

## **A Community Remembers**

### **Interview: Valerie Perkins**

Laura Browder: ...To hold this... like... it was a lollipop that you were about to lick, so... pretty close to your face.

Valerie Perkins: Ok.

Laura Browder: Good. That's perfect. Let's just start off by you telling me something about how you grew up and tell me about your family.

VP: Ok... basically, um... grew up in a home in which my mother was a domestic worker until, um, around about my last year in high school. My father was a auto mechanic. And... I consider, um, our family to be lower-middle class at that time, from what I know now. Um... my mother strongly believe in and was very supportive of and stressed education. The v--the importance of education. Um... my older--I have a older brother and a younger sister. We grew up, of course, in Richmond, Virginia.

LB: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

VP: Um, Southside Richmond. Um... we moved a couple of different times. We lived, um, on Decatur Street.

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: And then we lived on 30th Street. West 30th Street. And so we were--what we considered back then--we were uptown at one time and then we lived downtown... another time.

LB: [Chuckling] Ok.

VP: Is--that's what we called it. Yeah.

LB: So tell me more about what Richmond is like when you were a child.

VP: Wow... you know, it's--it's so different than what I--I know now. It just seemed like, um, Richmond... was, you know, this bigger-than-life place. Um, and mostly what I saw were--were black people, mostly, and I saw white people, too, but mostly it was, like, when I went downtown... or something of that nature. Cuz all the major businesses were downtown. Thalhimers, Miller & Rhoads... Woolworth's, J.C. Murphy's, all--all of that. So... um...

LB: What was your neighborhood like?

VP: Well, let's see. When I lived uptown--and pretty much when I lived downtown, too--um... again, when I lived uptown, we were renting a house... and that neighborhood

was, like... maybe lower- to mid--middle class back then.

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: And when I moved downtown after my grandmother passed--my mother's mother passed--we moved into her house, which she owned. So--and that area, again, that was like, middle, lower... middle class? [Laughs] Um... quiet. Um... all the neighbors knew everybody. You went over to each other's homes, that kinda thing. One of the big things for me growing up, especially uptown was, um, my mom was a bit of a tomboy. She played basketball in high school. So all the community kids were, like, really anxious when she got home from work cuz she want--they wanted her to throw a football with them. [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

VP: It was so funny. But it--w--my house was kind of like a community hangout. Um, we had a ping-pong table outside, people would come over for championships and playing games and... marbles and... all that kinda stuff.

LB: Oh, it sounds really fun.

VP: Yeah, it was! It was, we did a lot--my mom, like I s--again, my mom... um, would take some of the community kids with us to the beach... and we would go, you know, bowling and... she played softball so we would go to softball games, and... even, um... Richmond Race--Southside Speedway?

LB: Yeah.

VP: We would go there sometime. To watch the races. Back then. And it--we just did a lot. She had us completely involved in activities and exposed us to a whole lot. So and looking back, I'm--I'm amazed how she did that.

LB: I know.

VP: I--I just can't... even understand... thinking, you know, knowing the kind of work she did...

LB: Pretty exhausting.

VP: *Very* exhausting. You're cleaning somebody's else's house and raising somebody else's kids... and then you gotta come home and do the same thing at your house. But she always made it--it was just... an exciting time, be--I mean, she just took us places and exposed us to a lot. I don't know she did it. I have no idea.

LB: But it sounds like it was great for you.

VP: It was wonderful for me. It was wonderful.

LB: So, where did you go to elementary school, and how did--how did your family decide?

VP: Well... um, it wasn't a thing of deciding where you went, you were pretty much directed to--

LB: Yeah.

VP: ...where you had to go. I went to, um, Franklin Elementary School--

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: ...which is on Midlothian and it's now called Swansboro.

LB: Ok.

VP: And that's where I went to elementary school. After I left there, I went to junior high school at Blackwell. And... that was decided, um, a--according to your zip code. Some of the people I went to elementary school went to Bainbridge and others went to Blackwell.

LB: So, what kinds of schools were those?

VP: Predominantly black.

LB: But not entirely.

VP: Not entirely. You might have had... four or five white people, but... not many more than that. It was predominantly black.

LB: I wonder what they were doing there.

VP: I don't know!

LB: Do you know what I mean?

VP: I thought about that last night when I was thinking--you know, just going through my books and thinking about my experiences and I was like, hmm. I wonder...

LB: That's interesting.

VP: But I--I think it--it--it's consistent with the fact that now that you would find... that there are white people that fit in just fine with black people and black people that fit in just fine with white people. And it's just like it's no difference.

LB: But back then--

VP: You're just a person.

LB: Back then there were laws, though.

VP: I know!

LB: I mean, that's--

VP: You would think...

LB: That's what I would...

VP: You would think...

LB: Like...

VP: But you know what? I th--when I think about it, when I think about my experiences as I've--you know, been educated and--and the work world... a lot of my early experiences, I was maybe the only black in the room. It flipped!

LB: Yeah.

VP: I don't know... you know, I just... think people are people. I--didn't bother me. Sometimes it was a little uncomfortable. But... pretty much, it was just... what it was!

LB: There you go.

VP: And it is what it is today.

LB: So that's really interesting because... I mean, all the stories I hear--

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: This would have been in the sixties?

VP: Yeah.

LB: Right?

VP: Yeah!

LB: And... segregation was so strong then.

VP: Absolutely. *Absolutely*, very strong. Very strong.

LB: I would love to interview those four or five people--

VP: I know. I know.

LB: Don't ya think?

VP: Yes. I--I would *love* to know--maybe what--where--where they are, what happened to them, what they did with their lives. I think it would be very, very interesting.

LB: So what was the school like in general? How was your--how was your education those early years?

VP: Well, I thought about that. And I'm--I--I--and thinking about it, it just was it was. I didn't know anything else--

LB: Yeah.

VP: ...other than what I got.

LB: Did you like your teachers?

VP: Pretty much!

LB: ...by and large?

VP: Yeah. Yeah. They were nice. They were nice. Now, I have to be honest with you and tell you, probably in the first and second grade, I was probably kinda rough around the edges and, I got in a little of trouble because um... I guess being the middle child...

LB: Yeah, I'm a middle child, too.

VP: [Laughing] so you know what I'm talking about, you know where I'm going. It wasn't--and my--I have a older brother... by... two years, and a younger sister by three years. So I was the first girl... and it wasn't like, I guess maybe I just didn't know how to share a lot and I was just kinda... I don't know what happened, *but*... my mom came to school and quickly got that straightened out. And after that, nobody had any trouble with me at all. But I do remember that time because I guess it was pretty traumatic for me. You know?

LB: I'll bet it was.

VP: [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

VP: But she got it straight... and I knew what I had to do. I knew what my marching order were and I went with that. So...

LB: And then from--from there, you went on to... middle school--

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: ...and what was that... like?

VP: Blackwell... it--it was a interesting, um, experience because it brought together, um... predominantly blacks from uptown and downtown... together. Culture kinda different, you know, kinda... kinda different.

LB: Now, I--I'm gonna sound so ignorant--

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: But I never really heard people talk about uptown and downtown Richmond. Can you tell me more about that? Like w--

VP: Ok. Let's see if I can explain this. Um... pretty much if you think of where Hull Street and Midlothian come together--

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: And that's like, Clopton Street.

LB: Yep.

VP: That was kind of like the dividing point, almost.... And I would say anywhere from 29th street up... would be considered uptown.

LB: Ok.

VP: Downtown was pretty much the--the railroad track.

LB: So other side of the tracks.

VP: Other side of the tracks... was the dividing point, right there. And that was anybody that lived on the other side of the railroad track was considered to live downtown. Or in Oak Grove.

LB: Ok.

VP: Down Jeff Davis.

LB: Ok.

VP: Yeah. So I never even--living--and even... on the other side of the track, there were still... kind of like uptown and downtown. Because I was--when I moved on Decatur Street, I was only, like, a few blocks from... there railroad track. But still on the upside--

LB: Yeah.

VP: ...uptown side of the railroad tracks.

LB: And so you say that people from uptown and downtown were kinda different from each other.

VP: Kinda different, kinda different. And, um... I don't even know how to kind of explain that... It seemed to me when I think about it... um... it seemed like, to me bec--maybe because I was from uptown... that the kids from downtown... I don't know how they were different. It just seemed like they got into more trouble or something--

LB: Yeah.

VP: I'm not sure. Because there were some that were advantaged, and some were disadvantaged. Um... on both sides of the track. But mostly I would s--say--

LB: Uptown was more advantaged.

VP: Yeah. Yeah. Over all.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Overall. Yeah.

LB: So when you get to junior high, I imagine all that starts really coming out.

VP: Yeah. Yeah. Because you're exposed to kids that you didn't go to elementary school with. You know. So you've got uptown and downtown... coming together--

LB: And never the two shall mix, right?

VP: Eventually.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Eventually. But it's just like the storming norming forming kinda thing that we--we-- know now and do in project management and in relationships and developing relationship. Um... that went on back then as well.

LB: And... so from junior high school--

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: ... you went on to George Wythe.

VP: Yes.

LB: And that was 1970, right?

VP: Yes. When I went to George Wythe. Um... it wasn't my choice. I was ordered to go to George Wythe in 1970.

LB: Where would you have gone?

VP: Armstrong.

LB: Ok.

VP: Because my mom went to Armstrong, my brother was... currently at that time at Armstrong. And it was just the natural progression of... of black children... um, in the school system at that time, they either went, at the high school level, Armstrong or Walker.

LB: [Simultaneously] or Walker. And could you kind of decide which one you were gonna go to?

VP: You know, I don't know. I don't know... if they gave you a choice or not. And maybe it depended again, probably, because everything else, on where you lived.

LB: Yeah.

VP: The zones.

LB: But you had that family tradition.

VP: Yeah. And I was excited about it. I was really looking forward to it--I was very, very excited about it because, as you've probably heard, the Armstrong-Walker Classic was a *big* event.

LB: Huge.

VP: Huge. Huge. And everybody lived for that event. And I was just looking forward to... going to Armstrong. But... I couldn't! I was disappointed. I really was. But... I had no choice. And so I went forward to George Wythe as I was ordered to do.



LB: And how did you get to school?

VP: Um... the school bus.

LB: Ok.

VP: Mm hmm. School bus. Yeah. And see, actually, let me step back again. From where--like I said--from where I lived... um... when I went to Blackwell, I had to catch the city bus from my house to Blackwell.

LB: They didn't have bus--school buses.

VP: They--no. They--they--they--I don't know why... we did--and maybe they didn't have school buses back then but we had to catch the city bus from where I lived from--from, um, 2411 Decatur Street -- never forget the address -- to Blackwell and back. And then when we were bused to George Wythe, we just walked out to Hull Street and caught the bus.

LB: But it was still the city bus...

VP: It was--it was a school bus.

LB: That was a school bus at that time.

VP: A school bus. Mm hmm. Yes.

LB: How long did it take you to get Blackwell on the city bus?

VP: Mmm, maybe... less than ten minutes.

LB: Oh, that's easy then.

VP: It's real easy but the thing is, after you got off the bus, you still had to walk maybe four blocks?

LB: Ok.

VP: Nothing for--

LB: Yeah.

VP: ... junior high student.

LB: No.

VP: No.

LB: So when you got to Wythe, what were your impressions at first? That first day, what was that like?

VP: Wow.... [Pauses] It was a one--it was a big school.... Different, um... I just remember... during that--that--that first year it was so... it was kinda traumatic for me because it was like every day it was a fight. A fight.

LB: Who was fighting?

VP: Blacks and whites... mostly. From what I remember.

LB: Just black on white, white on black.

VP: Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Yeah, every day it was something. And for me, I wa--I'd never been exposed to that. So it was traumatic for me. And... you know, often I, you know, was like, "I don't really wanna go to school because, you know, somebody's gonna get in a fight and I don't wanna get... hit, I don't wanna get hurt, I don't wanna be anywhere around that." That was--that was--that was my first year and it was really traumatic.

LB: It sounds very intense.

VP: It was. It was.

LB: Was there a lot of tension in the school--

VP: Yes.

LB: ...that first year?

VP: Yes.

LB: ...that you could just... kinda feel?

VP: Yeah. yeah. You could cut it with a knife, yeah, it was--it was--it was tough.

LB: Tell me some more about some ways that that all came out during your school day.

VP: Um... wh--are you asking about... what the...the--

LB: Like the atmosphere, the tension...

VP: [Pauses] I don't know--for me... I was just very focused. I was focused on getting from one class to another--just getting through the day...

LB: Yeah.

VP: And not being anywhere around... any kind of disturbance or arguments or any of that. That's what it was like for me. Just... doing what I was supposed to be doing, and getting--getting through it. And just not... being around that. And--and not--not, you know, how... sometimes when people are drawn to fights -- it's like, "Oh, they're fighting, let's run!" Not me. I'm just like, "I don't wanna know, I don't wanna see it, I just--I'm just going to my class." That's it.

LB: So did you keep the same friends that you'd had at Blackwell? Were a lot of your friends at Wythe with you or--?

VP: We--in my situation... because I went to Wythe an--at--in 1970. Some of my friends that went to Bainbridge didn't go to George Wythe, they went to Elkhart. And--and--and the core friends that I had were at Elkhart. And actually, we formed a little sorority... kinda thing? And... every--I was the only person at George Wythe. Everybody else was at Elkhart. So for me, I made a lot of friends... um...

LB: But you were starting from scratch.

VP: From scratch. That's why it was so scary, too, because... your core friends that you're used to being around are no--no longer there -- that's your support system. They're not there. Just like, you know... you just kinda... starting from the beginning, like, ok, who--who... who's an ally and who's not maybe so much of an ally--

LB: Yeah.

VP: And let me just go and do what I'm supposed to do... because I knew if I didn't, I'd [laughing]--I'd have to answer at home for that. So... I was focused on trying to do, you know, do what I was supposed to be doing.

LB: Were you involved in extracurricular activities? During this time?

VP: My s--my second year. First year, I was kind of... there, kind of... like I said, doing what I was supposed to do, kinda learning, kinda seeing what was going on, what activities were available.... Those kinds of things. My second year, I tried out for the cheering squad. And I made it. And that was the ss... I think that was the second year... of course, of the integrated... cheering squad.

LB: So that was when... the Rossi twins, and...

VP: They came, maybe a year or so later, after that.

LB: And Elizabeth Bowles Salim?

VP: Yeah.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Yeahhh, that's my buddy [laughs]. Um... they were either... let's see, were they one year or two years behind? They might have been one or two years behind. That very first year... and I have the picture--

LB: Oh, great!

VP: Do you want to see it while we're talking?

LB: Sure! Absolutely.

VP: Because I--I--I...went through this and I was, like, "Oh, this would be wonderful to share." This was the first year.... for me.

LB: Oh, this is great.

VP: [Laughing] there I am.

LB: This is great.

VP: Yeah... First year on the cheering squad.

LB: Oh, that's terrific.

VP: And what--what made this so wonderful was... let me show you this picture, which was great. I love it. ...See if I can find it...[pauses]... there I am.

LB: Ah! That's gorgeous.

VP: Isn't that wonderful?

LB: That's a wonderful, wonderful picture.

VP: Mm hmm. Fifty-yard line! Right out there, front and center [laughs]. Yeah. Memories. It's wonderful.

LB: What do you remember most about the cheerleading squad? Cuz it sounds like, you know, when we were doing the interviews in the spring, that sounded like that was a really big part of life--

VP: Oh, it was! It was--it was almost larger than life. It, um... It was a driving force for me? Once I joined. Um... it's--it's--it was my way of attaching to a group of people, a group of allies, someone, you know, a group to--to--to, um... to bond to--to--to be affiliated with... because all of my other friends were not there.

LB: And it sounds like just the day to day... was that--was it still kinda scary...?

VP: It was still kinda--mm hmm, it was still kinda scary. This year. Just--

LB: Yeah. The second year.

VP: Yeah, the second year, it was still--but--but not like the first year. Not like the first year. It calmed down some... but there still were spots of incidences where there were fights, and... but spotty. Not like... almost everyday in the 70s. Yeah.

LB: Now, in 1970--

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: ... when busing began, was it still a predominantly white school?

VP: Yes.

LB: Like 80% white or something, that first year?

VP: I would say yes. Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Very much so.

LB: So that was a huge change for the white students at Wythe--

VP: Yes.

LB: ...and it was a huge change for the students who would've gone...

VP: Were being bused--

LB: ...to Walker or Armstrong.

VP: Yeah. Yeah. It was.... It really was.

LB: And it sounds like there were some very strong feelings on both sides.

VP: Both sides. Both sides. Yeah... Yeah... But, um, to talk about the--the cheering squad, you know, it was a lot of fun because we painted these signs... and it was just, um... it was just a wonderful experience. You know? I was real happy to--to have made it.

LB: Yeah.

VP: I was just, you know... And--and you know, in thinking about it, um... last night, cuz like I said, I went through all of my books and kinda went down memory lane... And thinking about it, would I have had that same opportunity had I gone to Armstrong. I don't know.... I don't know if I would've. And to this level, I don't know if I would've. And it's been such a wonderful experience for me. It gave me my first steps towards leadership... to--to become the person that I am today. Like I mentioned before, it--it--it taught me a lot of life lessons... that I--that I embrace today.

LB: Tell me more about that.

VP: Well... I just, you know, I just see people as people...

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: I just see people as people. I, you know, I feel that... no one's better than the other person. That it's a level playing field. And life is what you make it. If you apply yourself, then you--there should be opportunities for you. That's how I see life. You know, even... um, I work the federal government now, and of course... you know, I've... done relatively well. you know?

LB: What do you do for the federal government?

VP: I'm a senior, uh, management analyst. GS-14.

LB: Wow.

VP: Which is not bad.

LB: It is not bad at all.

VP: Not bad at all. There's only a few more steps above that.... Yeah. And, uh, I work for treasury. And, um... actually, my--my good buddy, Mark Person, we found out several years ago that we work for the same agency.

LB: Oh, that's so fun--

VP: Yeah! Yeah, and that's how we actually reconnected. One day in the hallway.

LB: You saw him.

VP: I saw him and I said, "Mark?" and he said, "Val?" and it was just like... we were back at George Wythe again.

LB: That's so crazy--

VP: Yeah.

LB: ...had you not seen each other?

VP: No! No. Because when I left George Wythe, I went to Norfolk State College back then. It's now a university. And then I went to the University of Dayton and I had g--I have my masters from the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio. And then when I left there, I moved to Texas. So when I--whenever I tell people where all I've lived... they think, first of all, "Oh! You in the military?" "No, not in the military--"

LB: [Laughs.]

VP: [Laughs] ya know? I've had--I've had a wonderful life.

LB: So what brought you back to Richmond?

VP: My daughter. And family.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Um, I came back to Richmond about twenty-one years ago. Um, I wanted my daughter to know my mother--not know her from afar. And that was the catalyst for me coming back.

LB: That makes a lot of sense.

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: So let's go back to George Wythe for a little while.

VP: Ok.

LB: Tell me more about what you did on the cheerleading squad, how much time you spent, who you were hanging out with at this time, and... and let's start getting into examples that you saw--cuz you brought up leadership--

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: ...of really good leadership, and leadership that wasn't so good at that time.

VP: Mm hmm. Ok, so let's start with...

LB: And you can take it from any--

VP: [Laughs.]

LB: ...angle you want.

VP: Ok. Um... Like I said, the cheerleading squad provided me with an opportunity to get to know different people... from different backgrounds. Um... which was a wonderful experience. It was a wonderful experience because during the summer, before school started, once you made--tried out and made the cheering squad, then, uh, we used to go to Fonticello Park and that's where we had our practices. And, um... it was just a wonderful experience in that I--I read, um, a comment that, um... Elizabeth Bowles wrote...

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: ... and I've got these comments in the books--

LB: Oh, great!

VP: ...um...and, um, Cathy Berman... and it--it was--it was... almost like it was a... a core team within the--the whole cheering squad, cuz--it was like twenty-something people... um... by the time we got to '73 and '74? It was like--

LB: Huge.

VP: Twenty-s--yeah, and you saw here, we had maybe seven or eight cheerleaders, maybe? In '71? Um... and it was--it was wonderful because, Carol Massenburg (?) who was on the cheering squad, um, another black female, who lived, actually, two doors down from me... when I lived on 30th Street. And then Elizabeth Bowles, we used to call her the Bowman Body (?) because I don't know if you remember that, um, it was a... um... came on late at night, it was like horror... fli--you know, they would play, like, um... um, Alfred Hitchcock... movies and stuff like that. But the guy that hosted the show was this guy that--that dressed like a skeleton and we used to call her the Bowman Body. And--her comments, you'll see--

LB: Cuz she was so skinny?

VP: It--that she--she was so skinny!

LB: [Laughs.]

VP: And, um, she--she would, um... she'd sign, "The Body."

LB: [Laughs.]

VP: And then Cathy Berman who was shorter. And--oh--white female. And--I'm--I failed to mention, Eli--um... Elizabeth is white female. And... Cathy Burman... like I said, shorter. She--I read a comment that she wrote in one of these books and she signed her



name and then she said, "The Jew." So we had that kind of relationship. We were open with each other about culture--

LB: Mm, that's interesting.

VP: ...and diversity, even back then, we... bonded to a level of, you know, beyond skin color. It was just--we were people, we were girls on the squad. And we united for... to make it better.

LB: It sounds like you must've spent a lot of time together.

VP: We did. After school, everyday, you know, practicing... making signs, preparing for the games, preparing for pep-rallies.... It was--it was just like a... sorority! But it was cheering squad.

LB: Yeah.

VP: It was great!

LB: And did you, um, cheer at all the away games? What was that like?

VP: Oh yeah--oh! That was--that was drilling (?) because... we would get to--most of the games were played at City Stadium... most of them. Or at the schools that had football stadiums. We didn't of course, and we st--they still really don't.

LB: Yeah.

VP: ...unfortunately, at this--at this late, um, stage. But, um, it was exciting because, you know, the football players would get on the bus and then the cheerleaders would be in the front and we'd, ya know, have our... would've had our pep-rally that day before and everybody's hyped up and, you know, it was just a lot of fun.

LB: Yeah. It sounds like it.

VP: Yeah, it was. It was.

LB: Now, what do you remember of really good leadership that you experienced at this time, and what do you remember of leadership that wasn't so good?

VP: Ok, and I made notes on that. And... good leadership for me...was Yvonne Mimms. She was our, um, sponsor. Our cheerleading sponsor. And she showed interest and she supported me so much she... it was--it was just like she... [pauses]... not--not just gave me self-worth, she validated me. You know, because she saw something in me... to progress me from... a cheerleader to co-captain to captain. So... to--to go in that progression... she had to see... what she was looking for in terms of leadership in me. And that--that... has still resonated with me to today because we're still friends.

LB: Is she still in Richmond?

VP: She's still in Richmond.

LB: Wow.

VP: And if you wanna talk to her, I can get you in contact with her, she would *love* it.

LB: That would be great.

VP: To kinda--yeah. She's--she's in this book. I put her--I put her, um--I've got a little picture here... her... and--and her little comment that she wrote... um, back then... Let's see.... she is right there.

LB: Oh, she was so young then.

VP: Oh yeah. And she--and she wasn't, you know, she wasn't older like some of the older teachers, she was close to our age. She was... maybe... six, seven years older, maybe?

LB: Oh, that's nothing!

VP: Yeah. Hardly nothing. Hardly nothing.

LB: I was picturing her as a ninety-year-old woman--

VP: Oh no.

LB: ... by now, but [laughs]...

VP: Mm mm. No. No.

LB: Cuz I've never seen a picture of her.

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: But I've heard a lot about her.

VP: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Um... yeah, she's--she's a great person. And--and, um... this was during the time, of course, when we were still... around about '73, cuz I don't--she wasn't the sponsor... here. She was, um, I think Ms. Morano (?) was the sponsor... back then. But... when she became the sponsor, that's when the--the squad had gotten large... probably around in '73. And there were, you know... again, a lot of the storming and the forming and all of that and trying to make sure that everybody's voice was heard in terms of... what we wore... the combination of socks and shoes... [laughs]... the

colors to make sure we wore the skirts and the pants and... uh--it was just--in--uh, interesting time. And she was just so... um... [pauses]... she was just so, um... just... she--she--she was fair. She was just fair, I'm just trying to think of another word. But she was just fair. She--she wanted everybody to have a voice, everybody to weigh in on what we would wear, um.... I--I would set up a schedule and w--we did have one cont--and reason why I'm bringing it up cuz we had a couple of controversies about wearing the black and white bucks with the short socks versus the long socks and all of that. And I was kinda adamant, "No, that doesn't look right. You know, let's just wear--" so on and s--and one of the other young ladies was just like, "I wanna wear this," and it went to Miss Mims, and she said, "Well, let's just see." And she said, "Let's just give it a try, Valerie." I said, "Ok." So it was just kinda one of those things where, um... I guess me being a young person. You know, thinking, I'm--I'm fashion-forward and I kinda know what looks good and--especially against those girls from Armstrong. Because, see... I was supposed to have gone there, remember?

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: And I wanted to make sure when we got there we showed up... the right way.

LB: [Chuckles]

VP: But, you know, she said, "Oh, you know... no, let's just kinda... What would it hurt to wear it one time?" "...ok!" ... you know.

LB: So she had a way about her.

VP: Yes she did. She did. And she does! She does now. She still does. We're--like I said, we're still pretty good friends. I talked to her maybe a couple of weeks ago.

LB: Oh, great!

VP: Mm hmm. Yeah.

LB: Now... what about leadership that you saw that was not so good?

VP: I tell you... what I... thought was not so good, I thought that... the principal wasn't as effective as I thought he should've been. Because of... all the fights and... you know, I thought that there should've been some different intervention... back then. To kinda--

LB: What was the intervention?

VP: Well, I thought that maybe--maybe they might have needed more... hallway monitors? Go figure!

LB: Wouldn't you think?

VP: Yeah!

LB: So, what did--I mean, I guess what I'm asking is, what did he do, how did he deal with all the fighting? Cuz it sounds like... every *day*...

VP: Every day, --

LB: That's a lot of fighting.

VP: ... every day, every day. I tell you.

LB: It sounds so disruptive.

VP: It was. It was disruptive. And--and... it placed--and even now, when I talk about it, I fear... I feel the fear that I felt back then. Um, that first year. You know. It was--it was--it wasn't good. It wasn't good. I w--I was... you know. And I--and I'm not a--not a cowardly kinda person, I'm a standup kinda person. But it--back--it--it was fearful for me.

LB: And he just kinda stood by and let it happen--

VP: It--it appeared that way, but you know, we don't know what he tried to do.

LB: Right.

VP: And we don't know what the resources available to him were at that time. Might not have been able to get anybody else. Might not have been able to get support he needed at that school. We don't know. And I don't wanna judge, but I'm just saying what I--what I perceive at this point, thinking back... then... is that would've... shown me... and shown others... that this kind of activity is not gonna be tolerated. We've got people here that are gonna monitor to make sure everybody goes where they're supposed to go... and... cut down on all this fighting. For what?

LB: Yeah, it sounds like a... really tough way to have to get through every school day.

VP: Yeah, it was. It was. It was. But I didn't have a choice.

LB: What kind of interactions do you remember with fellow students or teachers or administrators that really stick out in your mind?

VP: Well... I tell you what. There was one teacher that... I thought a lot of because he--even though he wasn't a principal or an assistant principal... he... kinda--Mr. Lane (?)--he stood up. He stood up. And he would take it upon himself to... you know, for his hallway--he was on the science hallway--that, you know... you could--you would rarely see a fight on that hallway. Cuz he was there. His presence... in and of itself... made people kind of respect him and not--and *know*... you know, we're not having that over here.

LB: Yeah.

VP: But on, like, the english hallway and, um... what's that other hallway, that was english... and history.

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: As I--as I... go back th--I'm a very visual person, I'm sorry, but as I go back through the hallways... almost every day you could find somebody, you know... fussing or fighting or something like that. It's just, you know, and--lot of women. They figured, I guess, you know, this is a good cut to go into, or corner to go into. And... you know... had their argument or their fight or whatever, I'm not sure, you know, it's just... seemed like it was, um, just certain spots that they--it--it happened. More frequently than others.

LB: But Mr. Lane didn't stand for it.

VP: No. No. You didn't see that on his hall. Mm mm. No. And he--and he was, you know... he was just kinda standup guy. He's a nice guy.

LB: What about other kinds of interactions with fellow students that you just... remember today?

VP: Ohh... I just--I just tell you. I love Elizabeth so much. She was just, oh...

LB: She's great.

VP: She is wonderful. We just had the--it almost makes me tear up because she was just... so... she was just a genuine person. You know? And--and Elizabeth and Cathy and Mary Zabrowski (?), and Leslie Wirt (?), who was my, um... co-captain with me the sec--the... second year... in '73. Um... you know, there were wonderful young ladies. We just had such a wonderful time. It was just a good time.

LB: Was that your core group of friends, those girls?

VP: Um... [pauses]... initially, yes. And then after some of my friends that were at Elkhardt came over, then that broadened the pool. Yeah. But my--I spent most of my time with them... because cheering squad.

LB: Now this is a time when... so much was happening in civil rights and Richmond and the--the changes were really... it sounds like coming fast.

VP: Yes.

LB: How do you remember that and how are those changes discussed at home?

VP: The changes did come fast. There wasn't much that you c--I'm--there's nothing to be done about it. Um... my mom always just said... you know... "You're--to go to school. You do the best that you can do. If there are any issues, then you let me know." But other than that, you know, it wasn't... anything about, "Oh, we don't wanna go to that s--" you know. "You can't--I wish I didn't have to send you to that school." She never said that.

LB: It's just, deal with it.

VP: Just deal with it.

LB: How about kind of the bigger changes that were going on in America at that time?

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: You know, did you--did you watch the TV news as a family and talk about it?

VP: Every day. And I do that now even with my daughter. I love watching the evening news, I watch the morning news when I can. Um, it's just kinda one of those things that I do. Um... as you asked that question, my mind went back to when I was at, um... in Franklin... Elementary School... during that time, and you heard about the assassination of Martin Luther King. And that was a big moment, um... at--at school. When we let out of school that day, it was pretty traumatic and the discussion was -- around school -- about what had happened and what he stood for and that kind of thing. Um... but at--back to home... um... my mom just kind of focused, you know, you gotta do what you gotta do. I guess she felt like she had to do what she had to do.

LB: Yeah.

VP: And she didn't have--she was a no-nonsense person. So it was just like, well, you gotta go and do what you gotta do.

LB: And that's exactly what you did.

VP: And that's exactly what I did. And that's what my brother and my sister did, too.

LB: So you were just pretty focused on that day to day--

VP: Yeah.

LB: ... it sounds like.

VP: Oh yeah. Yeah, just making through the next day... and like I said, after I met--after I made the cheering squad, things got better... for me. Because I--I think I--I did develop friendships with the girls. I always call them 'the girls', and sometimes I call them 'my girls.' Um... and... it just--it just seemed like, I guess I had support... and the friendship,

and I wasn't just out there by myself, I think. Maybe that's why it got better. But I--I had fun with them. We had--we had a good time.

LB: What did you used to do outside of school -- did you all used to hang out, besides the cheerleading squad?

VP: Pretty much no. No. Um, we went to some... dances and some functions... um, maybe in '74?

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: Um, after the games? We would do those kinds of things. But basically, other than that, no. It still--was still kind of... you know... black, white... but we were... meshing together... better.

LB: Yeah. But it was kind of those moments in the middle during very specific activities, and then generally people went off and did their own thing.

VP: Yes.

LB: What were the high school parties like?

VP: Um... crazy. [Laughs.] I--I actually, you know, it was kind of fun. Um, they would just, you know, play music and dance and stuff like that... and that was.... pretty much it. You didn't hear about all this other stuff that goes on now. So it was--it was--it was pretty much... good fun.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Yeah, pretty much.

LB: Do you remember any big personal turning points during these years?

VP: ... I think... when... I became the co-captain. The--the s--the point of becoming, um... identified as a leader... as almost like a role model... was a big turning point for me. Because I felt like I had responsibility... and I didn't want to let... the cheering squad down, and like I said before, especially when we went to Armstrong and Walker, I wanted to make sure that we looked real good.

LB: Yeah.

VP: Because everybody was, you know... eh--those that... were able to go to Armstrong and Walker, you know... you know, fel--I guess they felt th--you know, I think that they... were living out... their dreams--

LB: Yes.

VP: We didn't get to. But. I wasn't gonna let that deter me from still having a good life. And being successful and being what I--what I--all--all that I knew I could be. And for us to go there and be on a level playing field with them;

LB: Did you have dreams about the future? Did you have a sense of what you wanted to do?

VP: You know, I thought I wanted to be a PE teacher.

LB: Like Miss Mims.

VP: Like Miss Mims! Go figure! My mentor, yeah.

LB: Yeah!

VP: Yeah!

LB: Makes a lot of sense.

VP: Yeah. And when I went to college, that's what I went to college initially for. And then my... ss... junior year, maybe? They introduced a new program called corrective therapy, now known as kinesiotherapy.

LB: Oh! Ok.

VP: And... my basic classes that I'd already taken, pretty much were in--in line with that curriculum. And... you know, the--the--the head of the department came out and says, you know, um, "Who's interested in doing this instead of teaching," and I thought, "hmm... maybe that's something I need to look into." And that's what I did. I went that direction--

LB: And is that what you got your masters in, too.

VP: No. That's what I have my undergrad in. But my masters is in counseling and a minor MBA.

LB: So did you do the, um, kinesiotherapy for a while?

VP: I did. For five years. I worked at the, um, VA Hospital in Houston, Texas and Waco, Texas. Between those two hospitals.

LB: And then you made the career switch.

VP: Then I made the career switch to treasury. And that was... again... I have attribute that to... diversity... and diversifica--div--diversifying and... recognizing diversity.



Because when I was at Waco, the Waco VA, um... I was chosen to be the Federal Womens' Program manager. And that gave me an opportunity to go to their national conference... in St. Louis, Missouri.

LB: Mm hmm.

VP: I networked there with other EEO... managers across the country. And that's how I got to treasury.

LB: Wow.

VP: Through that opportunity. Had I not had that opportunity, I don't know where my path would have gone.

LB: So hard to say, isn't it?

VP: It--it is! It is! It really is.

LB: I always think it's funny looking back, you know... recognizing the turning points that may not even have seemed like that at the time.

VP: Right. Exactly.

LB: Did you have some of those when you were at Wythe? Where at the time, you might not even have thought much of it, but now you say, wow, that sent me... in a new direction?

VP: Mm hmm. Just what I just got finished mentioning.

LB: Yeah.

VP: And the leadership position.

LB: Yeah. So it really was Miss Mims.

VP: It really was Miss Mims. She... she validated me. She supported me. She, um... trusted me. She had faith in me. She--she built all of that... in me--I don't even know if--well, we've talked about it before. Um... especially when I first came back to Richmond. And... I told her how much she meant to me and what she did for me. And... I'm--at the time, it just seemed just natural. But when you look back over it, it's like, that was a turning point in my life.

LB: Yeah.

VP: It really was.

LB: That's amazing.

VP: It is!

LB: I'll have to talk to her.

VP: You've got to.

LB: Did she grow up in Richmond, too?

VP: Yes! Mm hmm.

LB: Perfect.

VP: Mm hmm.

LB: Because, you know, our framework is kind of coming of age in the civil rights movement so if she grew up here and then started teaching, she must have been a really new teacher.

VP: She was. She was. Mm hmm.

LB: Oh, well... It's emotional!

VP: Yeah, it is. It is....

LB: And do you know, those were such tumultuous times.

VP: Yeah. They were. But she's--she just meant so much to me. And because--I guess because... I don't know, I guess because she believed in me. You know?

LB: I know when you're fifteen or sixteen and... it's sometimes hard to find that.

VP: Yeah, it is. It is. And, um, can you stop one minute?

LB: Yes, of course.

VP: I need to...[indecipherable] I can't even talk...