Mittie Jean Ward Dixon
Interview Summary

Interviewee: Mittie Jean Ward Dixon
Interviewers: Charlene Jackson and Antonia Comfort
Interview Date: October 17, 2016
Location: Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center Newport News, VA
Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 121:14

THE INTERVIEWEE: Mittie Jean Ward Dixon lived in the Newsome Park area of Newport News for the entirety of her childhood. Dixon attended all-black schools in the area. Dixon graduated from Carver High school and worked many different jobs and also had her own business. Dixon has been the president of the Carver Alumni Association for the past six years. The association was organized in 1982, and part of its purpose was to give scholarships to underprivileged children in the area. In August 2016, Carver High received a historical marker. Dixon was one of the people who worked diligently to make sure that happened. Dixon has two children, a son and a daughter, and four grandchildren. She married later in life but is now a widow.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Antonia Comfort and Charlene Jackson are students at Christopher Newport University. They are enrolled in Dr. Laura Puaca's History 341 class: "The Long Civil Rights Movement" and conducted the interview as a part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted in Conference Room C at the Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia. It was a medium size room. Before the interview began, Dixon shared with the interviewers a large binder full of pictures, documents, and newspaper articles that she had collected over the years about Newport News, Carver High School, and her life. She was very eager to have her story a part of the project. At the beginning of the interview, Dixon gave short answers but toward the middle of the interview she began to go more in depth as she recalled events in her life. At one point of particular interest, she shared that she was attacked by a racist neighbor's dog in North Carolina and had to hide in a ditch until her grandfather came and rescued her. She recalled a few other instances where she saw others racially discriminated against.

Throughout the interview, there is a low hum from the vent in the room but nothing of serious concern. All in all, Dixon had positive life experiences and was very delighted to be a part of the project and offered further help in any way she could. The interview focused almost exclusively on Dixon's life and experiences in the Hampton Roads area and her summers spent in North Carolina.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Antonia Comfort: This is Antonia Comfort and my partner Charlene Jackson. Today is October 17, 2016. We are interviewing Mittie Jean Ward Dixon. This interview is taking place at the Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia. This interview is being carried out as a part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good morning Ms. Dixon. We are taking what is called a life history and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. First off, where and when were you born?

Mittie Dixon: I was born April 6, 1943 in Wilson, North Carolina.

AC: Do you have any siblings?

MD: Yes, I have two sisters and one brother.

AC: What did your parents do for a living?

MD: Well, my mother--. Well, they worked the farm for about three years before they came to Virginia. They came here in 1944. And my father got a job in the shipyard and he worked in the shipyard until probably about 1963. And then, he became a longshoreman. My mother was a housewife until we were in, probably in, maybe the tenth or eleventh grade. And then she started doing custodial--well, housekeeping, for

outside families and from that she went to the National Linen Service. And after she worked there for a while, she went to what they called Patrick Henry Hospital and she was an aide there until 1985. And she was in a really bad--. We were in an accident. So she retired after that.

AC: What made you and your family move from North Carolina to Newsome Park?

MD: Well, my father was looking for a better job, you know. He wanted to provide, you know, for the family and said he was just tired of working on the farm. He grew up on the farm, and he didn't want to have to raise his family on the farm. So he decided to move to Virginia.

AC: What was it like to grow up in Newsome Park?

MD: Well, to grow up in Newsome Park, I wish it was those days now. [laughter] It was good growing up in Newsome Park. You know, you didn't--. You know, you didn't have to worry about anything, everybody was--. The community was a family, you know. So, it was just great growing up in Newsome Park.

AC: What kind of jobs did the people living in Newsome Park hold?

MD: Most of the men worked in the shipyard. I had a neighbor; we had a neighbor that worked at Goodyear Tire Company. But most of them worked in the shipyard because then that was about the only thing that they could get, you know, that paid a decent salary for them to live off.

Ac: Do you remember the physical structures of the houses or the community of Newsome Park?

MD: Yes, they were wood frame houses. Yeah.

AC: Do you remember any of the businesses in Newsome Park?

MD: You mean like the little confectionary stores and things like that? Yeah, Seller's Market was one. Night and Day was one. Ester's Store, that was located on Roanoke Avenue. Seller's Market was located over near 44th Street or something and Night and Day was over, maybe, in that area too. So--.

AC: Did those businesses have like an important meaning to the people in that community?

MD: Yes, because it was the only thing that was open, with the exception of the grocery stores, you know, where they had to have transportation to get to. But the community stores, you know, they could walk there and they sold just about everything, you know. And then you could buy it in small quantities. Where you go to the grocery store, your meats and all that stuff, you know you buy it in large quantities. But in the confectionary stores, the little stores, you know, you could go there to buy a half a pound of this or a half a pound of that.

AC: As a child, did you have much interaction with the people of Copeland Park?

MD: No. [laughter]

AC: Alright. And what would you say that--. How would you say race relations were like in Newport News?

MD: Critical, because I never--. I didn't ride the bus until I was a teenager and, by then, everything was integrated, you know. But, during the segregation period, we stayed right, not too far from the bus stop. So, when the bus passed, you could see the people on the bus coming from Copeland Park, and you could see them sitting up front: the white people, sitting up front. And then you could see the blacks sitting in the back. Now, when I did start to ride the bus and, even though everything was integrated when you got on the

bus, if the bus was filled in the front, the white people wouldn't sit down. They stood from Newsome Park, 48th Street, all the way to Jefferson Avenue and over to Washington Avenue. They refused to sit down, you know, if they had to sit by a black person.

AC: Alright. So now we are going to ask some questions about just school.

MD: Okay.

AC: When did you enroll at Newsome Park Elementary School?

MD: I enrolled [pause then laughter] about 1949.

AC: Okay. What grades did you study there?

MD: First through sixth grade.

AC: How would you describe the faculty and staff there?

MD: Great. [laughter]

AC: When did you enroll in Carver Elementary?

MD: I went to Carver Elementary in 1955. I think.

AC: And how long were you there?

MD: One year.

AC: And what would you say your experience there was like?

MD: Great. I loved my teacher, Ms. Roberts.

AC: Would you like to tell us more about Ms. Roberts?

MD: Well, Ms. Roberts, she was a classy lady, you know. I remember she wore her hair--she had bangs--and she wore her hair parted down the back and she wore two braids and they were rolled over her ears you know. She was really nice. Nice person, real classy.

AC: When did you go to Carver High School?

MD: In fifty-seven, I believe.

AC: And what would you say your experience was like there?

MD: It was good. I had the opportunity to go back there to take a tour, and I spoke about it at the unveiling of the historical marker. And it just seemed like a really big school, a lot to see, you know. And I always wanted to get there, you know. We would pass by there and I always wanted to go there, and when I had the opportunity to get there, everything looked so big, you know. I mean, you know, it was like gigantic. But now it looks like a little shoe.

AC: What kind of activities were you involved in at Carver High School?

MD: The only thing--. I started out, I was going to join the basketball team but after the first fall on the floor, I decided that wasn't for me. [laughter] So, I was in the Glee Club and the choir. Other than that, I did a lot of projects for home economics.

AC: Do you have any memorable teachers?

MD: Yes. Mr. Johnson, my math teacher at Carver. And in elementary school, Mrs. Granderson and Ms. (Shavers? 09:49), my first and second grade teachers.

AC: What makes those teachers stick out to you the most?

MD: Well, they were understanding, you know. They were quiet in manner; they were just nice people.

AC: Do you have any memorable classmates?

MD: Yes, and we still associate--not all of us--but we still do. Carrie Gwynn, Geraldine Carey. The ones that don't attend the luncheons and things with us: Ruth--I can't even think of her name now--and Flora Drewery. Ruth Fields and Flora Drewery. (Roberta Stewart? 0:10:59.0)

Charlene Jackson: Alright, could you tell us what it was like attending school during segregation?

MD: You know, during segregation, you really didn't think about segregation. The way we grew up was all we knew, you know. So it was--. I mean it was just an everyday thing. You didn't think about going to school with whites, you didn't think about working with whites, you didn't think about doing anything with whites because you didn't interact with them.

CJ: We're curious to learn a little bit more about the process of school desegregation in Newport News. So when did that begin?

MD: That was--. Can you pause that a minute?

[pause in recording]

MD: Okay, I can remember when we had our first students to come to Carver: they were not whites, but they were Hispanics. So the classes in general, they did not seem to separate themselves from them, you know, even though they were not white, you know, but they weren't black either. It was just that, even when they came, after that we had to be involved with the whites--. It was not that we separated ourselves from them, you know, because if you're not taught that then you don't know, you know. So we weren't taught to distinguish between blacks and whites, so we just treated everybody the same, you know.

CJ: And along with that, what was the response of the black community to desegregation?

MD: Well, it was something that they just--. They were satisfied with it, you know, because segregation was all you knew at that time, you know. And it wasn't until they

started, until they did the integration, you know, that things really seemed like they started to separate, you know. A lot of anger and hostility and stuff, you know. Because the whites did not want to mingle with the blacks, you know. So then, that started a problem.

AC: So, we know you graduated in ’61. Correct?

MD: Mm-hmm.

AC: But Carver was closed in 1971 as a part of the Newport News desegregation plan. How did blacks respond to that?

MD: Well they, the blacks really didn’t--. I’m not going to say all blacks, but some blacks didn’t like the idea that they had to rezone the children, you know, and send them into the white neighborhoods. And, of course, when they sent them into the white neighborhoods, they sent them so far away from home, you know. But, it was a lot of problems with that, you know. They wasn’t satisfied with that. Now, on the other hand, some of them were because they felt like the children would get a better education if they went to another school.

AC: In our class, we learned a little about court-ordered busing, where people had to move and redistrict and things of that nature. Do you know anyone who was affected by this, whether it be family members or friends, or children of your family members or friends?

MD: Yeah, my brother and some of the classes that I deal with now, being the president of the alumni. And the class of ’72, we, you know, we call them “the lost class” because they said that, you know, they started at Carver and then they all got split up, you know. So they really didn’t have a school that they said that they went to that they graduated

from, you know. We always said that if you went to Carver one day, you were a member of Carver, you know. So we opened--well, we really didn't open it up--but the alumni, they decided--. We asked them to join, you know, so they could be a part of us. So, we've had some class members, you know, from class of '71 to join us.

CJ: Do you remember any resistance to busing, and if you do, what was it like?

MD: Any what?

CJ: Any resistance?

MD: No.

CJ: So we understand that you are still very active with Carver and that were--. I'm sorry. So, we understand that you are very active with Carver and you're the president of the Alumni Association. So could you tell us more about that please?

MD: I've been president for six, almost six years now. Before that--. The alumni was organized in 1982 and the purpose of that was to give scholarships to underprivileged children and that has been what we, you know, been trying to do. Our only fundraiser is the Alumni Ball which we have every year, the Friday after Thanksgiving. And we try to support the schools, and the school that we really support is--. The one school that we support is Crittenden, and we do a lot over there, you know, with books and tutoring, you know, different things over there.

CJ: Could you tell us a little bit more about the historical marker that was just installed?

MD: The historical marker was put--. Well, it was a project that was started about two years ago, maybe three years ago. And, I decided that I wanted to get it done as soon as I could because, like I've said, and like I said in the paper, "History fades fast if you don't stay on top of it." And the school was Carver and now, as you know, it's Crittenden. And

we just wanted something placed there to let our children, grandchildren, and other members of the community to know that, at one time, that was George Washington Carver, and it had not always been Crittenden Middle School.

CJ: So just to backtrack some, speaking of some of your own experiences, what did you do after graduating from Carver?

MD: After graduation, I went to--. Well, I got a job. I worked at James River Nursing Home. That was when they first built it. As a matter of fact, I think it was probably the first convalescent home on the peninsula, other than Patrick Henry that they call. And I worked there and, after that, I worked a while in JC Penney's. And then, I decided that I would go to school, and I went to Thomas Nelson for two years. And after the two years, I decided--. Well, I didn't decide, but I took a young--. I took my cousin to apply for a job at K-Mart, and I was in school, and she said "Will you take me up to fill this application out?" I took her up there and she said, "Well why don't you fill it out, fill one out?" and I said "Well, I'm in school, you know." And she said "Well, you can work for the summer," and I said "Well, I don't know, you know." So, I filled an application out. About a week later they called me and didn't call her [Dixon's cousin]. So I worked at K-Mart for almost 35 years and I retired as Assistant Store Manager. And when I started out there, I was-started out part time and I worked in lingerie. And from that I moved to full time department manager and then, from department manager, I went to personnel and, from personnel, I went back to Assistant Store Manager.

AC: You just listed a number of jobs that you had. Did you ever notice or experience discrimination in the workplace?

MD: Yes. One of them I didn't name--. The first, the really first, job that I got, I worked there for two days, and I couldn't stomach what was going on and that was--. I got this job over on Washington Avenue at the Colony Inn, owned by Jews--no, Greeks. And [pause] when it came time to serve the people at lunchtime--now this was in '61, so it was not supposed to have been any segregation then. But they had the whites on one side, where the booths were leather and everything, and the blacks were on the other side with card tables that were all just raggedy and mismatched chairs. And some of the blacks had to sit outside on the curb to eat their food and, you know, I had never experienced anything like that. And when I was asked to take the food over to the other side, I didn't know what was over there, you know. And I took it over there and when I saw the conditions that they were eating in, I came back over and I asked one of the cooks there, who was black, and I said "Is this what goes on every day?" and she said "yes." So, I finished everything for that day and then the next day, I went back, and I just couldn't stomach it anymore. So, I worked there two days and after that I just--. I couldn't do it anymore, you know, because I could not let them--. I didn't want them to see me looking at them, you know. I just couldn't take the food over there and they, you know, eating in those conditions, you know, It's just not right, you know.

AC: Are there any other experiences that you can remember?

MD: I don't think so because even when I was working at James River, you know, I didn't go through any of that, you know. As a matter of fact, the supervisor that was there, Mrs. Joyce, we were just--. She was an older white lady. A lot of people didn't get along with her, even her kind. But we got along great, you know.

AC: Just from, you know, from when you graduated till now, were you and are you still active in your church or any community groups?

MD: Yes, I joined Shalom in 1956, and I've been there ever since. And I've worked with the--. I've sponsored the youth department; I've been in the choir; I've been a missionary, member of the missionaries. Now I'm a deaconess and I try to do what's right [laughter].

AC: Throughout the years, have your--. Was your church active in engaging in the Civil Rights Movement?

MD: Yes.

AC: Would you like to tell us more about that?

MD: Well, they--. You know, my pastor fought for what he thought was right, you know. He would write, you know, to D.C. on different things that he thought needed to be taken care of and he did, at one time, run for city council. And he said he did that because he wanted to make sure, you know, that the blacks were treated equally in the community, you know.

AC: Were you ever involved in any protests?

MD: No.

AC: Do you remember any that took place here in Newport News?

MD: Yes, I remember when they burned Jefferson Avenue down, you know. Well, not all of it, but they burned like certain stores, you know. But my parents, they kept a stern hand on us, you know, and we wasn't allowed to go this place or that place you know. So a lot of things that did go on, we really didn't know that much about it because we weren't out there. We didn't socialize with other people, you know. We weren't prisoners, but we just couldn't go, you know [laughter].

AC: Do you ever remember any marches that happened in Newport News?

MD: No, mm-mm.

[recorder was turned off and on again]

AC: You spoke of your parents, and how they were very firm with you all. Would you like to tell us more about your family?

MD: Yes. Well, we weren't allowed to go like a lot of places. They were more protective of us. And I can remember when there used to be a place called (J.B.'s? 0:26:51.9) on Jefferson Avenue and they use to have dances and things there and a lot of my classmates did go there, but we weren't allowed to go. They used to sell barbeque, so my mother would let us go there to buy the sandwiches, which was like on the--. It wasn't on the outside, but it was like a little vestibule with a window there. So, she said, "You go in there, you get the sandwiches and you come out of there. You don't go inside, you go and get the sandwiches, and you come out." So, that was as close to J.B.'s as we got, you know. But they just didn't let us go to a lot of places because then, you know, people did a lot of fighting, you know, and they were known to cut you. So she just didn't want us, you know, in that crowd, you know, so. My parents, we really didn't want for anything. We were taken care of but, then, with everybody living on a low salary, my mother made our clothes, and I can remember her looking in the catalogs and looking at dresses and things. And there was one dress that [was] like [the ones] all the little girls wore, and it had a white yolk, which was like right around the neckline. It was white and then the dresses were plaid [laughter] and then it used to have a little collar on it with a little piece of cord that runs through it. And she used to just cut the patterns from a paper bag and make our dresses and then that's where I learned to sew. I was about six years old, and

she would be up at night sewing and that. And sometimes she would stay up 'til like twelve, one, two o'clock, and I would just be leaning on the sewing machine watching everything that she was doing. And when she threw a piece of fabric on the floor, I would pick it up. And at Christmas time, we would get--. They would give us a shoebox that would have your fruit and your nuts and candy and everything in it, and I would always save my shoebox to put my fabric in. [laughter] And every dress that my mother made me, I made my doll a dress just like that. While my sister and them were playing, I would be sitting behind the stove. In Newsome Park, they had the stoves that you put coal in and and it had like a space, probably about three or four feet from the wall, and I would sit back there on the floor with my shoebox and my fabric and the doll. And I would make the dress and then I would take the shoe--. I would take the doll's foot and draw the print of the foot on a piece of cardboard, and I would cut that out. Then, I would take another piece of fabric and pull it up around the cardboard and sort of make the shoe like. And from our old socks, I would cut out a sock, you know, and that's how I learned to sew. So I've been sewing ever since I was about six years old, and I'm seventy two now, so, and I'm still doing it [laughter].

AC: Since your mother was such an influence on you in getting into sewing, could you please tell us more about how you were the first on the peninsula to make and sell your own dashikis?

MD: Well, there was a place on 25th Street called The Hut and the owner was Frank Carney and it was--. He sold a lot of ethnic attire, and I saw him one day and he asked me if I could do some dashikis for him, you know. And I told him, "Yes, I could." So he told me he was going to go to New York and buy the fabric, and he would come back and let

me know. So I asked him, I said, “Well do you have a pattern?” You know, “How am I supposed to know what size?” He said “Well, you know, just do a size.” I said “Well, okay.” So, what I did, I used newspaper and I had medium, large and extra-large and I made them for him and he sold him out of his shop on 25th Street. And now that was in nineteen, probably 1970, in the early seventies, and now the dashikis are back, full bloom again [laughter] but I haven’t made one yet [laughter].

AC: So you showed us these books that you did as a souvenir gift for your class reunion, can you tell us more about those please?

MD: Yes, we were celebrating our fiftieth class reunion. And I wanted to just add a little something, a little souvenir, and I talked to one of my classmates--well, I didn’t really talk to one of my classmates about it, but I was telling him what I wanted to do, you know, and do it as a gift. So he asked me, you know, “Well, what is the book gonna consist of?” I said, “Well, I just want each class member that’s gonna participate, or if they not going to participate, to do a little memoir, you know, and I can put it in there.” Well, I didn’t get a lot of participation, you know, from that. So when I talked to him again, he said, “Well do you mind if I help you?” and I said “No, I don’t mind, you know, if you want to.” So it went from the memoirs to collecting information on different people from the community. So then we decided that we would do a “Did You Know?” And, we had like a lot of people in there and their first times from Carver and first times of the peninsula and then the Black History “Did You Know?” So, that was just something that I felt like I wanted to do because I’m the type of person, if--and I ask a lot of my class, you know, and I just feel like when I ask--well I don’t feel like, but when I ask them to do something for me, they always do it, you know. So that was like a token

of appreciation. And right now, I do a luncheon every year in February for them and it's called "Glitz and Glamour." And I have it at my house, and I do everything: the chairs are decorated, and I use China and flatware and crystal and everything. And they come dressed, you know, for dinner. So I do that every year and that's my appreciation, you know, for what I ask them to do during the course of the year, you know.

AC: It seems like Carver is very important to you, and it is something that you work very hard on. Can you tell us why it is so important to you?

MD: It's important because [pause] it was where I really, [pause] I could say, got started with my future. I can remember my drama teacher. I wanted to take a part in the dramatics club and--Miss Scott--and she said, "Well, I have this part I want you to do," you know, and she said, "It's an understudy." And I said, "Well, okay," you know, so I did and I didn't get to do the part because I was just an understudy. But she told me, you know, she said, "If it's anything that you want to do in life, you can always do it if you put one foot forth," you know, "and let the other one follow." And that's--. You know, I feel like I got started there with anything that I wanted to do, you know, because I've started out doing a lot of things and sometimes I felt like I couldn't do it, but I say I always think back to her, you know. She gave me that extra push, you know, and if it had not been for her, who was at Carver, I would've never done a lot of things that I'm doing today, you know, with going out, you know. Because I've had like a small business up in the flea market and I said, "Well, I'm gonna go up there and get started." You know, do something up there. So I went--I had a place on the inside--and I made pocketbooks, handkerchiefs, hats, jewelry and everything, and I stayed in there for like five years. And I made a decent living in there, but my mother got sick with Alzheimer's, and I had to

close it because I had to come home and stay with her. So, Carver is where I got started at, you know. And Miss Wade, who was my Home Ec. teacher, she taught me a lot. We didn't have like a lot of time in Home Economics, but we had like a half a semester sewing and a half a semester of cooking. Well, you know, you can't learn a lot in a half a semester, but I learned enough that I was able to do about three garments. And then after that I just--with what my mother had taught me, you know--I was able to just go out and do it on my own you know, so.

AC: Okay, so I just wanted to know, compared to your schooling--. I would like for you to compare your school experience to your children's school experience. And also, before you do that, can you tell us about your children?

MD: Okay, I have a daughter, she's not working now. She's a breast cancer survivor. So, she doesn't work, but she does everything that she can to try to stay busy with her daughter and her grandson. And I see her almost every day, and we go out and we do a lot of stuff together. And my son stays in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and he's a minister. And he's married with three children. So, we just live a normal life [laughter].

AC: Just to backtrack a little bit, so what would you say their school experience was like compared to your school experience?

MD: Well, their school experience, they were a lot freer than we were, you know. They were able, I mean they were able to--. [pause] I trusted them to go to games and go to different activities, you know, out after school, where when I was in school, it was kind of hard to trust your children to go to games and things because of the rivalry that, you know, the schools had. So it was a lot different, you know, because you didn't have that pressure--I didn't have that pressure that I think my mother had on us. My father, he

wasn't there because he was a longshoreman, so he was always working, you know. So my mother was like the mother and the father of the house, and I know she was probably like stressed a lot when, you know, when we asked to go someplace. You know, she was worried about if we were gonna get back home safe or whatever. But with my children, I, you know, if they asked to go somewhere, you know, I felt confident that they were gonna be okay, you know, if they went, you know. But I never let them--when they were younger--I never let them leave home if I was at work, you know. I always made them stay home until I got there, you know.

AC: Do you think that your family ever experienced discrimination?

MD: Yes.

AC: Would you like to tell us more about it if you can remember anything of that experience?

MD: Well, I don't remember [personally], but I remember my mother telling me--. Well, she didn't tell me in particular, but she talked to, you know, it was like a conversation and I was there. And, it was probably '44, '45, '46, about 1946, and she wanted to go to North Carolina for Christmas and my dad wasn't able to go. And he said, "I will buy your train ticket so you can go." And she left from the train station over town here, and she said that she had to stand up with two children, me and my sister. Now I was born in forty-three, so I was only about a couple years old, but she said there was a white soldier standing beside her, and he picked me up and put me up on his shoulder to keep me from getting squashed, you know. And she said some of the people on the train said, "You know, you don't need to pick her up. Let her stand on the floor like everybody else standing on the floor." So that was, you know, the only thing that I could really

remember, you know, my mother really talking about, you know, that happened during segregation.

AC: Would you like to tell us more about your childhood?

MD: Yes, I think my childhood was different from a lot of other children because I spent each summer in North Carolina with my grandparents.

AC: Was that a different experience than being in Newport News?

MD: Yes, because my grandparents stayed on a farm. And I was really close with my grandmother. And every year, right after school closed, my mother would take my sister--the two of us--would take us to North Carolina, and we would spend the entire summer there. And the reason I say it was different from here was because I got a chance to learn how they made their living on the farm, you know, from the summer up to September, when they had to harvest their crops and everything, you know: from planting the vegetables to killing the hogs, you know, preparing them for the winter, doing the tobacco, how they harvest that and how they, you know brought it from the field up to the tobacco barn and the process that they did there. And then from that they put it in the tobacco barn and it was cured. And from the tobacco barn from it being cured, they put it in the pack house, and from the pack house, they had to grade it and it had to be like in different grades of tobacco, that's how he was paid, you know. And I got to do everything because, as I got older, they let me do more, you know. I didn't mess with killing the hogs and stuff, but as far as planting the crops and working at, you know, around the tobacco barn and everything, I learned to do all of that, you know. And it was a great experience and it's something that the children today--every child needs to do it to let them know how their grandparents and great-great grandparents had to really struggle

to make ends meet, you know, where life is so easy now. You know, they just sit at home and wait for you to come home and put the money in their pockets, you know. But then, you know, nobody laid around in my grandfather's house. Before day, my grandfather was up, my grandmother was up. I could hear her in the kitchen, you know, and he was out the door before the sun came up, you know. And he was out there getting the mules and stuff ready to go to the field. They didn't have a clock but you just had to just kind of--[laughter]. You know, say, "Well, it's eight o'clock." And then the people that he hired to work in the fields, you know, they would come and then they had this store that would ring the bell at twelve o'clock, you know. You could hear it like all over, everywhere, you know. This lady would ring the bell, and people would come up out of the field and they would eat or whatever, you know. And then my grandfather had white people--white people worked for him, you know. But they really--it didn't seem like they made a difference, but my mother talked about how racial they were, you know, outside of the workplace. But as long as they were in the workplace, you know, they didn't seem to make a difference, you know. They did dirty things. Well, when I say dirty things, I mean they did stuff that was just cruel, you know, because they did this trick on my--. Well, they didn't really do it with my mother, but it was done, I guess, for whoever--with this snake in the bottom of this tobacco truck. And they put the tobacco over top, killed this big snake, and put it in the bottom of the truck of tobacco, and then they filled the truck. So the truck was like, the bottom of the truck was like from here up to here [signals distance]. So they handed the tobacco out of the truck so they could put it on the thing to loop it on the stick, and when my mother picked up the last bundle of tobacco, here's this big snake. And she just fell out and had some type of seizures which left an effect on her

for the rest of her life, you know. So a lot of times we had to suffer because of what they had done to her because if she saw one in a book or something, you know, she just reacted, you know. I can remember one time, she hit my brother because--. Well, he didn't know. He had his school book, and he was showing her a picture. And he wanted to know what the word was, you know. He was doing his homework and when she looked at the book, the snake was at the bottom of the page and it had scared the horse. And the horse was up in the air and he asked her, What was this word?" and when she looked at the book, she just reacted and she slapped him and he like fell under the table, you know. And all the time we had to be on our P's and Q's, you know. If we saw one in the book, you know, we had to like fold the page over, and even when she got older, you know, my sister would call and say, "Don't look on page such and such because there is a big snake in there," you know. But, growing up in North Carolina--. Well, not growing up in North Carolina, but visiting North Carolina was--it was great. I learned a lot, you know, from my grandmother, you know. She was my heart, and every year when I got ready to leave, my mother would say, tell my grandmother, you know--. She would write and tell her, you know, "Well, we will be there you know the week before Labor Day, you know, the day before Labor Day," and I would start crying. And I would count the days, you know, and I would say, "Well, gotta go home in two more days, I gotta go home in another day," you know, and I would cry from my grandmother's house all the way to James River Bridge. You know, three hours. I would cry nonstop, you know. But, it was just different, you know, and I enjoyed it.

AC: It seems as if you have really strong parents and grandparents. How do you think they prepared you for the racial inequality that was going on in the world--that is still going on in the world--but like during your time?

MD: Well, my mother--by her doing domestic work, she came in contact with a lot of white people, you know, and she always told us, "Whatever they're doing, it's not a part of you, you know. You're to treat everybody the same because it's no difference. It's just the color of your skin, you know, and everybody is the same in the eyesight of God." My mother was a very religious person, you know, and she really didn't make a difference between white or black, you know. Now she did say, you know, that they would treat you different, but because they treat you different, that doesn't mean that you have to treat them different, you know. So those are words that I live by. I've had some really, really nice white friends, you know, in working at K-Mart and, you know, people that would come into my shop. And when I look at them, I don't look at them as white people. I look at them as people, you know, just like me. And the way I treat them is the way I want to be treated myself, you know.

AC: Are there any events from your childhood that really stick with you to this day?

MD: Well, nothing, nothing--. Nothing really bad in Newport News. But, I can remember when I was visiting North Carolina one summer, and my grandparents sent me to the store, and there was a family that stayed not too far from my grandparents' home. And they had a bulldog. And my grandfather, he used to tell my grandmother--. You know, they used to talk about things that they would do, you know, to black people. And this particular day, as I was going to the store, they had the dog, and the dog was on the porch. And, when I got right there by the porch, they let the dog go, and I ran. I fell in the

ditch, and I screamed. And my grandfather said he heard me screaming, so he came out and came up there. And I was still in the ditch, but the dog was right there, would not let me out the ditch, you know. So, he went over and he had a confrontation with them, you know. And I can remember my grandfather, you know, he was using some foul words and they were calling him the "N" word, you know, and all this stuff, you know. But he was--. My grandfather was telling them that he didn't want that to happen again, you know. And they said, "Well, you know, if we don't do it to her, then we can do something else to you all." So my grandfather was saying, "Well, you know, I'm right down the road, you know. You are welcome to come on down there," you know. But, I didn't get to the store that day, I came on back home. But I was really afraid, you know. That was like the only incident that I've ever had, you know, with white people doing something to me, you know. And like I said, it didn't happen in Newport News. It happened in North Carolina, you know. And I was a young girl then but other than that, you know.

AC: Do you think that because you didn't have very much interaction with whites in Newport News as a child that your experience was different from when you went to North Carolina?

MD: I think so, yeah, I think so.

AC: Okay, so we're gonna change gears a little bit. We have a couple questions we would like to ask you about Christopher Newport and when it was built. Do you remember the controversy that was going on when Christopher Newport was first being built in the sixties?

MD: Yeah, I heard people talking about it when Ferguson you know closed. They wanted to know what they were going to do with the school and then, you know, the next thing we heard that they were gonna do a college over there. So then the people that stayed over in that area, they started, you know, they started talking about "Well, if they gonna do a college, well then what's gonna happen to us?" And the next thing, the land, you know--. They gradually started moving people out, you know. And they were upset because a lot of family members grew up in that area and, you know, their family still was there. And they said they were like being forced out, you know, and they had no say so over what was being done to them. Well, they said they felt violated, you know, because everything they had worked for, you know, they had no say so over it. People just came in and took it from them. And they're still saying it today you know, because there are still some families over there, you know. And this one gentleman, he said he's just sick because [he says that] they've given him like so many more years before he's gonna have to go, you know. And he said, you know, that's his home, you know. He worked hard to pay for it. He said what he worked for and what he says is his, now there is someone telling him that he's gonna have to go. You know, he has no other choice. He's been given a set time that he's gonna have to find someplace else to go, you know. He says it's not right.

AC: Do you remember any community organizing that was used to try and stop the building of Christopher Newport on Shoe Lane?

MD: Well, I've heard that Reverend Marcellus Harris that had the church there, you know, he fought for a long time, you know, to try to keep the church there. And one reason they didn't wanna move [was] 'cause the church was like over a hundred and

something years old. And then, you know, the members, you know, they were gonna have to relocate so--. But it didn't work out, you know. I think he was on city council too. Did you know him? Have you heard of him?

AC: No, ma'am.

MD: Oh, okay.

AC: Okay, so now we're gonna switch gears a little bit again, and we are gonna talk about Newsome Park. We read a couple articles online about how Newsome Park was the place to live for black people in Newport News, but it kind of went downhill. Why do you think that happened?

MD: Well, from the old Newsome Park, once they tore that down, then they moved over to--. They rebuilt the new Newsome Park. And I think it went down because, I guess, the change of time. The parents were not the same parents as they were in the old Newsome Park. It was a different generation, you know. Just like with the things that happened in the school--you know, they took the prayer out of school. Once they took prayer out of school, then stuff started changing in the school you know. If they don't pray at home, they don't pray at school, you know. But I think it was just a change of time. The gangs, the drugs, the--. It was just a group of things you know. And nobody--they just wasn't taking interest, you know. The people didn't stay home with the children, the children were raising their own self, and children raising their sisters and brothers, you know. So it was no parent in the home then what's gonna happen to the home, you know. So, I think Newsome Park just went down from that because--. My mother stayed in Newsome Park, you know, and I would go over to visit her. And when she first moved there, it wasn't as bad as it was after she moved. You know, it just kept going downhill. You know, they

just--. You know, the drugs just start moving in more and more, the killings, you know. It was just corrupted, you know [laughter]. So you know, they just didn't--. The younger generations don't have the pride that the older people have, you know. And if you don't have any respect for yourself how can you have it for somebody else, you know. So I guess you just call it--. It went downhill because of respect. Just no respect.

AC: You mentioned that they really didn't take pride in the neighborhood. Why do you think that Newsome Park was a place of pride for black people in your community and in the time period when Newsome Park was really this booming, great, black community?

MD: Because they had something that they could call their own, you know. They stayed in Newsome Park. They had a yard--well, their own space, you know. And they just--. I think they felt comfortable that they had decent living quarters, you know. There wasn't, didn't have cracks in the wall that they could see outdoors. And they had heat, they had running water, they had lights and stuff, you know. So that was different than what they came from, where they came from. Because when my mother and father came here, you know, and even when--and I know that they didn't have electric or anything because when I went back to visit my grandparents, they still did not have electric or indoor toilets or anything, you know. So, for them to come from North Carolina and move here, this was like heaven to them, you know. I mean you got everything on the inside, you know, and you're able to go to work and work a job that you don't have to be out in the field walking behind the mule all day long in the hot sun and everything, you know. You can get off at a decent hour and then you got the weekend off that you can do what you wanna do. You can buy you a car, you know, so this was a different sort of life for them.

CJ: So, now we have a few questions about the Civil Rights Movement. What do you view as the most important accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement and what makes that important to you?

MD: Civil Rights Movement. [pause] Voting, [laughter] the most important one. That you're able to speak, you know, stand up for what you think is right and not have to just settle for anything because someone said that that's what you had to do because of the color of your skin. That's what I think about the Civil Rights Movement. Equal opportunity.

CJ: What do you regard as the unfinished legacies of the movement?

MD: The unfinished legacies. Well, you know it seems like everything that was started seems like it's never gonna get finished because, you know, it seems like we're making headway but then, at a point, it seems like we're going back, you know. And now, at this point in time, it seems like everything is in reverse you know. We're going back to where we were, you know. It seems like they--. You know, they just don't want you to get ahead, you know. They do everything to try to stop you with jobs and things, you know, they're still coding your applications and things, you know, that they shouldn't be doing, you know. I mean it's [laughter] it's never gonna get there. It's always gonna be a work in progress, you know.

CJ: What do you believe are the most pressing problems with regard to race relations today?

MD: I think the problem is that people just not gonna let go, you know. They [pause] they say they're not prejudiced, you know, but they are. And it's like I have a little four-year-old great grandchild and he's really light complexion, and we have never taught him

a difference in color, but he was in daycare, and I'm not saying he got it from daycare, but he got it from somewhere. He played out in the sun this summer, so he got a tan. So he came home one day, and he said "I don't wanna be like this. I wanna be like I was before," and I said "Well, what do you mean like you was before?" you know, and he said "I wanna be like I was before, I'm too dark." So I said, "Well, where did you get that from?" You know, "Who told you that?" He said, just did his eyes up in the ceiling, you know. I said, "You are the color that God made you, you know. You cannot change that, you know, and you gonna have to accept that. Just because you played out in the sun and your skin is another color, that does not change you." You know, so from that, I'm saying that we're never gonna make progress because it's still being taught in the homes you know. I was at Thomas Nelson, I was taking sociology, 'cause I was majoring in nursing, and one day the teacher asked the question--he just stopped and he said, "Is there anyone in here that's a racist?" And nobody said anything. And he said, "I'm gonna ask the question again." And nobody said anything. So he said "Well, I am." He said, "Not by choice." He said, "It's what I was told in my home that make me the way that I am." He said, "Not that I don't like other people," he said, "but it's what I was told." He said, "And sometimes I have a hard time trying to go against what was told to me," you know. So that's why we're never gonna get past that, you know, because it's being taught in the homes every day, you know, every day. So, if they're being taught from little kids up, it's gonna be stuck there, you know. So, we're never gonna get past that, never, no. I don't know if I answered your question or not but [laughter].

CJ: Do you believe that African American are still facing the hardships from the past?

MD: Yes.

CJ: In what ways?

MD: Like I just said. You know, it's hard for some people to get a job. You know, you have all this killing, you know. And I hate to talk about that, but with them being abused when they're arrested--. I just watched something on CNN last night, you know, and they were talking about drugs. I think it was in Chicago, and how this young [white] lady was in the bathroom and she was shooting up and her friend had so much drugs on him. And the cops forced the door open, and told him to get out of there. Where they said, in another part of Chicago, if they're caught with that much on them, they automatically get so many years, you know. So, it's just a difference you know. They're making a difference. And then when they're arresting blacks, you know, even though they tell you to put your hands up and don't do this and don't do that, you know, they still shoot you. But like the lady said the other week, you know, when the young man killed, no bombed the place, and they didn't kill him, you know, but they wanted to spare his life so they could question him, you know. She said, "But it was alright for them to shoot and kill the other person, you know." So, they just, they're never gonna be equal, you know. We're always gonna be at the lower end of the totem pole. It's just that we're gonna have to fight to stay on top of everything, you know. I stress it to the young men of today, you know, "You need to get your act together, you know, because--." [pause] I don't want to say this, but I'm gonna say it, Trump is saying that he wants to make America great again, you know. I don't think people are looking beyond great. Great is that he wants to make the white person at the top, and the black people at the bottom, you know. So if the black man don't get himself together, the black women are gonna end up being slaves again because who's gonna protect them, when over half the men are out there

incarcerated, you know? So we're never gonna get ahead, you know. Never. We just have to fight for what we think is right, you know. It's not that we are doing bad, but we don't have to be treated the way that we are being treated, you know, and I try to look past that, you know, but it's hard. I always try to think about what my mother said.

AC: This project that we're doing is basically a life history project. Is there anything that you would like to add that you want on the record about your life in your story?

MD: As a black woman, I don't think I have really done bad. I've raised two children by myself. I got married when I was in my late thirties and, by then, my children were grown and out of school. But, I just tried to think about the things that I was told when I was growing up, you know, to prepare myself, you know, for days to come. You know, how to make a living and be respectable of yourself and of other people. And I've tried to do that, and it has paid off. I've never been in any trouble, you know. My health is good. Now, you know, I'm a widow and I'm still surviving. I'm not asking anybody for anything, you know. So, I think my life has been great, you know. I can't say that I've had any hardships or anything, you know. I just wish that other young black women out there would just try to push forward, you know. And when they have those cloudy days, that they don't give up, they just keep going because they are gonna come, you know. And it has been days that I didn't think that I was gonna make it, but I said, "Well, you know, I gotta push forward, you know, because I don't have anybody to help me." I mean I have family and everything but, you know, family, they have their own problems and they have their own needs and things, you know, and sometimes they just can't do what you want them to do. So you have to prepare yourself, you know, to take care of yourself, so that you just won't fall. Because if--. [pause] They say black woman are strong

women, but I think if anybody, any woman--I don't care whether it's black, white, Hispanic, or whatever--you know, if they hit rock bottom, it's hard for them to try to pull themselves back up and try to start over again, you know. Because it seems like when you're down, you know, nobody wants to help you because people, they're jealous of you, you know. And they say, "Well, you know, you get there the best way you can, you know." So I just feel like I've done a good job. [laughter] Pat myself on the back [laughter].

AC: You do a lot of work in the community, especially in the black community, keeping records and, you know, having the information somewhere 'cause I know that you mentioned before that you don't want the history to be forgotten. Can you tell us about any work that you're doing right now in regards to the history of the black community here in Newport News?

MD: Well, right now I'm trying to gather information on Morrison Negro/Colored School. I have acquired some diplomas, copies of diplomas, and copies of class pictures, and I did have a chance to interview Mrs. Cheeseman just before she passed. And I gathered some information from her, but that's a long road, you know. But I'm not giving up. They don't talk about the school, but I think it should be talked about because that's where a lot of the parents went, before Carver was built. So in a sense, I feel like that's a part of Carver too, you know, because the parents and the children were so close together in age, you know. So when they left Morrison, and they closed Morrison, and then they moved down to Carver--. So right now, I'm just trying to gather as much information as I can, you know, on that. Hopefully if I can get enough, I might try to do a book or something, you know. I don't know but I'm doing what I can [laughter].

AC: Alright, as we close, is there anything else that you would like to contribute or that you thought of and you would like to share with us or that you feel we may have missed?

MD: Going back to when we were talking about black and whites during the segregation and integration period, I can remember when I was working at [JC] Penney's, and I was hired to do window displays. But in the morning when I came in, I was supposed to change the dates and everything on the credit card machine. So, the manager, who was white, approached me one day because they had a wall in [JC] Penney's that had to be painted, where they did the shoe display. And he asked me--well, he didn't ask me--he told me that he wanted me to paint that wall. And I asked him, "Which wall?" and he said the wall that had the shoes on it. And I said, "I can't paint the wall." And he asked me, "Why?" And I told him I couldn't paint it because I was wearing a dress. At that time--that was the early seventies--and women weren't allowed to wear pants. So, he said "Well, I still need you to paint that wall," and I said, "Well, I'm not going on a ladder with a dress on." And he said, "Well, if you can't paint the wall, then you're fired." So, I was fired because I refused to go on the wall--up on that ladder-- to paint that wall, you know. And I felt like that was part of being discriminated because he knew that I was wearing a dress. He knew that that was not what I was supposed to be doing. I was supposed to have been taking care of the window display, you know. But he was determined that I was going to paint the wall, you know. So since I refused, he said, "You're fired." So, I was fired [laughter] for not painting the wall that Trump trying build. [laughter] Is this part of the ten minutes? [laughter]

AC: [laughter] Okay, is there anything else you would like to contribute?

MD: No, but I would like to thank the two of you for asking me to participate in this project. I feel like it gives us a chance to, you know, still keep history alive and I'm all about history, you know. I just feel like, you know, if you don't say it, it won't get heard, you know. And once it's heard, you can't forget it. So I want to thank you all and thank Christopher Newport, you know, for this project.

AC: We would like to thank you, Ms. Mittie Dixon, for participating in our oral history project, and, thank you, for taking the time out to be a part of this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

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