

A Community Remembers

Interview: Yvonne Mimms Evans, 1-4

Laura Browder: Now... Yvonne, can you please start by just saying what your full name is?

Yvonne Mimms Evans: Yvonne Mimms Evans.

LB: Good. Now, tell me something, Yvonne, about how you grew up. And what your family was like.

YME: I grew up in south of the James River.

LB: Mm hmm.

YME: Uh, down the street from George Wythe High School. I was--lived on Midlothian Turnpike. I had, um, five sisters and one brother. I was the youngest. Uh, I only had one living in the home with me as I was growing up. And she was four years older than I was. Um... and she was kind of tomboyish. So we didn't get a chance to play together very often, so I learned to be an only child. I did a lot of reading. Played a lot of, uh, individual games.

LB: Mm hmm.

YME: And I just learned to love myself.

LB: That's great -- what were your parents like?

YME: My parents were very strict, particularly my mother. Uh, my father was a little more lenient. But, um... he didn't do much of the discipline. Uh, we knew that he wasn't... very good at discipline so we tried to play him against her.

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: But she never would let us play her ag--play him against her. Uh, my mother was quite strict -- she demanded a lot of us. And, um, she wanted us to be successful.

LB: So... tell me more about that -- about how demanding she was. What--what kinds of--

YME: Well, demanding from the standpoint of we had, uh, household duties, on Saturdays we had to clean. We did not have a car in my home. Um... my brother--my brother had a car, he would by occasionally and take us places, and I had a sister who had a car. But we would have to go out to the grocery store and assist her with getting groceries on the weekend. And each one of us had--I--my sister who was fourteen (?) years older than I -- uh, she was the one lived in the home at the time. We had to go with her to the grocery store many times. So had to go to the store and get some things for her ourselves. Uh, we also had the responsibility of cleaning. Uh, the living room, the dining room, and our bedrooms. Uh... she always had us doing chores and she said we had to be responsible. She demanded when we walked in the house from school that

we had to open our books and do our homework. Before we could do anything, we had to do homework. An--I mean, she just required a lot of us. But I appreciate it.

LB: What was your neighborhood like when you were growing up?

YME: Uh, we had a--I would say that it was a basic middle-class neighborhood. Um, all the parents were... most of the p--it was mostly, um, mother-and-father homes. Uh, ver--I don't remember any... single-family homes at that time. Um... so we ha--we had a decent neighborhood.

LB: And... what was Richmond like when you were a child?

YME: Richmond was segregated. And I remember 'white only' signs. Um... there was a... drug store, uh, Peoples' Drug Store on the of Cowardin Avenue and Hull Street... um, right up the street from my church -- I belonged to First Baptist Church South Richmond. I've been there since I was in my mother's womb. And when we would leave church on Sundays, we'd go and we'd go to the... Peoples' Drug Store because they had a... um... a stand where they sold sodas and this type of thing. And we could buy mat--um... substance but we couldn't eat it in the--at the counter. We had to buy our substance and take it outside the school--store to eat it. So it was quite... quite a segregated neigh--uh, area. Richmond was quite segregated at the time that I was growing up.

LB: And if you don't mind my asking, what year were you born?

YME: 1943.

LB: Ok. So it was a very different time.

YME: *Very* different time. Um, I remember, uh, walking new--we would walk down Hull Street cuz it was--Hull Street was quite affluent at that time. It was like shopping cen--uh, stores and... uh, just like a shopping center. Uh, and you had stores that were very progr--pro--uh, productive. Very progressive. And that was where people went to shop, um, when I was growing... up. Um, we would walk down Hull Street, um... during the week with our parents, often went to church in the evenings, and would leave there and go, you know, shopping or what have you. But, um... it was q--it was... very family oriented. The area was very family oriented. But, it was also a very, um... safe place. We could walk--we walked to school. I lived on the hill, uh, like I said, a few blocks from George Wythe High School. And we walked to Blackwell Elementary School... every day, and walked home every day. Uh, we didn't have to ride a bus or anything.

LB: That's nice.

YME: And we did a lot of walking and it was very safe to do that.

LB: What was school like? What was elementary school like?

YME: Fun, fun, fun.

LB: Tell me what you remember.

YME: [Laughs] I remember I had a physical education teacher who... *loved* me, and loved a girlfriend of mine. And she just--she took us under her wing. She taught us how to play tennis. She would take us to--my mom would let us go--um--our parents would let us go with her on weekends sometimes. And she would, uh, cook for us, and just have us over at her home. She taught us so very much. And then when she decided one day, she says, "I'm gonna teach you guys how to play tennis." And we said, "Ok!" So that's when I learned to play tennis, and of course I carried it over into high school because I was on the tennis team--

LB: And where were you in high school?

YME: ... at Maggie Walker High School.

LB: Ok.

YME: Mm hmm. And, um, she was just good to us. I mean, really good physical education teacher. We still stay in touch with her.

LB: She sounds wonderful.

YME: Yeah, she was great! She was *great*! Um, she just--she was our--like my second mother. In fact, most of our teachers were. Uh, see it--during the time when we went to school, parents and--teachers were just like parents. They could tell us what to do, when to do it, and when not to do something. And if we refused to do it, our parents are right there on *us*. Not on the teachers. They supported the teachers one-hundred percent. And it made a difference in how we grew up.

LB: I'll bet it did.

YME: Because we knew that they cared what happened to us. That was very, very important.

LB: Well, your physical education teacher, what was her name?

YME: Mrs. Whiting.

LB: Mrs. Whiting?

YME: Yes.

LB: So Mrs. Whiting would have you come and just visit her during the weekends and--

YME: She would come and pick us up... and take us to her home to spend--we wouldn't spend--we wouldn't always--we stayed overnight a few times. But most--most of the time we stayed the whole damn Saturday. All day with her. And she would take us out to shopping or... and we would come back and she would always cook--she had--she made a famous recipe of potato

salad, which we *loved*. So she would make us potato salad, we would have hot dogs or hamburgers. She would always feed us and then she--you know, get us back home in the evening. And she took us to the park. And sh--you know, just wanted to teach us how to do things. My mother loved her.

LB: I could see why.

YME: Mm hmm. And she just--she didn't have any kid--she had one--she didn't have any kids at that time, of her own. Later in life, she had a son and a daughter. But while we were in... elementary, middle school, she was our favorite teacher. [Pause] and of course, when I went to high school, the physical education teacher there was one of my favorite teachers.

LB: So it sounds like it was a very natural transition for you to become a--a physical education teacher--

YME: Ohhh, that's why I wanted to do it. Well I never want--I never could sit still. The chillies probably told you, I'm full of energy. And my chillies probably told you that. I don't know if they did or not, but anyway, I'm full of energy. So, uh, I never could sit still so when it became time for me to go to college, my couns--high school counselor said, "Why you--going to college and major in health and physical education?" I said, "That's what I wanted to do." She says, "But you got so much aptitude in science and math." And that was the--at the time when they were hiring... really... good p--engineers and what have you and she said, "Go into one of these science fields." I said, "That's not what I want to do." [Laughs.] Always have had a mind of my own. So, she says, "Well, I don't... see you... I don't see you in physical education." I said, "Well, I see myself in physical education." So I made up my mind and I said, "Plus, I can't sit in a classroom all day and teach. I want to be moving about. I want to go outside, inside, and what have you." So I went to college and I--I majored--started majoring in health and physical education. And I changed over the second semester to biology. At the end of that semester, I said, "No, this is not what I want to do." So I went back. And I majored in physical education and I had a minor in English.

LB: Where did you go to college?

YME: Virginia State... College.

LB: Ok. So... I'm gonna pull you back just a little bit--

YME: Ok.

LB: ... to talk about... what kind of changes you noticed taking place in Richmond as you were growing up?

YME: Changes... [Pauses] as I was growing... up.... Not a whole lot, I was kinda sheltered. My mother didn't let us go anywhere. I mean... th--we had a playground downtown near the school that we attended. And, um... it--the only way that I could go was--was that my sis--four-year--

sister who was four years older than I would go. But if she didn't go, I couldn't go. My friends in the neighborhood asked me to go. She would not let me go. Uh--

LB: Were you ever allowed to go -- with your parents -- to downtown Richmond?

YME: Yeah. I mostly went with my aunt. My mother had one sister. And she would come over and take a--take me downtown with her. And she would--she basically took me under her wing and bought all of my clothing and what have you for me. But um... my mother wasn't really how our going out--hanging out. And so I grew up really, coming home from school, doing my homework, sitting on my front porch, watching the kids play and sometimes I'll play the--you know, jack rocks with them or this type of thing. But I was--I's... pretty quiet as a person. I liked myself. So I would do a lot of individual kinds of things... with myself.

LB: And you had your best friend, right, from elementary school.

YME: Well she... was with me, yes, but she lived downtown near the school.

LB: Ok.

YME: And lived--we called uptown--

LB: Uptown.

YME: So we really got to see each other in school. But not that much unless we... we were--you--we did have a little club, a little teenage club. And we would meet, uh, once a week at different one's homes. And that's how we go to see our friends that--who did not live near us.

LB: What did you do in your teenage club?

YME: Um... nothing. Just--

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: Um, made sure we had dresses alike, we would dress alike from time to time. And we would just go walking. And a lot of us attended the same church. So we would get together in the uh... um... Sunday school. And we would go... the--um, mission trips... together, and this kind of thing.

LB: Were you involved in extracurricular activities when you were in high school?

YME: Yes, I was a--cheerleader. I became the captain of the cheering--cheering squad. Um... that's basical--that took a lot of my time.

LB: I could imagine.

YME: A *lot* of my time, so I really didn't have time to be involved with anything else. I was in the science club. But we didn't do a lot of things--a lot with that. But I was a member of that. Uh, but my biggest thing was the cheer--you know, cheerleading.

LB: So what was cheerleading like at Walker, during that time.

YME: Ohh.... It was wonderful. Um, and plus the sponsor who was the physical education teacher *loved* me [laughs]. I could do no wrong. I would, you know, she would he--help me--let me help her select... uh, members for the squad. I really acted more an administrative capacity with her. Um, I st--it was just--it was just great. We--we--of course the--problem had... was on Friday night--at Friday night games.... Rain, snow, sleet, or hail, we had to be there in those little short dresses. And I think I'm paying for that with my arthritis today. My mother said, "When you grow up, you gonna have arthritis. Cuz it's too cold for you to be out there those li--that little short skirt on." But I was... hellbent on going every Friday night to those games and cheering my heart out. It was so much fun.

LB: And it became your entire profession.

YME: Yes! Yes! I loved it! You know. There was something to do, and I just loved the people that I cheered with, and I just... loved the stunt (?) girls, I--I just loved everybody, we had a great time. We just had a good time.

LB: So... you got to college, after your brief foray into biology, you were back to physical education--

YME: Physical education, mm hmm. And I pledged--when I was in college, I pledged twice... for a sorority. And the first time I didn't like the way they were treating me, I just thought they were too demanding, so I told them, "I'm not gonna do this. I'm gonna get off." So I got off the line. They begged me to come back, I went back. I was getting ready to pay my money for the pledge... and someone stole all of my money.

LB: Oh no!

YME: So, I said, this is not meant to be. So I did not ever go over into the sorority while I was an undergrad. But I have joined a sorority since gradu--since I was--I'm in a graduate chapter.

LB: Which one?

YME: Delta Sigma Theta.

LB: I've interviewed a lot of Deltas.

YME: [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: Yes. My Valerie's a Delta. They followed in my footsteps. So I did--I did become a member of their alumni association. But I couldn't make it in undergrad. They were rough.... Too rough... And then when I graduated from college, I... graduated mid-year... and, um... I became a long-term sub--substitute for a teacher who was going out on maternity leave. And I taught physical ed--physical education at that--at George Wythe High School... for that s... from January until June. And then they told me that she was returning. So I wasn't sure I was gonna have a job. But when I went back to the person at the department of Richmond city schools, the... um, gentleman said, "Yes, you're gonna have a job." So I went to, um... he--I went to elementary schools. And I went there for a semester. I worked at several elementary schools... teaching physical education. At the end of that... semester, I went back to the person and I said, "This is not my thing." So they sent me to--uh--they had a teacher going on maternity leave at Randolph Middle School, which is no longer in existence. So I took *that* job. And then that following year, I got a job at John Marshall High School. And I worked at John Marshall High School, teaching physical education and health for two years--

LB: And... when would that would have been?

YME: That have been... let's see... '67 to '68... '68... '69... uh, '69... to '70, '70 to... '71, I believe. And then, uh, [beeping, phone call] Mr. Williams called me... [beeping].

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YME: I believe I worked at, um, John Marshall from '7... from '69... to '71.

LB: And what was Marshall like then?

YME: Uh, predominantly white. Uh... just as Wythe had the same kind of population.

LB: Mm hmm.

YME: Mm hmm. Uh, but really good kids. Really good kids. We--we pulled kids from the west end, north side, and... same kinda kids I had at George Wythe. I just... it's... just a good time. And then I left there, um... and principal at George Wythe called and asked if I would come back there... and teach health and physical education. Uh, he had been, uh, a physical education teacher at Maggie Walker High School. He became principal at George Wythe. So he called to see if I would come back there to work.

LB: Had you known him back when you were at Walker.

YME: Yes! Yes. And he remembered me, he called to see if I would come back--he said, "I would like for you to come back." Cuz that was when they were doing the mass integration of the schools. So I said, "Sure." Cuz it's--it's in south side and that's where I lived. So I went back over there and I worked there. And during the time I was there, I went to VCU and got my masters in guidance and counseling. So I worked at Wythe until... um... about '73? '75, '75. And I was called, I--I finished my masters and I was called to get... to ask if I wanted to go to

Elkhardt Middle School as a guidance counselor. Yeah, sure. So I went back for five years, then the principal at Wythe called me back and say, "Would you like to come over here and be a guidance counselor." I said, "Sure." so that's when I went back there, and [beeping] that's when I started sponsoring the cheerleaders.

LB: So tell me about those early years in the 1970s at George Wythe, because... all of the cheerleaders remember you so vividly and you were just... like the shining star to them.

YME: I don't know why, I just like kids. I love kids and they--knew they could come to me and talk. They knew they could come to me and I would help them out with any problems they were having, and they just clamored to me. And they loved my teaching. Cuz I was very strict. I didn't tolerate any foolishness. And they knew that they were safe. Cuz I wasn't gonna allow anyone to hurt them, do anything to them. And I think that probably made a difference.

LB: Valerie talked about that, certainly. And Elizabeth talked about you integrating the cheerleading squad.

YME: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

LB: Tell me about that.

YME: Well... when I--that's why--I think that's why Mr. Williams asked me if I would sponsor it because he said, "We've gotta do something with this squad. We can't have the squad the way it is with this population of the school changing as it is."

LB: What was the squad like when you got there?

YME: Um... I can't remember who was sponsoring the squad when I got there, but it was basically lily white. Um, but the school had been that way. So it was kind of understandable that that would be the approach that they would take. So when I got on, I said, "Now, we gotta change this, this can't stay like this. This school's population is changing, things have to change." So of course I started, I had my try-outs and... I had some really good black girls at try-out. And we chose them... some of them. And then the squad--and--really, the kids on the squad didn't realize how effective it would be... with the diff--different ethnic groups--

LB: Yeah.

YME: ... involved, you know? And when they found out those kids were normal like they were? They were a fantastic squad. And I would have them over to my house. We'd have little parties and... I would cook for them and they would come over, we'd have parties and--oh, they just loved it. [Chuckling] Cuz, yeah--and also I had kids that I coached with basketball.

LB: I didn't realize you did that, too.

YME: Yeah, coached basketball. I coached... I coached basketball, I coached tennis... and then he asked me to give all that up and start coaching cheerleading. And so I stayed in touch with the

kids who had been on my basketball team. In fact I've got some who go to my church who still run to me every time they see me. [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: And then I took over the cheering squad. And, uh... I just had good girls. I just basically had to be there. You know... they learned the cheers like that, they'd learn the movements, the stunts and everything. And I would just stand there and watch them and if I saw them doing something I did not feel was appropriate, I would stop, "We're not gonna do that. That's not appropriate." I think they admired that... you know, about me. Cuz I wasn't gonna let them, you know, do... booty shakes and this kinda thing. That was not... representative of our school.

LB: Although I have to tell you, when we did a scene in our play that was all about the cheerleading squad, there was a lot of booty shaking going on [laughs].

YME: [Laughs] yeah, well, we didn't... I didn't let my girls... I mean, they'd get a little bit--you know, but--

LB: Yeah.

YME: I just don't believe in just sticking it out there and waving it back and forth. And there were certain things I wouldn't allow them to do, and I think that's why they respected me so. Cuz I made them keep it kinda classy. But they were good. They were *very* good.

LB: See, I remember Elizabeth talking about how when she joined, the squad was almost all black.

YME: Mm hmm.

LB: So it must have changed--

YME: It did.

LB: ... very quickly--

YME: It switched--it made a switchover, because it had a t... I don't know, kids had a tendency... once you--once you... kind of integrated, then people back--they had a tendency to back off and go with the kind that they were accustomed to. And I think that... that started that basic all-black thing, I--so, you know, I had to let them know, "You've got to integrate this squad... because that's what the *times*... are demanding." And it happened.

LB: You must've been in a kinda tricky position cuz the school was changing so fast.

YME: Yeah. Yeah.

LB: It's like all white, then it's integrated, then it's all black.

YME: Black, mm hmm. I was there... basically when it was all white. I left. By the time I went back, it was--had become... well mixed... when I went--left Elkhardt, I went back--became well mixed. And... then by the time I pulled out and left there, went to Chesterfield County, it was beginning to become... about 70-75% black. So I saw--sor--sort of saw the changeover. But I needed a change. Because I had grown up in the city, I had gone to city schools, taught in the city and I wanted to do something different to see if it was different. So that's why I transferred to the county.

LB: I could understand that. What do you remember from Wythe at that time? You know, when you think back on your interactions with other teachers or administrators or students, what sticks out in your mind?

YME: What sticks out in my mind is when I was teaching physical education. I taught with two other white teachers. Uh... and they had their plans already set up when I went there. About showering--see at that time, kids were required to shower. And, you know, they were--they required that the kids go in the shower, and... run the water and come out with a towel and we would check them all having taken a shower. Well, I was just following suit because that was what the department did, and I got called to the principal's office one day, and he said, um, "I've got these parents here and they're saying that the kids said they think you're f... something is *wrong* with you. Because you're trying to see them without any clothes on." I said, "What?! I'm not understanding this, what's going on?" And, you know, I think it--I think... what was happening was, because I was black... they were having a problem with me doing the same thing the white teachers were doing. You know.

LB: Mm hmm.

YME: But I was just following protocol for the department. And of course, [chiming in background] I was able to talk to the parents, explain to them what was going on. And everything was ok. You know, but I think I had a few kids in my classes who probably wanted to stir up something.

LB: Yeah.

YME: But it didn't get stirred up. Because the principal said to them--he said, "I'd already said to them when they came in the office, 'I *know* Ms. Mimms. That is not happening. She is one of the most *dedicated* people--'" this was been Mr. Seddon (?) was principal. "'She's one of the most *dedicated* teachers I have in this building. That is not happening.'" So when I went in, I explained to them what the department policy was. And the parents got ok. But that was funny to me. Why I wanna look at a kid for?

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: [Laughs.]

LB: What el--what else do you remember, because you must have so many memories from this period.

YME: Um.... Well I just remember that, um... we were--we gradually started integrating with more black teachers... and then we got more black kids. And... you know, I... I don't remember a lot of descension. I really don't. I don't remember a lot of racism. I remember the kids interacting with one another, liking one another, and probably seeing something they probably had not experienced in the past. You know, and really *liking*--beginning to like... blacks beginning to *like* the white kids, whites beginning to like the black kids, and there was a good integration that occurred at George Wythe High School. That's--that's... what I remember. I remember that, uh, we... we had a... lot of needy kids. But we also had a lot of kids who were very, um... I would say well-off. So it was quite a mixture there. And it was a good mixture.

LB: It's unusual for a school to have that kind of mixture now.

YME: Well when I worked at Clover Hill High School, it was the same kinda thing.... Was interesting in there, too. Uh, but, yes, it--in fact--the--it... back then reminded me a lot of Clover Hill when I went out there. The population and the mixture. Um, but George Wythe--the biggest thing I remember is that we had really good students. Uh... the kids strived to be successful. They wanted to be successful. Um... they were just on top of things. You didn't have to beg and plead with anybody to... do this or do that. They really... wanted success. That was such a joy. It was such a joy teaching there. See kids just... just... progress. And become successful. And advanced, you know? And most of them went to college, most of them are successful. And I run into them now, um... they're telling me about jobs that they have and I'm so proud of them because I always told them, whatever you do, you're just not c--completing college, make sure that you're *successful* in doing *something*... that will--be meaningful to you in life. I was in Wal-Mart yesterday. And I was buying some apples. And this fella and his wife walked up and... he was saying, "Oh, they got all kinds of different apples." And I said, "Yeah, have you ever eaten a Fuji apple?" And he said, "Yes! I buy them all the time and my family keeps telling me, buy Fuji apples." And then he turned to me and said, "Aren't you Miss Mimms." I said, "Yes, I am." He says, "I know, cuz I remember you from Clover Hill High School."

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: [Chuckling] and that's the kind of thing that I run into. From kids that I taught at George Wythe... Elkhardt. I'm seeing parents now that I had at Elkhadt that have kids in school. And they're always saying, "I remember you from George Wythe High School. We'd *loooove* to come to your office, we just *loved* you." [Laughs.]

LB: That's wonderful.... Now, when you think back on your time growing up in Richmond, and then your time teaching at Wythe, can you think of any examples of really good leadership, and some examples of leadership that was not so good -- and it can be on any level you want from... you know, on your street to the nation.

YME: Leadership on my part, or leadership on the part of the kids?

LB: It could be... anyone. People answer this question... sometimes they talk about national politicians, sometimes they talk about teachers, sometimes they talk about family members... anyway you wanna take it.

YME: They... yes, leadership was really, really... great... in my school. Um... the guys who play sports at my school really impressed me. [Buzzing sound] They were hard working... *hard* working guys. They got on that field on Friday night... and they wanted to win. When they got to school on Monday, they were always obeying the teachers, doing what you request of them, just gentlemen. And I would constantly, you know, remind them, be successful... do the right thing, stay out of trouble. So one Saturday, who was--had played football at Wythe. He's a friend of my nephew's, were playing football, he was saying, "We were so glad to have you at George Wythe, cuz you really looked out for us. We wanted to get into things, but we knew if we did, you would be all over our case." And also, I had a nephew who would attend--I had two neph--three nephews to attend George Wythe while I was there, two nieces. One of my nephews, um... did Martin Luther Kings speech... for Mr. George Wythe. And it was fantastic. I said, this boy is gonna be a leader. Right now, he is a sports commentator for Comcast.

LB: Oh, wonderful!

YME: ... up in Philly. So I mean, those the kinds of examples I saw, kids starting early. Showing signs of leadership.

LB: That's great.

YME: Yes. He's--he's--it's just great.

LB: Did you ever see any leadership -- and again, take it anywhere you want to take it -- that wasn't so good?

YME: Uh, yes, but I--really don't... I want to refrain from talking about it, ok? [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: Because it dealt with the administration of the school.

LB: Yeah.

YME: And I don't really wanna talk about that.

LB: I understand that. Now, during this whole period, when you were growing up, when you were a young adult, there were enormous changes taking place in Richmond, and in the nation. How... were you experiencing those changes -- was this something that you and you friends and family talked about a lot?

YME: Not really. Not really. Uh... my parents taught me... to... respect people. My parents never talked about... anything regarding... he's white, don't trust him, don't do this, don't do that.

Don't stay around there [???]. She taught us to respect people, regardless of who they are. If it's an adult, you respect them. And that's the way she taught us. So, we didn't get a chance -- we saw things, but we never got a chance to get involved in stuff. Because she taught us... you are always going to be a respectable young person. That's just the way we grew up.

LB: So kinds of, stay out of...

YME: That's right. Stay out of everything. No trouble. Cuz she wasn't gonna tolerate it. And, um, so I didn't get to see a whole lot of stuff, like I told you--

LB: Yeah.

YME: ... she--she was very strict. Keep it--and I--and I appreciate it. [Laughs.]

LB: Did you watch the evening news together?

YME: Periodically. Periodically. But like I said, the first thing I had to do when I got home--

LB: Was homework.

YME: ... was homework. And it took me a while sometimes. Because I--history, particularly, cuz it was a lot of reading... you know. And, um, sometimes I would spend a couple of hours doing homework. And then it's dinner time. So we had to eat together--we all ate--always ate together. And did that kind of thing. And then... it's time to go to bed, cuz you gotta get up early the next morning. Particularly in high school, we rode the city bus. From Midlothian Pike all the way to Maggie Walker High School. There was no bus transportation provided for us. We rode the city bus. We passed John Marshall High School... uh, T.J. High School was right up the street. But we had to go to Maggie Walker High School, or Armstrong High School.

LB: It must have been a *long* bus ride.

YME: It was and we had to transfer.

LB: How long did it take you to get to school?

YME: Right off-hand, I can't remember--I c--I would say... maybe an hour. Depending upon how the buses ran. Uh... and then in the evening, we had to ride the bus back home. And if you stayed for after-school activity, you would get hung up with the people getting off work riding the bus. But we had to get home. But it was safer then.

LB: Yes.

YME: Much safer.

LB: But it sounds like your days were very long.

YME: Yes. Yes, particularly when you stayed for after-school activities. Very long. And then I had to go home and do homework. And by the time I finished that, I had to eat dinner. When I finished that it was time to shower, get--go to bed. To get up early the next morning and go to school. But I didn't complain cuz I figured that was a way of life for me.

LB: That's right.

YME: I had to do that.

LB: Now... what were your--some of your personal turning points during the civil rights era in Richmond?

YME: Well, I never got involved with the marching. That... I mean, I admired it.

LB: Yeah.

YME: And I appreciate it. But I was not a part of that. Um, my mother would... wouldn't let us do that. She was afraid of something happening, this kind of thing. She's... very protective of us.

LB: But, you know, turning points -- and, again, you can take this question *anywhere*. Doesn't have to be civil rights marches, it could be personal things that were going on for you during this period of time.

YME: Um...

LB: Changes that you made in your life, big decisions.

YME: I was just happy to see them occur--

LB: Yeah.

YME: I was happy to know that, hey, I can go to a restaurant now and I can sit down, without being... without standing up, eat my food or bringing it outside. It just made it--it just made a world of difference on how you *viewed*... your life. And the things that you wanted to do. And desire to do. You just... you know, it was just good to know that... at least now I'm being treated as a human being. Yeah... And that people are respecting me for who I am.

LB: What do you think were some of the turning points for the community?

YME: Well.... The community, let me think. Our community.... I think--I think when we discussed it, basically, people were just anxious. About... what was occurring. You know [phone rings].

YME: Well... we would always have a discussion. That--at the beginning of the season. And I would sit down and talk with them, and explain to them my expectations. And what I wanted them to do. And how I expected them to get along. You know, didn't have to li--didn't have to love each other, but they needed to accept each others' differences, and accept each others' likes. And that I wasn't gonna tolerate anyone being disrespectful to anyone on the squad. And they understood that. And by understanding that, we had very few problems for... I don't think we had any. [Laughs.] We--we really didn't. I never had any problems with my kids. Because even in my classes, if there was any argument going on, I would stop whatever I was doing, I would take them to the side and work it out. I didn't let stuff fester, I never let stuff fester. And that's the way my mother was. So I think I got that from her. You resolve the issue right now. And that doesn't create anything later on.

LB: That's right.

YME: Mm hmm. So that's--that's how I am. And--most of the kids, I would say--wager to say that all of them who had contact with me, knew how I was. And if there are con--conflicts that occur between them and other kids, they were ready to come to me. To let me know what was going on, I would pull the other kids in, and we would al--could always work it out. You know, they would leave each oth--leave the office talking to each other, laughing and grinning. Because I said, we've all gotta be here together. We gotta--we've gotta get along. We may not like it, but we gotta get along. And that's how I worked things out. Uh, I b--I beginn--I be--I believe in hitting things head-on. Even in my household, I don't let things fester. I deal with it right then.

LB: Now... when--h--how do you think your experiences growing up shaped who you are today?

YME: Well... I had a mother and a father who stayed on top of us. I'm--I've told you that before. They didn't let us get away with anything. And they read us like a book. [Laughs.] I mean, you couldn't lie to them, they would eventually find. They--they always figure out that you were lying to them. They--they were--they, um--they were really great parents. Um... and as I said before, it--my mother didn't know someone... would be... at a party, or someone that she knew. Or someone would be at the playground who protect me--to protect me, such as my sister... I was not going. So I grew up with those values. And as a--as a... result of that, I implanted that in my kids. And I implant it in the kids with whom I worked. I had a strong value system, I knew right from wrong. And believe me, I lived by it. Cuz if I didn't. I would catch it. And I never liked getting hit with switches. So I learned real fast to obey my parents. And it made a difference in how I w--in who I was. And it made me the person I am today.

LB: Now, how do you think all of the stuff that was going on in Richmond shaped the community today? All that was going on in the '50s and '60s and the early '70s--

YME: I'm not sure it has shaped the community today. I'm not sure of that. Because we have a lot of bitter people now. I a lot of bitterness is going on in this--in this country and in this communities. So I'm not real sure that... integration did anything but cause more problems. Because I don't think people have taken the time to understand what has really taken place. And of course I think that by kids being tossed together, um... with many bitter parents, that they,

um, probably... allowed some of that bitterness to filter onto the kids. Kids have grown up with that bitterness and they're still festering that kind of thing in their households. Which is not helping the situation at all. So I can't say, Laura... truly say... that has--done a whole lot of good shaping for the communities today.

LB: Although it sounds like when you were at Wythe, you were really proud of shaping the schools--

YME: Oh yeah!

LB: ... so that everyone was really--stepping up to the plate--

YME: I wasn't gonna tolerate anything else other than that. We had to live together. And I had to live with them every day that I entered that building. And I entered it every day. [Laughs.] So they understood that I w--I don't--I just didn't tolerate foolishness.

LB: But--

YME: And they knew hat.

LB: But you feel as though as thought people have kind of forgotten that now? Forgotten how to...

YME: Uh, I don't know whether they have forgotten it... or whether their past was not as stern... as what I tried to instill in a lot of them. A lot people today cannot forget what they were taught by their parents. You know. Just like I don--haven't forgotten what my parents taught me. They haven't forgotten. And w--there has been a lot of, uh, prejudice taught in the household. And people who--and a lot of bitterness taught in the household. How you think a kid's gonna grow up? They will grow up to--they gonna f--they gonna display the same kinda behavior. So those people haven't died out who came up during that time. And they still--they're still teaching their children what their parents taught them. So you still have *a lot* of people--now, you have a lot of people who've really accepted it. And they're getting along just fine. But you still have *a lot* who are living in the past. Because of what they've been taught on their household. People--people develop families based on their beliefs.

LB: It's true.

YME: And--it is! Very true! And I don--I--I--and--and I think that's half of the problem we have in this country. People are still living by what their grandparents and fore parents taught them. Which was wrong! You know. Accept the person for what they are. Everybody's a human being and that's the problem. People do not--they think they're better than you are. They cannot see the worth that someone has if they don't look like them. What sense does that make? What sense does that make? None. Not one bit. And that's the way I taught my children. I may look different from you. But I have a value system, and I have *a lot* to offer. Take time and fine out what it is that I have, rather than prejudging me on how I look. And that still existing. Which is a bad thing. It's happening with our president. You know. People don't like him because he's black.

Give me a break, the man is just as intelligent as he can be. [Laughs.] But, I mean, I'm getting off the subject a little bit, but I'm just telling you--

LB: No. Not at all.

YME: It's--it's happening because of people's personal prejudices. Who cares what a person looks like. See what he has to offer. Take time and see what they have to offer. And that was the premise upon which I built... *my* children. And my kids I taught, they will tell you, very fair.

LB: They do tell me.

YME: Very fair. You know, I tried to look at things as open as I could. Try to be as honest as I could and I wanted them to be the same way. And I hope they grow up to be that way.

LB: Well I think they did and I think... you know, they all talk to me about how you inspired them to success.

YME: --and that was my greatest goal. If they were successful, that's all I wanted. BEcause I see too much rifferaff walking around about nothing. Even with my grandkids, I'm no their case every day. About being successful. Because you can't get anywhere in life... sitting back, waiting for somebody to do something for you. You've gotta step out there and do it for yourself. And that's what I taught my children. That's what I taught my kids who I came in contact. And that's probably why they like me so. And they knew that I was an honest person and a fair person.

LB: Well I think that comes through in all the interviews I do with them.

YME: And I was always gonna teach them the right thing to do. Never gonna teach them to do anything wrong. Some of them came to school and said, "My mom says if he hits me, to hit him back." Well if you teach a child that, what do you expect? You know. If he hits you, tell somebody he hit you and let someone else handle it. Because if you tell them to hit them back, that's how fights break out, that's how somebody gets hurt. But parents teach kids that. So what do you expect? And when they get suspended for fighting, then they wanna call up school and blame somebody else. You taught 'em that! [Chuckles.] And I tell them, that's why you have adults around. Share with them what's going on. They can always work it out for you.

LB: So you're already answering my next question, which is--

YME: [Laughs.]

LB: ... are there things that you'd like the generation of young people growing up in Richmond today to know?

YME: Yes.... Yes. They need to know that they need to establish goals, and they need to pursue those goals. And you're gonna--you're gonna have obstacles. But every obstacle has a way around it. And you need to find a way to get around it. And continue to head in the direction of your goals.

LB: Do you think there are things that we as a community need to particularly remember that we may in danger of forgetting?

YME: Yes. That the community helps to grow a child. And we need to stop, as parents, blaming adults for speaking to your child about doing something wrong, and telling them don't tell my child anything. I've seen it happen all the time. Uh, 'I don't need you speaking to my child.' Well, what harm is it doing if I'm telling you something right. We need to, as a community, pull together and we all need to start raising these children. That's the way--that's the way I grew up. Everybody in the community helped my mother rear me. If they saw me doing something I should not be doing... it was coming back to her. Because she expected that. When we walked down the street, my mother told me whoever was on their porch, you need to speak to them. If you walk into a room and someone's already there, you're the first one to speak. People come around you nowadays and don't say a word. I mean, I don't understand it. They didn't sleep with me last night (?). But my mother taught us that. But my mother taught us that. We would walk down the street... 'good evenin', good evenin'! And people appreciated it! Because we were children! And--they would come back and tell my mama how respectful her kids were and she enjoyed that. Because she--she prized herself on teaching us to be respectful young people. And all of us stayed out of trouble because of the way she was. I love her for it. [Laughs.]

LB: So did your sisters follow in your path as well?

YME: Yeah.... I--my mother wasn't gonna let us do anything else. [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: We weren't allow--all of us. I mean, she set the standard for us. And we had to abide by it. And we *all*... appreciated it as we grew up. Now, not all of them went to college. But that was a choice they made. But she geared all of us in that direction--she never went to college. But she geared all of us in the direction of trying to get into higher education. So you could be s--successful in life. But some of them cho--you know, a few of them chose not to do that. Which is fine. She had no problem with that, but they were still successful at what they did.

LB: Are they all in Richmond still?

YME: I have one sister who lives in San Antonio, Texas. I just... visited her in June. But all the rest of us are here.

LB: Now, Yvonne, is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to address?

YME: Um.... George Wythe was a great place to work. John Marshall was, too. I met a lot of kids there, I see them--time to time, too. But George Wythe was special. Um... I think because that was the first place that I worked when I graduated from college. And I really... you know, established some kind of foothold there. And that was a schoo--that was a school I really wanted to continue to work--why I really want to continue to work. But of course when the position came up as the guid--for the guidance counselor. And it was at a middle school... I didn't mind

leaving. Cuz I... the whole time I was there I knew I was going back to George Wythe. I don't know how I knew that. But I knew I was going back. [Laughs.] And, but--but I was going back not as a physical education teacher, as a guidance counselor. So.... And it happened. But, um... George Wythe was just... something special to me. The kids were special, uh... the parents were special. There were a lot of parents who... you could--you could feel the resentment. Because they looked at me. And they saw that I was not like them. And sometimes they would be a little rough... with their communications toward me. But I was always able to smooth it over.

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YME: I guess they know you're here. [Laughs.]

LB: It was interesting, you know... we had a group interview for my theater class and we had about twenty Wythe alums, half black, half white, from that time, coming back. And... it was a really interesting conversation but the interviews we did then and... since I've been talking one-on-one with people, they have radically different memories of how the school was. And some of them are still so dedicated to it

YME: Yes.

LB: ... like Robin Mines and Mark Person.

YME: And Valerie Perkins.

LB: And Valerie Perkins.

YME: They are. Because they had a good experience while they were there.

LB: Yeah.

YME: I mean they *loved* that school.

LB: They do.

YME: Yes. They really loved that school -- they still love that school. They even give money--I think they developed a scholarship fund. The last reunion they had, they set up a scholarship fund. They really love that school, and I just... I think a lot of it... goes back to... teachers. Those teachers were so dedicated at George Wythe. And they were so into those kids. And they cared so--they were like parents away from home. And I think the children really felt it. And they played into it. And they got a lot out of it. And yes, George Wythe was special.

LB: It was clearly a really powerful experience.

YME: Yes it was. Yes it was. And good kids.

LB: Yeah.

YME: Mm hm. Really good kids--and good parents! Parents--good parent support. *Good* parents support. It reminded me a lot--even though I went to a negro--uh--I mean, a segregated school, it reminded me a lot of the family at Maggie Walker for me.

LB: Oh, that's interesting.

YME: Mm hm. Because we were all close and those kids were all close. You know. And, um... course... I was Ms. Walker... in 1962 at my--at my high school. Uh, they say I was popular, I didn't know I was. [Laughs.] But you know, I guess... personality-wise, I pretty much blend with most people. Because I'm very frank and very honest. If I see something I don't like, I'm not gonna... shelter it and keep it to myself, I'm gonna s... let people know where I'm coming from. And let me--let them know that I'm not pleased with what they've said or what they've done. And that's just--I'm outspoken. That's what they say. But... in a good way. And I think, um, being at Wythe helped me to fester a lot of the, uh--lot of my personality. Mm hm, I was able to generate a lot of things that I had learned growing up. I was able to--to... implant them in a lot of kids... and get them to move forward and become successful. In fact, one of the girls that was in my last graduating class at George Wythe--no. Class before gra--before I left. Uh, she lives in Houston, Texas. And I went to Houston last March because I have a very good friend who grew up with me who lives there. And she doesn't live far from her. And she--we were able to hang out. My student, ex-student. We were able to hang out the whole week together. She was so excited about it. She calls me on my birthday every year. I mean... just good kids. You know? Just good kids. And she had good parents. Yeah. And like I said, there were a few who didn't think that their kids did anything wrong or you shouldn't say this to my kid or this, that--but that's today, too. Parents are just... they don't realize the significance that others can impart upon their child. They think that every--somebody's always out to get them. And that's such a sad way to be. Because it doesn't help the children to grow in a positive fashion.

LB: That's for sure.

YME: But I'm not gonna talk you to death, but... George Wythe was special. And I--I gained a lot from that school, I gained a lot of... adult friends, as well as kids, growing up who are my friends. Valerie and I are very close. Very close. We go to dinner together, we go to lunch together. We're in the same sorority, we go to activities together. We're very close.

LB: That's nice.

YME: Mm hm. And I--I'm really trying to get her... while they had the last reunion they had, um... a lot of the cheerleaders came back to the reunion and--and of course they invited me and I went. And they presented me with, uh... a gift. Uh... from the cheering squad. And, uh, they just said that I had such an impact on their lives and... Ohh, they were cr--tearing and--tearing and crying and--so excited to see me, and I was so excited to see them, we just had a grand time.

LB: It sounds fantastic [laughs]. All--

YME: I *love* my kids. I love my kids in every school I've ever worked in. Even kids from Clover Hill. When I run in--like the guy I saw--I just hugged him so tight. I remembered his face, but I told them when I was in school, I said, "I'll remember you face, but I can't promise you I'll remember your names." Well when he said "I remember you from Clover Hill," I looked in his face. And I could remember him standing in the hall talking to me. And I told him, I said, "You remember that time you came to my--to the--my office and I was--in the hall." He said, "How could I forget, I was always in your office." [Laughs.]

LB: [Laughs.]

YME: And I was so glad to see him. But I really took a lot of time with my kids. Because I--I'm a firm believer that... if you take time with a child, you pay on the front end or you pay on the rear end.... Okay? And I figure you pay with the time on the front end, and then on the rear end, you'll see success. That's my philosophy.

LB: Well, thank you so much, Yvonne.

YME: Well, thank you for coming. I hope I haven't talked you to death today.