat us that well. And so we just don't have the best memories of him.

LB: What kinds of things would he... do to show how he felt?

RFM: Well, there was one instance that I remember, that they had a talent show at Chandler. And... our little group of—I'm sorry—our little group of girls, um, wanted to be in a talent show and we got our little routine together and we had our little outfits together, which was probably like a t-shirt and jeans or something—I don't remember, it's nothing... fancy. Cuz I think we got them from Woolco (?), but [laughs]. Um, but whatever it is we did—and I think we were the—I don't know if we were the last act, but whatever routine we wanted to do, he said that it wasn't approved. And it was at the last minute that he said that and so we all went to his office, and eventually he let us be in the talent show, but it was things like that that we just felt that... he always put a lot m—more on us, as far as what we could and could not do, and what was accepted and not accepted, than he did with the other students. And I can't remember specific things, we just all have an—it's—it's um, eight of us who have been friends—well, seven of us who have been friends since first grade. And we're still friends. And so we talk about this stuff all the time when we get together. We get together four or five times a year. And none of us... like him. So, it's something... I don't know. We could—we couldn't even remember specific things. We just all knew that none of us like Mister... I don't even want to say his name. None of us liked him. And we just felt that... he—I guess it—it—I guess was the feeling that he didn't really think that we could succeed... and I don't know if it was just the black race all together or what, because I don't know what his experiences had been, but we were just so happy to leave Chandler, to go to John Marshall, and then to find out he was gonna be the principal, you know, sort of put a damper to it. Um, but... um, and then the counselor that we had a John Marshall was the football coach, and he was very prejudice. And I remember specifically him telling me that, um... my friend that I was talking about before was the only black who was in the top ten at John Marshall. And that I was in the top fifteen. And I remember him telling me, "Well, you'll never get into—" My—my father told me that I had to go to a state school... and—for college—and so, um, my parents had gone to Virginia State. And I didn't want to go to Virginia State, only because all the way through elementary school, my mother had the same teachers that I had, so I was

always *her daughter* and I didn't want to go to Virginia State and have that same experience. So, I said, ok. So I sort of did some research and William & Mary was the cheapest state school at that time. So I said, I'm gonna apply to William & Mary. And he pretty much told me, "You'll never get in there." And so I applied early-decision and I did get in early-decision so I never even applied anywhere else. So I just felt that instead of being an encouraging person, he was the type of person who... didn't think you could do and he's gonna let you know you couldn't do it. And... I guess I had parents, because both of my parents had advanced degrees. So education was not something that I thought about - I knew I was gonna go to college. And I had very nurturing and very, um par—parents who wanted me to do well and help me succeed, so I never really... I guess I listened to him, but I never thought that I couldn't do it. And I didn't know if I could get in early-decision, but, you know, I di—I didn't see why I couldn't get in. And I did even get a small scholarship. So, um, that proved him wrong, and I was just excited [laughs] about that. And in fact, some of my white classmates who applied to William & Mary did not get in. And some of them are my friends, and you know, they remind me about [laughs] that all the time. 'Well, I didn't get in, how'd you get in' - you know that kind of thing, but, um, anyway... so I think Chandler—I cannot remember my first day at Chandler. I can't remember how I felt, and I even talked to a few of my friends to see, 'can you remember?' - they can't remember either. But... it was, I know when I went to Chandler was a good feeling cuz we were all reunited from the ones who had gone to Stuart. And then there were kids from my neighborhood and Brookfield Gardens that—who were there, so it wasn't like I didn't know... kids. And some of the white kids were friendly, but we never socialized outside of school. You know, you were in classes with them and then when you went home, you went to your house and they went to their house. And so we didn't go to parties, and we didn't do that type of thing... with them. Probably some in high school, we did. Um... but... and I did have some, um... I did have friends of other races in high school who were actually friends and are still friends to this day. So, um, in fact one of the people who works here, I went to junior high and high school with, and he and I are—I mean, I wouldn't say we were friend-friends then. I mean, we didn't socialize. But he was not one of the ones who treated us nasty. And he's still to this day, he actually... was one of the reasons I got this job because he told the people about me and they encouraged me to apply, so - and he even says that some of the people... that—who we didn't like, he didn't like either. And so he's not even sure if it was a racist thing or if it was just... they just were bad kids, you know what I'm saying? So, until I talked to him, I never looked at it that way. I always had this feeling in my head, but some of—when I would mention certain names, like the guy who... threw the spitball at me and things like that, he says, "Well, I didn't like him [laughs] either," you know, so it's hard to say whether it was a racist thing. I mean, I still think some of it probably was. In high school, I was... very active in a lot of different organizations. And... I, um... and, again, I was in all of these classes with mostly white kids and some of the teachers would have functions at their house and invite the white kids, but not invite us, and we would only find out about it because the kids would be talking about it. So we didn't, you know, necessarily know about it ahead of time. And there were not many black teachers at... at John Marshall when I was there. And it was

majority white when I was there. It started changing towards my senior year. Um, because I think busing – I'm not sure if busing started my senior year or the year after I graduated.

LB: It started in 1970, so—

RFM: Ok, so it was the year after I graduated. I graduated in '69. I thought it was the year after I graduated. But it was still, more kids were going, their parents were taking them out of the school and moving to different neighborhoods, and some of them were going to private schools and some of them were going to county schools and things like that. So you could see the—the color of the school changing. And my sister was actually there in ninth grade, and I was there in twelfth grade. And—and her class was majority black. And the year it star—busing—the year it started busing in 1970, a lot of her friends were dispersed to all different schools. And in fact, they're having their fortieth high school reunion this year, and their actually having a high school reunion of all of the schools in Richmond – because everybody just went sort of different ways, and they're trying to get the whites and the blacks to be a part of this high school reunion. So, um... so that was a difference, the way she, you know, experienced it versus the way I experienced it.

LB: And I imagine when you got to William & Mary, you must have been.... Were there any other black students there?

RFM: Yeah, in my class—I think we were in the third class of blacks. And one of my friends who I'd grown up with actually went to William & Mary as well. She was a—we argue who was higher. But we were both in the top 15, so, it doesn't—I told her it didn't matter [laughs] at this point. So, she went—but she went because her boyfriend was a football—was—had gotten a football scholarship. So she and I weren't even close there. And we talk about it now because we're very close, but we don't know what happened during that period. But when we went, it was twenty... I will say around twenty blacks in my class. And out of the twenty blacks, six of us graduated. Viola Baskerville was in my class. And, um... but it was—it was—it was in—I went the summer before my freshman year. And I don't know why I went, I just wanted to go. I took two sophomore-level courses in psychology. And I got A's in them. So I thought, this is gonna be a breeze. And then I took freshman classes and I was struggling. Um... because I—I've never been—science and math—science and math have not been my two strongest points. I was always in advanced classes. And the science, I was in advanced. And I stayed in advanced because my best friends, who I didn't know at the time wanted to be a scientist, um, was one of the only blacks in the class, and so I was sort of staying in there to be with her. And I—say things to her now [laughs] that I wish she had told me in seventh grade, I wanted to be a scientist and I wouldn't have done all that. Cuz I didn't understand physics, chemistry and all that, but anyway. And she's actually a PhD biochemist now, so... she took a whole different turn. Um... at William & Mary, that was like starting all over. It was like, ok, here we go again. Chandler junior high school, except for it was worse. And it was worse because so many of the whites there had not gone to school

with blacks. And then quite a few of the blacks had not gone to school with whites. So it was—it was a, um... hmm, it wasn't the best experience in the world. And... I—when I look back on it, I—I would say sometimes I wish I just not gone there, because I never—I would listen to my other friends and how much fun they were having in school. And I didn't have that same type of experience. I didn't know it all the time then, but looking back sometimes I feel like I—w—got—you know... I could have had more fun if I had gone somewhere else. And... but I—most—several of the blacks just left. They're like, you know [laughs], I can go somewhere else, have a good college experience, I don't need to go through this. But my mind-set was, I'm not gonna let this school defeat me. So I stayed to prove that I could graduate from there. And I did, and I graduated a semester early. And I... I had some good professors who, because I went there the summer before my freshman year, the dean of students, Dean Saddler (?) sorta took me under his wing, and he sort of kept me under his wing the whole time I was there. I knew his family, I would go to his house, and so what I did there was a babysat for professors. And so he would sometimes tell me different professors who needed... babysitters. And I would babysit for some of them, and so then when I would have them as a teacher, they already knew me. So a couple of times that helped like when I took, um, calculus [laughs]. I was babysat—already babysat for him, so he's like, "Mmm. Ok. You're not doing too well [laughs], but I'll... help you along," you know, so it was that type of thing. I'd never—we didn't have any black professors there. We had one—we would have visiting professors from Africa and things like that who would come over for a semester. But we didn't have any black professors. And so that was very unique to me, not to have any. I mean, John Marshall, we didn't have many, but we did have some. But, there... um, I mean I had to make friends with people of other races or I wouldn't have had any friends. And... I would, you know, um,... dating was not a very good situation, because with the small number of blacks who were there all the—and there's usually more girls than boys, so, you know, you're fighting over these few little boys who... really, if you'd been in any other setting, probably wouldn't even have been interested in them [laughs], but that's all you had, you know. And you had Fort Eustace there, but... we didn't really, you know, I didn't have a car, so what was I gonna do. So, anyway. So wasn't a whole lot of social life. It was, again, mainly studying and going to school. I was in several activities there. Mostly—mostly, uh, religious, like the Methodist Students Organization, the Baptist Students Organization, and things like that, because they did community service, and that's the kind of thing I liked. So I was active in—in different organizations like that. And, I wr—I did write for the newspapers. Um, the Flat Hat. And, um... trying to think—and I—I st—I—I stayed there every summer except for the summer before my senior year. And I stayed there because I worked there. I didn't go to school but that first summer, but the other summers I worked, I volunteered at Eastern State Hospital, and then usually I had a job, either in the library or somewhere on campus – to sort of help me have spending money. Um... so, I... I... um... I guess I got acclimated to that area, and even though it wasn't... the happiest times, you know, it was, like, ok, I've... I've gotta finish. I—I think my focus was just on, I've gotta graduate. And that's why I just started doubling up on courses so I could get out early.

LB: Was there a lot of student protests there, at the time?

RFM: Yes, it was. Um, there were—especially my freshman year. And part of it was... some of the fraternities who... um, Kappa Alpha was one of the fraternities who, I think, during the homecoming and other times would have Confederate flags and things like that. And I remember prot—protesting and evidently, the Times Dispatch or News Leader had my picture a couple of times because I remember my mother saying, “I don’t want to see your picture [laughs] in any more papers.” Um... because... she—she was a ver—sort of an introverted, quiet person, and... I was probably more like my father, who... you know, if I saw something wrong, I wanted to speak out on it. And I do remember, you know, going down to hear (?) Gloucester Street and things like that. I’m trying to remember... there might have been a protest because we didn’t have any black professors. But I can’t—remember any specifics about that. But I was pretty outspoken. And... yeah, I guess I had the feeling of ‘what are they gonna do to me?’ I mean, you know. I mean, I—I—that’s sort of the feeling I had, even though my mother didn’t quite understand that.

LB: Although, she must have been used to it from your father...

RFM: She probably was, and, um... he was a pretty—he was very, very—because he—he worked at a black bank and actually eventually became president of the bank... um... bl—bl—black businesses—supporting black business was very, very important to him. And therefore important to us. And she probably did it because she was married to him. I don’t know how she actually—I don’t remember her actually talking about it, I remember my father, you know, being much more vocal about things like that. And, um, saying things that were wrong and seeing things that were wrong and trying to do something about it. Because he was very community-oriented. But he was also well-respected by the white community, because, I think of the position he had. So he had to have interactions with other bankers and when he went to Rutgers to the Stoyer Graduate School there, of course, um, he had to interact with, you know, other people. So it wasn’t that he was a militant black or anything, but I think when he saw something that was wrong, he spoke up about it. Um, I do remember in high school, I had—there was a family who came from Minnesota in high school—they came and—they’re... my friend and her brother were twins and they ca—and they—that was their senior year so I know it was hard for them to move to Richmond from Minnesota, where they really had not interacted with blacks. They were very open-minded, which I was surprised, coming from Minnesota. Um, and so they had had foreign exchange people, and some I think from, maybe Africa, so it wasn’t like they had never been around blacks, but they really hadn’t been around American blacks. But they were very, very open. And they—her brother was very, very smart. So I always latch onto smart people. And so I would go over there a lot and he would help me with my... homework, uh, my math... calculus again—took calculus in high school. He would help me with that, and I remember my father worrying that it was something else going on, and... you know, and “Do you have a white boyfriend?” and all this and—and I could tell that that was not gonna be accepted at that time, and that was 1969. Um, but, it was just a friendship. I

mean, she was a very close friend, we became very good friends, and eventually I was in her wedding, which was very interesting out in Minnesota [laughs]. But, um... but her family was just very, very open. All of her brothers were friends of mine, and... um... and I remember one time we went to high school graduation—I mean, a high school football game. And this was very childish, but I must have gone with them, and her younger brother who was probably in the ninth grade or... something at the time. And I remember he and I sitting in the back of the car, pretending to hug or something because we knew other people were looking. Because we liked to... I don't know, it was just sort of fun to get other people's reactions at the time, you know. Now that I look back, it was a little silly [laughs], but, you know, but back then, you know, there really wasn't too much interracial dating or anything, so, um... And like I said they were good friends of mine, and so I didn't see them... I saw them as people, I guess. I knew they were white, of course. And they were probably... one of the first families that I actually was in their house all the time. There was one other girl that, um, that I was very good friends from, she was – with—and she was from Blackstone, Virginia, which was... interesting, in itself. And I actually was the Maid of Honor in her wedding. And that was a very traumatic experience for me because her first husband's family, who lived in Blackstone, only thought you had blacks as help. And... that was the summer I worked in Richmond and I was actually a teacher's aide or something and I remember having to take off a day from school to go to this bridal shower that they were giving her, all of her teachers—even though she had moved to Richmond, all of her teachers from Blackstone had gotten together, were giving her a shower. Well, I guess on the way into Blackstone, somebody must have said, "There's a black person" or whatever they called us then, um, in the car, and wherever—I think the shower s—was supposed to be at her future mother-in-law's house – it quickly got changed to somebody else's house because her mother did not... think black people could be guests... in your house. She had a maid or a cook or something and that's what she thought, you know, that's all we could do. And so it was a very uncomfortable [laughs] shower for me, of course—a luncheon. It was a very uncomfortable luncheon. And that was the week of the wedding, and so when his father found out I was the Maid of Honor, he was the Best Man, and he—first he wasn't gonna be in the wedding. And so at the last minute, we had to compromise, with all the things she had planned for the wedding – excuse me – and... there could be no pictures with both of us in the picture. Um, she was supposed to—you know, how you walk down the aisle together, come out together, however you do it, with the... men and the women. We had to do everything single-file. The reception line, because at that time people used to do reception lines. Or receiving lines, I guess they were called. Um, could only be... her parents... his parents and them. But none of the, you know, bridesmaids or anything. So that was—that was probably—and that was the summer before my senior year, so that was... '72. That was in the summer of '72. And her parents – her father is a minister, they were very open to me, I used to stay at her house, I used to spend the night at her house, she spent time at my house. And, so it was just very, very, um... I don't know what the word is -- *unsettling* for me to be in that type of atmosphere, and I really wondered – I knew her boyfriend and he seemed to be nice to me, and I don't think he carried those same feelings that his parents carried. And at the

wedding... reception, they were upset because she had invited some black people to be guests, and they thought that they should be in the kitchen serving and... all of that. So, that was just sort of, another—you know, you sort of—you go along in life and then you have these rude awakenings every so often, where sort of jerks you back and say, gosh people are still like this, you know. So that was a very—that was a pretty traumatic experience for me. Because I was her friend—I'm the—I mean, I was the Maid of Honor, so obviously we were close friends. Um... and I wasn't gonna back out on her at the last minute, but it was just a very.... It was one of those situations where I just wished I didn't have to be there [laughs], you know. So...

LB: And he was the first husband - the marriage didn't last?

RFM: Right [laughs]. She's on her third now [laughs], so... And that one has lasted [laughs]. Yeah. And we're still friends and in fact, she and I actually got our doctorates at the same time. So we were in the same doctorate programs, so we both graduated, um, at the same time from high school and then we graduated at the same time from my doctorate program, so that was really interesting [laughs].

LB: It's amazing to me, Renee, how you have stayed in such close touch with people from so long ago.

RFM: And it's amazing to us—the friends that I have, the eight of us that have been friends since we were small - it—it's amazing to us that we're still friends like that. And, um... and whenever we tell people, they're like, "Eight of you?" [Laughs.] I mean, that's a large number to people, you know. And we get together four to five times a year. The one who I was in the wedding in Minnesota, she and I are still in touch. Um, we—there are periods, of course, throughout our lives where you're not as close, and then you get back together, and because she moved back to Minnesota, that in itself...

LB: Makes it harder.

RFM: Makes it harder. And what—what is funny is, the summer before she got married, I went out to visit her in Minnesota. And then the next summer she got married and I thought—and I was in her wedding—and I was like, "Now, I wouldn't have come out here last summer if I'd known [laughs] I was gonna be coming out here -- two summers vacation in Minnesota? I don't think so." But, anyway...

LB: [Laughs.]

RFM: But, um, whenever she comes to Richmond now, we always get together, and... her mother is still here and so I do see her every now and then. But, um, yeah I do have quite a few friends that... we're still in touch, you know.

LB: And of course now I want to interview all of them.

RFM: [Laughs.]

LB: I do!

RFM: Well they probably would want to, too – yeah, um, so—

LB: Do you think so, really?

RFM: Well, some of them... there's one who's still in Richmond. Most of them aren't in Richmond, so... But I could ask them. Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

RFM: Because some of them probably have lots better memories than I do [laughs].

LB: No, you have great memories.... And speaking of which, what do you remember about Richmond changing during the time you were growing up? What kinds of changes did you see?

RFM: Hmm. I think I saw... well, of course the stores. Um, we saw changes in that. Where we could then go to some—like the Tea Room we weren't allowed to go to, but over time, you know, you could go to the Tea Room, which was a big thing during that time, which – now that you look back on it, again that's a little funny [laughs]. But everybody wanted to go to the Team Room, I don't know. Um, so, some of that, being able to not have to sit at the back of the bus. Um...

LB: When did that change? What year did that change?

RFM: I don't remember. Because I wasn't—because my parents had a car, I didn't really take the bus that much.

LB: Yeah.

RFM: My grandmother always took the bus, so if she was going downtown, I would have to take the bus with her. She never drove. She never got her driver's license. So, that's really the most I was riding the bus was with her. And because busing—and I—and, well, I did ride the bus sometimes to John Marshall if my parents couldn't take me – I did ride the city bus to John Marshall. Um, but I can't remember exactly when it changed as far as from the back to anywhere you wanted to sit.

LB: Now, when you look back, what do you see as some of the big turning points for the community?

RFM: Hmm. I think moving... when we moved over to Woodrow Avenue, that was a big turning point because I'd always lived in a black neighborhood. So, just being—even though it eventually changed to b—black neighborhood, at first it was not, so,

having to live around people who were different, and that you really didn't know that well. And some of them you got to be friends with and some you didn't [laughs]. Um, that was one of the biggest turning points in my life, I think. Um... trying to think... course I probably had some experiences in school that, I'm trying to think right now—some experiences in school that I might not have had if I had been in a black school. Um... but I don't know specifically, I'm trying to think specifically what that would be. The All-State Orchestra when I was in junior high was probably something that I might not have experienced if I had been in an all-black school. Um... ice skating I know I would not have [laughs] experienced.

[Voice in background]

RFM: [Laughs] ... experienced it. And then even the sports that were at John Marshall, like hockey and archery and things like that, I'm thinking, "What is this [laughs]?" You know, so I don't know if they were at Walker and Armstrong but I have a feeling they probably were not. So things like that I think... some of—just some of the experiences that I had I would not have had if I had not being that type of school. And really, one of the reasons I went to John Marshall is cuz my mother taught at Walker. And I did not want to go to Walker and be in the school where I knew my mother [laughs] was gonna see me every single day, so... Um, and I'm sure because my friends were going to John Marshall, too, but I mean, I remember distinctly... having that choice of I could have gone to Walker or John Marshall but I didn't want to be under... under her foot [laughs] every day. At home and in school. Um, trying to think...

LB: When you think of examples of—an example of good leadership and an example of not-so-good leadership you encountered during that time, what comes to mind?

RFM: Well, one of the things that's come to mind is my father was a member of Also's (?) Presbyterian Church and my mother was a member of a Ebenezer Baptist Church. And Al—and the Presbyterian church – and I don't know how they do it now, but at that time, pastors were sort of sent there. So it wasn't like in the Baptist church where we actually... have different people come in and preach and then the church votes on them – it wasn't like that. And even though my sister and I decided to join my mother's church, which was the Baptist church, we still were in activities at my father's church. And I remember there was a white minister who was sent there after the black minister I think retired. And, Reverend Carpenter, s—um... there was—there were some ladies in the church—b—and—and Also's was integrated. And there were some ladies in the church who were white, I believe, and they started a group called "No Gaps Allowed." And there were kids from all over the city who were a part of that group and they would take us on camping trips and we would do activities together, and I think part of their whole purpose was to show us that, yes, we might have some differences, but we also have some similarities. And Reverend Carpenter allowed this group to be in his church and I just saw him as at that time, and I don't know how he was as a minister or anything because I didn't go to that church, but I saw him as a person who... regardless of how people in the

community might view that type of thing, he was willing to be open enough to allow, you know, this integrated group to do all these things under the auspices of his church.

LB: And it sounds very unusual to have an integrated church during that time at all.

RFM: Right. Right. Um, and I—and I don't know... in fact, my friend who, um, lives in Minnesota now, her mother was a member of that church until recently. And so I don't know how that whole... integration part occurred. Because I don't remember, when I was going there as a small child with my father, I don't remember it being integrated. And so I don't know if it was because of the white minister and maybe s—or I—I don't know why that occurred. My friend who's the biochemist was a member there, maybe she knows [laughs], but I haven't asked her. But you know, she might know, but I don't why... yeah, why it was integrated. But that was very unusual. Because even today, churches are still very segregated [laughs] in Richmond, so...

LB: Absolutely.

RFM: Yeah [laughs].

LB: [Laughs].

RFM: So, yeah...

LB: Now, h—

RFM: As far as a bad leader... so I guess, he's—I can't remember any good leaders in school that I saw. Um, but I do remember the bad leader was that counselor that I mentioned and—and he just stuck out in my mind because he just... really tried to push you down instead of raise you up. And so I remember him as—definitely as a person who was a leader because he was a coach and a counselor, but was not... wasn't—was negative and not a positive leader.

LB: How do you think all of those experiences shaped who you are today?

RFM: Well, I think it helped me to realize that I could compete with anybody and still do well. And it gave me a sense of... well, let me try this, let me try that. Instead of—instead of just going a secure route, and my father didn't like it because he was of, you know, back then, of the mind-set that you got a job, you stayed at a job, you retired of the job. And I think since I finished graduate school, I've had thirteen jobs. I think I counted thirteen. And the reason is because I—I know my limitations and if I get in a job and I feel like, ok, this job is boring to me, or I can't advance at this job, then I look for some other opportunity. And he didn't understand that. And so back—back in the day, he would say, "you're job-hopping," and "you're never gonna get anywhere in life," and, you know, he was just quite upset about it. But... it has

worked out and sometimes I've had to take lateral things, but it's—it's—I've always been in situations – not always – but I've been in a lot of situations where I was either the first black or the only black on staff or the executive team... I'm still the only black on this leadership team. There was another black lady but she resigned a coup—I think a year after I got here. And—and I don't know if they'd had any prior to that. So it still amazes me when I get jobs. When I worked at St. Mary's, I was on the executive team, I was the only black on that. And... when I worked for Service Master which is—was similar to Airmark (?), a major Fortune 500 company, I was the only black on my leadership team there. So, I think from the experiences that I had, I never felt that I couldn't compete with other people and I always felt confident within myself that I could do it. I... and sometimes I probably show more confidence than I was really feeling on the inside, because some of these situations were new situations for me. And not everybody... accepts, um... or, I guess, what is the word, questions... how do I want to say it—when I worked in Missouri, I actually trained all over the state of Missouri. And I worked for the Department of Mental Health, Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, I believe. And I got in that job because the National Institute on Drug Abuse had an internship program where they were trying to get minorities and females to get in leader—in administrative positions in dr—in substance abuse instead of always being counselors. And I applied, I said I wanted to go to the Mid-West, they put me in Jefferson City, Missouri. And I didn't even know where that was [laughs]. I mean, I remember it was the capital but that's all I knew. And so I moved out there not knowing anyone, not knowing what I was gonna be facing, but it was for eighteen months and I said, "You can do anything for eighteen months." And I also was supposed to work on an advance degree so I had to work on a doctorate while I was out there. But when I got there, the only other two blacks on the staff... were also in this internship program. And—well I think one of them was on the internship program, one might have been working there. But it was two guys. And I was the only black female. And I remember distinctly the people who I had to work with—I was twenty-five years old, and... I was single, didn't have any children. And out there in Jefferson City, a lot of the people who worked in the city were from rural areas around Jefferson City and they were married, had kids when they were twenty-one. So they were thinking there was something wrong with me that I didn't have anybody. And... that's when Good Times and the Jeffersons were popular. And that's their only—that was their only view of blacks, from those shows. And so I found myself constantly explaining things about being black and, you know, about black hair and black this and black that, because to them it was total—it was totally new. But the experiences that I had out there, I remember having to constantly—because the... two of us who trained all over the state, we were training substance abuse-based courses. But the—the—sometimes our audience were doctors and nurses because we would train things like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and explain how drinking alcohol in your first trimester was very—and a lot of doctors back then didn't always know that. But anyway, when we would go to train, we'd have to give all of our credentials... up front, before they would even listen to what we had to say, because, well, who are you? You know? And I always felt—I've always felt sort of that way, that I always had to have all of these degrees or something for people to think, "oh, well maybe she does know something." Whereas I don't think other

people—other people don't even have a degree, and who cares? You know. But I remember distinctly out there always saying "Well, I have a Masters degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and I've worked in the substance abuse field" and having to go through all of that and even as much as saying, "I went to William & Mary," and sort of validating who I was for them to say, "Ok, well maybe she can now train us." You know. And so there have been times throughout my life where I have felt that way, that... why can't you just take—take me on the face value, but no. I've got to tell you all about me and then... and people—I mean, it's amazing when I say I went to William & Mary. "You went to William & Mary?" That's the reaction I get a lot. And I don't say it because I'm trying to brag about it or anything like that – that's where I went. I mean, you know, if people ask me, that's where I went! But during that time, people also know that many blacks did not go to William & Mary and so they're often surprised, you know, when I say that. But again, I feel that in their minds it's like, "Oh, well she went to William & Mary, so maybe she's ok," you know. And I was always told that, you know, if you went to a black school, black college, that you wouldn't get as far as if you went to William & Mary, UVA – went to William & Mary, UVA. But what was funny is when I went to University of Florida for my masters, when I got down there, people did not know anything about William & Mary. They were like, "I thought that was a private boy's school." You know. So I'm like, all this time, people been tell me if I go there [laughs] I'll really go far and then when I get to Wi—and Missouri, they had no clue [laughs] where William & Mary was, you know. So, it was—it was just interesting because in Virginia, it's—it's way up, you know, and I think nationally probably in the academia part, but it's just funny because when you go other places, it's like, what is that?

LB: Context is everything.

RFM: Right, right. You know, so, that sort of blew my mind cuz I'm thinking, hmm, I thought was supposed to really be going far and... some of these people who have degrees from no-name schools are going farther than I am, so... that was sort of a myth that, you know, sort of burst my bubble [laughs]. But... but...

LB: Now when you think about... Richmond today—

RFM: Mm hmm.

LB: ... what would you want kids growing up now to know?

RFM: One thing that I would want them to know is that education is important. And I see when I—I volunteered in the schools, and I actually a couple years ago through a professional organization that I was in—that I'm in—we actually went to one of the high schools and did a series of workshops trying to explain to them what the world of work is like, why it's important to get your degree, etc. etc. And the disrespect that was given to us, I mean, the poor teacher. I just felt so sorry for her because she's like, here are people taking their time off, I'm taking leave to come here. This is not a part of my job, this is something I wanted to do. And... it was very discouraging

to me to see that they were there but they didn't seem to be there to learn. You know, and... [sighs] I really think that kids really need to understand that education is—is really impo—it's a key, it's very important to further—further—those to—to advancing in life later. And once you have your degree, nobody could ever take it away from you – that type of thing that my parents would always say, you know. Um, and I just don't see that being valued now, like it was when I was growing up. N—none of my friends—all of us knew we were going to college and all of their parents had not necessarily gone to college. But we all knew we were going to college. It was never a question of, 'are you going,' it's '*where* are you going?' And now, kids—I see it all the time, kids dropping out of high school, and really a college degree is almost like a high school degree used to be. And so it's just amazing to me that so many of our ancestors went through so much to get us to this point and people just don't understand the significance of it or the importance of it, and I don't think the kids care about it, you know, they don't know about all the stuff that we went through and what we had to suffer to get to where we are and they don't seem to even care about it. You know. There are some, but, you know, overall, when I look at kids, I look at the kids in the church, I look at... you know, kids at different schools, and what's important to them is how they dress, cheerleading, going to the games and going to parties and things like that. And I'm thinking, well, yeah, that's a part of growing up, but that's not the essential part, you know, right now. But I also think it's the parents who are not parents like our parents were. You know, our parents were nice to us, but they weren't our friends. They were parents. And I think now parents get confused because they want their kids to like them, that they don't... they don't push them to do certain things, so, I just think a lot of what we struggled to get... is sort of lost in this generation, I really do.

LB: So you just answered my last question which is, what do you think we're in danger of forgetting that we need to remember?

RFM: I just think, my father was a history buff and I never was into history, but as I get older, I see the importance of it. If you don't know where you came from, how do you know where you're going? And I just feel that... it—somehow we need to... sort of get in our children the fact that, yes, you have all of these opportunities now, but why do you have them and how did you get here and those types of things, and I don't think that that's being stressed at all. Like, how many people do you think know who Oliver Hill was, *all* of us knew who Oliver Hill was, you know. Henry Marsh, I mean, just some of the people in the community that everyone knew because... and I really [laughs]—I look back on it now and I really... get mad at myself because when I taught at UVA... and—and worked at UVA, I was a career counselor there, but I also taught some courses. Arthur Ashe was on the board of Aetna Life Insurance. And every year when we would have all the companies come to do the career fairs, they would s—they started sending him. And I would—I was his contact, and I would, um, have him—he would speak to some classes, and then we'd have, like, the little wrap session in the evenings, and then he would also do the whole career thing for us. I actually picked him up from the airport, I had dinner

with him, and I have not one autograph from him [laughs]. Not one picture, not one anything, and I did it for two years.

LB: But it's all in your memory.

RFM: It's all in my memory, but I just—you know, but—who would have thought he would have been dead, too—

LB: I know, I know.

RFM: You know what I'm saying, so it's not the kind of thing where I was like [thump sound] "daggone it." It's not like I can go back and... talk to him or anything, you know, but, um, just having that association, him being from Richmond, I under—I knew all the... struggles he had in getting to where he was, and that was just such a great opportunity that I had being there, him in my car, you know, and—and not even... not even understanding the impact of it at that time. And I think that's sort of what happens now as things happen and you don't realize the impact of it at the time and you look back later and it's lost. You know. So...

LB: Well, thank you so much, Renee, what a great interview.

RFM: I probably didn't do too—