

Lyndia Johnson Interview Summary

Interviewee: Lyndia Johnson
Interviewers: Dorian Vitale and Matthew Johnson
Interview Date: October 19, 2023
Location: Main Street Library, Newport News, Virginia
Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format, 98:05

THE INTERVIEWEE: Lyndia Johnson was born Lyndia Griffin on February 19, 1954. She is a Newport News native and resident and has lived in the area all her life. During her childhood, she first attended Carver Elementary School and later attended Carver High School. In the summer of 1971, it was announced that Carver High School would be closing and that students would be bussed to other schools in the city. Johnson was redistricted to attend Warwick High School, which was, historically, an all-White high school. She graduated from Warwick in 1972 and went on to attend both Norfolk State University and Christopher Newport College. Johnson spent 31 years working in the Newport News school system, and still remains involved with the community today.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Matthew Johnson and Dorian Vitale are students at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. They are both enrolled in Dr. Laura Puaca's "Long Civil Rights Movement Class" and are carrying out this interview as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted at the Main Street Library in Hilton Village in Newport News, Virginia. The interview employed a life history approach, beginning with Johnson's childhood and upbringing, her early experiences at segregated schools, and her memories of school desegregation. The interview also covered Johnson's contributions to her community, and especially her work with the Newport News school system. Other themes of the interview included current issues and racial justice related both to Johnson personally and the community of Newport News as a whole.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Matthew Johnson: This is Matthew Johnson and this is my partner Dorian Vitale. Today is October 19th, 2023 and we are interviewing Mrs. Lyndia Johnson. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good afternoon, Mrs. Johnson.

Lyndia Johnson: Good afternoon.

MJ: Thank you. We are gonna be taking what is called a life history approach and would like to begin our interview with just sort of a few questions about your childhood.

LJ: That'll be fine.

MJ: Awesome. So, where and when were you born?

LJ: I was born in Newport News, 1954. February 19th.

MJ: And what did your parents do for a living?

LJ: My mother taught for many years, in fact all my life. And my father worked at Fort Eustis for many years and he retired from the army. [He was an auto mechanic.]

MJ: Okay, so, can you recall at all what the community was like when you were in grade school? Were there any particular—. Like, was your neighborhood particularly memorable in any way? Or were there any organizations in the community that stuck out to you?

LJ: Yes, very close-knit community. Everybody's family knew everybody. If something was going on, all neighbors knew what was going on. I happened to be in the house that I was brought up in. I used to live in Hampton. This was after I got married. It so happened that my father passed away [in 2002] and the house was gonna be vacant, so I ended up coming back to the same house that I grew up in.

MJ: Oh, that's awesome. Wow. Did your family attend church, or were they a part of any other community organizations growing up? And can you recall what that might have been like for you?

LJ: Yes, yes. We attended church all the time. My family's basically ministers, morticians, and teachers. I come from a [religious family.] [We are] Christians" and we were in church basically on Wednesdays, Thursdays, [and] Sundays. And you had to go to Sunday school. Organizations: my father and my mother were members of the Civic League, which I became president of—the Civic League. My father was Civic League president for many years, and I happened to get back into it when I moved back home.

MJ: And what is the Civic League?

LJ: It's North Newport News Civic League [which implements improvement and quality of life in our neighborhood.] And basically they look out for your neighbors and , if someone is sick, they make sure that people check on them. Let other neighbors know. Death in the family—always flowers or some sort of gift or, if nothing else, just to come pray with them, et cetera. It's been going on for a long time.

Dorian Vitale: Alright, so we'd also like to learn a little bit more about what it was like to live and grow up in a segregated—excuse me—a segregated society more generally. So, if you could tell us what race relations were like in your town?

LJ: Okay. North Newport News, it consists of South Avenue, North Avenue, Center Avenue. And they have a little cul-de-sac and that's considered still part of North Newport News. And it also goes across the highway, which is Center, North, and South. So, within that, I think I counted maybe [340 people, home owners] 'cause they're building houses right behind me right now.

MJ: Oh wow.

LJ: It's steadily growing. And now it's mixed [races.] But when I grew up, it was all Black. And we grew up as one big happy family. If you got in trouble, your neighbors would chastise you, and they would. And, of course, being kids and playing out in the street, you had neighbors who was like on guard at all times. You had neighbors who had their, I'd say, window blinds [open], so that they could see. And my father always said that [it] was good to have nosy neighbors because nosy neighbors look after neighbors. It was really a great, great environment. Just the best. And of course being a child, you had all these children to play with. And streetlights [were our clocks.] Streetlights come on, time to go in. Nobody stayed out after streetlights [came on.] That was just a done deal. It was just a great time. Fun. We had a canal, right in our neighborhood, at Carver. Carver's here, the canal, and then that's South Avenue. That was just the hangout. Not at the canal per se [because they had boards you had to walk on to cross the water.]

MJ: Right.

LJ: And they had a bridge. They eventually put a bridge up so that we could go across and not fall in the water. Now, to be honest with you, I have a whole list of stuff about that canal. But that canal has a bridge there now because of my sister. The neighbors got together and they constantly told the city of Newport News, "We need more than a

board.” Because basically it was just a board. I am not lying! And we had to cross the board [in order to get on the other side to go to school.] I kid you not. Or you could have walked around, that would have been going towards Jefferson, because the canal is long. So you had to go to Jefferson, and then go in the bussed area, where the busses [were]. And that’s how you got to the school, if you did not want to cross that bridge. It wasn’t a bridge, it was like a two-by-four. You just—. I wish I had pictures. But I have a lot of people that know about it, they were there. And, my sister, she fell in the water. But the water was only like knee-high.

MJ: Okay.

LJ: That was enough to disturb everybody. And so my father went to meeting after meeting after meeting and the best thing in the world was when we saw those trucks putting that bridge up.

MJ: Alright, so you were talking about the canal and the community. I was just wondering—. So then, you said that the community was primarily Black? So were the people that they were addressing to make these changes, like, a White board or was—

LJ: It wasn’t a Black board. You go to city hall and, at that time, it was like, “We hear you, but we don’t hear you” because we have more important things to do other than take care of the board that we’re walking across. So, you know, you put boards on top of boards on top of boards [which suppose to fix the problem. But whose problem, not ours.] It’s something you grew up with. [As] a kid, you don’t see danger.

MJ: And that was to get to school, you said?

LJ: Uh huh, uh huh, every day. Every day. I just wish there was some pictures or something. You know? I guess you wouldn't wanna show that. But, anyway, yeah, that's pretty much [what happened.] All I know is God knows.

MJ: No, we believe you. I just can't-. I almost can't believe it, you know?

LJ: Yeah, so, we made the best of it, and that was that.

MJ: Well, thank you.

LJ: But my sister Sheila was the reason why they put that [bridge up] 'cause my daddy was hot.

MJ: Oh, I'm sure.

DV: So, next, we'd just like to talk to you about some of your experiences attending the city's segregated schools before integration. So, you attended Carver Elementary.

LJ: Carver Elementary.

DV: And high school, right?

LJ: Carver High school.

DV: So, what kind of experiences did you have attending Carver?

LJ: Okay so, you starting at first grade. Of course, I remember my first grade because that was happy times. So you get to meet people and my best friend, her mom drove the school bus, so that was cool. But in elementary school, it was just so great. The teachers were just loving and I had a wonderful [time]. I loved school. Period. And then of course when you-. [In] elementary, I ended up being a patrol. And that was good. But my next door neighbor was Mr. Keyes. He was also my teacher. He was our math teacher. And he gave me my first job. In fact, my job was-. He wanted me to type and my mom had always wanted me to take up typing.

MJ: When was this?

LJ: This was in elementary school [laughter]. She said, always, “Lyndia, I want you to take up typing because if anything ever happens, typists are always needed. You’ll always need a typist.” In our time, yeah— just in case, you know, you didn’t go to school, college, or et cetera, you always could have something to fall back on. And that is what Mr. Keyes did for me.

MJ: How do you spell, sorry?

LJ: K-E-Y-E-S.

MJ: Okay, thank you.

LJ: [The neighbors] loved you enough to be a second mama and second daddy. So that’s what that neighborhood was about.

MJ: That’s awesome. Alright.

DV: Thank you so much.

LJ: Oh yeah, sure.

DV: Going back to Carver, just about your high school.

LJ: We can do that.

DV: What was your favorite subject?

LJ: So my favorite subject? English.

DV: English?

LJ: Oh my goodness, I aced English. I wasn’t good in history. [laughter]

DV: It’s okay, we’ll forgive you.

LJ: Okay! But yeah, that was my favorite subject [because of] Mrs. Boston. She was my English teacher in fifth grade. She just was such a sweetheart and she loved us. She

would have little jobs because, remember, I was in walking distance to Carver. So I didn't necessarily have to go home when everybody else went home. My mom taught, and that mean when I got home, she was still teaching. I mean, she hadn't gotten home yet. So, Mrs. Boston [and] Mr. Keyes knew that. And so what they would do was they'd give me little jobs, my mother, being in school system, [and] Mrs. Myrick, [my childhood friend Ervin's mother,] being a teacher, always wanted Ervin and I to be together, as far as me taking care of him, looking out for one [another.] So, in kindergarten, we were together in kindergarten, because he went [at] four years old. I was five. And he was at that age where he cry cry cry. And I always had him with me. So, at that time, they separated girls from boys. Unlike now, girls did this, boys did [that.] And, if you switch, then the boys still were together [and] the girls were still together. So Ervin would be with the boys, but you'd hear him crying and crying until Mrs. Ford—I remember that!—Mrs. Ford would say, “Go ahead on over there to Lyndia.” So it was my job basically to take care of him. And Ervin, God, he was my brother. I never had a brother, so he was my brother. It was just my sister and myself. So he was my brother that I always took care of, even in his older days even as adults. Even when he went to the service, he was always [close], “How you doing Ervin?” And he's married! And I'm still, “You doing alright, you doing [okay]?” But that was my job. So, from elementary, I had Ervin. And he was in all my classes because parents could do that. See, think back. They [are], teachers—basically, I never knew how they did it—but they always had Ervin and I together. We were always—. Every class, we were together. We never, ever were not together. So, that's going through elementary and Mrs. Boston. Getting back to Mrs. Boston, she would give me jobs, like cleaning the blackboard. And, Ervin was with me,

so Ervin would stay with me, cleaning. And we would do jobs together. Mr. Keyes gave Ervin a job while he gave me a job typing. I think it was just something with the clique or something. The teachers, they just knew, “Those two, gotta be together.”

MJ: Okay, thank you.

LJ: Mr. And Mrs. Myrick took my sister and I in, along with her [Mrs. Myrick’s] five children.

DV: Oh, my Lord!

MJ: Wow!

LJ: And I kid you not, she did our hair. Now all this, she only had one son. So all the girls had—. And we all sat at this little table. If you were the oldest ones like her older kids, they sat at the big table. But we had a little square [kiddy] table. First time I ever seen Carnation milk in that big old [red] box. It was [dry] Carnation milk in a box. And I was like, “Wow,” and this is what we—. Like cereal, she made breakfast [for seven kids], and I mean she had to work. She had to go to school and work and teach kids and she would get us all up early, [fix breakfast, comb our hair, all that, without complaining.]

MJ: Wow.

LJ: Get us all ready and get us over to Carver. But remember, Carver is just in walking distance. So we never worried about [being] late for the bus. No! Because all of us [were] in school. [Two of] her kids [were] in high school, we were in elementary school. So it just kind of made one big family. That’s what the community was about.

MJ: That’s awesome.

DV: Interconnections.

LJ: And then, if Mrs. Myrick couldn’t keep us, we’d go across the street to the Smiths.

MJ: Okay.

LJ: They had six kids!

MJ Oh, my gosh!

DV: Oh, my word!

LJ: [That is what our neighborhood was about. Your family is my family. I call that Love. We don't have that anymore.] And Sheila and I stayed there! Stayed with somebody while my daddy worked night shift at Ft. Eustis. So, we all was just one big happy family.

MJ: Wow.

LJ: That's how it went.

MJ: Wow!

LJ: I made decent grades. You know, I ended up going to Huntington only for night school—only because I did not pass my geography class. That was Mr. Tuberville.

MJ: So then, technically, you went to Carver, you went to Warwick, and Huntington

LJ: Yeah, but Huntington was strictly night class [only four weeks of night school.]

MJ: Okay.

LJ: And it was just a little time.

MJ: Okay.

LJ: I don't even think I was there for a good [4 weeks.] It was just night class. They had night class for if you didn't pass, want to get out, you know. But to me, well, it was significant in a way because Ervin went with me [laughter]

MJ: Of course!

LJ: High school, [I] went to the games. I had a car at the age of fifteen.

MJ: Oh wow.

DV: Wow.

LJ: A Renault. My father bought me a car 'cause he really wanted me to drive because my mother [didn't drive]. He had to take my mother everywhere, because she never learned how to drive. He said, "I'm gonna get you this car, and you're gonna help your daddy out. And you're gonna be able to drive your mama everywhere that I don't wanna go." And that's what happened, so I had a car at fifteen. I did not drive to school at fifteen, of course. But I did have my car. Mr. Keyes drove my car more than I did because Mr. Keyes never had a car. My next-door neighbor, the teacher? He caught a ride with somebody else [when he had to go the distance.]

MJ: Wow.

LJ: That's when they carpooled.

MJ: Right.

LJ: And that was a neighbor because they happened to be at the same school. So, my mother left Smithfield and came to Magruder [which is in Newport News]. And she taught at Magruder for fifteen years, and then she passed at fifty-nine. Yeah. Kind of young, right?

MJ: Yeah.

LJ: Yeah, yeah. But at least I was grown, you know. So, yeah. That was that.

MJ: So—

DV: Just one last thing on that topic. When you were at Carver, were you aware of any differences between the schools for Black students and the schools for White students?

LJ: Well, at that time no. I just assumed everybody was—. Hey, you have your Black schools, and you have your White schools. [Everybody is equal, I didn't have anything to compare it with. So—]

MJ: Mm-hmm.

LJ: Yeah. Okay so—. And I'm gonna say just how I felt 'cause I wrote it just like I felt.

MJ: Please! [At the time of integration,] you were junior[s] still?

LJ: Uh-huh.

MJ: Going into [senior year].

LJ: Going into—. Yes, the summer of '71: all is well with the world, just like I said. The sky [is] bright and the [stars are out at] night. Now, everybody was happy. Okay? School shopping, brand new shoes, clothes, backpacks, [pens, paper, folders and binders.] Right? This is during the summer because you always look forward to going [back to school in the fall]. I'm a senior now. So, you can't tell me anything.

MJ: The top dog!

LJ: Yeah, I'm the top, yes! I've been there since kindergarten. So now, everything's great. And I'm looking forward to going to school. I'm overjoyed. Three weeks before the first day of school, the mailman changed my life. Didn't know. Three weeks. A letter addressed to my parents states: "Your child, Lyndia Griffin, will be attending Warwick High School 1971 to 1972."

MJ: Three weeks?

LJ: Senior class '72. My parents and I were in a state of shock. My neighborhood was in a buzz. I know teachers didn't know because Mr. Keyes didn't know. He's my next door

neighbor. So, I know they didn't know. My mama works in Newport News, she didn't know.

MJ: Wow.

LJ: Okay? So now, a change is being taking place. The "happy, bubbly" has now gone down to "very sad." To, like, the lowest of lows. Because you can imagine how it is when you're so adjusted and so used to a certain thing, a certain way, and then they say, "Oh, but, now you're gonna be bussed!" And you are not gonna be in the school that you thought you was gonna be in with a whole bunch of Black folks. So, now you going to a White school. Basically-. I will say this: when we were at Carver, I had a book that had eleven different names. Every year, for twelve years, that book was used. That's the book that I and a whole lot of others had to go learn from.

MJ: A used book?

LJ: That book. That book was so used 'til it was so torn they had tape on it.

MJ: Wow.

DV: Wow.

LJ: But we thought that was okay! Because that's all we knew!

MJ: Wow.

LJ: We didn't know that, "Wait a minute-you mean the other schools getting new school books?" We just thought this is where it's supposed to-. I had to tape up mine so much I told my daddy-. My daddy said, "Wait a minute, I got some duct tape. We gonna tape that bad boy up!" I mean, but it was like-. You know, nobody knew.

MJ: Right!

LJ: So [we] didn't know. So, when it so happened, all we asked for was good books. We as students, and I mean the student body as a whole, said, "Why can't we get new books?" That's all. We may have had maybe one book or two books that came in, I think they [didn't] know nothing about it. I think it came in through somebody probably saying, "We gonna sneak y'all these books!" Brand new books.

MJ: And was that at Carver, or while you were at Warwick?

LJ: That was at Carver. So, we didn't have any brand new books. So, we just dealt with them, the tape, and you re-tape, and if a page was falling out you tape that. You know? But I do remember 'cause I counted the names, 'cause you know it's like: "Oh do we know these names?" And it was twelve names! Twelve years.

MJ: Wow.

LJ: Because, you know, they had to stack these books every summer so that nobody could get to them. And then you just pull out a book, and you happen to get maybe somebody's book you might have remembered in upper grades, something like that. But that was the way it goes. Okay so, I was not a happy camper. I was not. And none of the kids in the neighborhood [knew. Not until we attended Warwick did we know there were new books.]

MJ: Wow.

LJ: And it was not one of my better years. When—. [sigh] Wow. When I would go to school at Carver, it was always fun. You always had your friends and what have you. Now, [at Warwick] you have to catch a bus. And not just catch a bus, you have people out there that's catching the bus for the first time, such as myself, and we're all like fussing, "Why we have to do this?" and "Why, why—? Oh, it's supposed to be for the

betterment?” So, then you have to take into consideration: well, maybe it’s not bad as all of that. It’s just we are getting ready to venture into the unknown. And unknown is very scary. So we’re all standing out there waiting for the buses. And we had some guys that were like, “Well, they better not–. They better treat me with some respect! Blah blah blah.” And you know–. It’s almost like, you know, you putting on your guard here ‘cause I’m like puffed, “I’m puffed up, don’t mess with me! Y’all better not mess with me,” you know? And it’s nothing to it. But it’s just you mad.

MJ: Oh, yeah, of course.

DV: Of course!

LJ: You mad. Okay, so, anyway. The bus comes and all of us get on the bus, and the bus is just [makes rumbling noise]. Okay, I kinda like stayed to myself. Ervin wasn’t with me.

MJ: He wasn’t in Warwick?

LJ: He was in Warwick, but he failed.

MJ: Oh, no!

LJ: He failed because of stuff he got into. But anyway, I did my job. And I still held on to him. Even though he was really messed up, he was still my brother. So, I’m on the bus, and we’re going to Warwick. And I kid you not, the first thing that we saw when we went to Warwick was a plow. That bus turned in and there was this plow, you know that’s no good, that’s no good.

MJ: Why?

LJ: Because plows stands for when slaves were plowing. You had to go through, as a Black person–

MJ: Wow.

LJ: Plows was a—. You had to take care of your family the best way you could.

MJ: Of course.

LJ: So you are basically on somebody else's land plowing for them. Sharecropping.

MJ: Do you think that was maybe like a threat, or more so an insult?

LJ: That was an insult to us. But to them, that plow had been there for years. We're talking White school, baby. So we talking from here [Carver] to a White school. So a White school, they got a plow. To us that's an offense. That's like you calling, "Mmm, mmm, mmm." I remember Joe Keyes, he got up on that bus, I'll never forget! He stood up on that bus, he said, "First thing that's got to go is that plow!" Because they were plows representing the farmers. They were Warwick Farmers. When we got there, they were Warwick Farmers, not Raiders.

MJ: Wow.

LJ: So as it stood, we're going to the unknown. But it ain't greeting us very well. So here we go. All of us go to that front where they letting us off, getting ready to get off, mind you we don't know nothing about nothing. Okay? We looked out, teachers were smoking in the front, with the students. [Where was the respect?]

MJ: Oh!

DV: Whoa.

LJ: That is true! They were out there smoking. Now, when we were at Carver, or at Huntington, you know, you sneak. [That's what kids did in High school.] You know, you go to the bathroom. You get the spray, and you like, "Shhhh, okay nobody gonna know we're in here smoking." Not I, of course! [laughter]. I'm just saying, when you go, you

might smell a little cigarette smoke. That was like the worst of the worst, you know? But when you go to a school where you are taught to respect? And these teachers gonna teach you? And you see for yourself the first thing, they out there smoking like it wasn't nothing. And teachers and students were out there in the front. And yes, I'm telling the truth. They were out there just—. I mean, que sera, sera. So, we're like, "What in the world? Lord, if Mr. Hines had seen this!" You know, all the teachers'd be fired! You know? It'd be a reboot for real. But, anyway, with all that said and done, this is my story.

MJ: Of course, right.

LJ: All I wanted was to know where I was going. I had my schedule. I had what teachers and stuff I was supposed to go to. All I asked when I entered that door, "Could you please help me find this class?" [White student] "We don't want you here."

MJ: Wow.

DV: Jeez!

LJ: [White student] "You better find it yourself!" That's what happened.

MJ: From White students?

LJ: Mhm.

MJ: Oh wow.

LJ: So, you go in and you're like, "Oh God, I don't—. I don't know where I'm going." And I could easily go to the office, but my point was, what happened to friendliness? What happened to, "I have to be here, I don't wanna be here with y'all, but you could 'least—." I am being honest as I can be.

MJ: No please, yeah!

LJ: So, you kind of feeling your way through. And I don't believe the school board knew what they were doing because, to me, when they made that decision without telling parents, without telling teachers, you just throwing us [out there], basically. Boom! There you go! And you take the two Black schools. That's only ones we were familiar with, Carver and Huntington. Even if they took one, at least leave one! But they took both. So you got Huntington, and you got Carver. Now, true, we were rival schools [Huntington and Carver], you know that. All in fun though! But that was rival schools, because we were both good in sports. Academics, Huntington was on top of the list. And so you have this rivalry, but it's friendly.

MJ: Right, like a community.

LJ: It's friendly. Now, you getting here [Warwick] with, "Where you people coming from?" They don't want us here. And you know what? We don't wanna be here. So, we would have to make the best of it. Well, I tried, tried to make the best of it. I did what I had to do. I went to my classes. Time was going on. Okay, so I go to my class, [ask] questions that I have, you know, I have to ask teachers. Basically you got some nasty students. But there's one girl, her name was Secret—and my grandson brought this up—he said, "You talk about Secret." And I said, "Yeah, she was the first White friend that I ever had." And just a joy. Just the nicest—. And we hung together. And Secret was very quiet, just like her name, just like a "secret." And my grandson was saying the other day, "Listen, you talk about Secret." He said, "it was almost like she was your secret!" And I'd never thought about that. He said, "Think about it, because all the stuff you were going through, with all the Whites. But she was that only one that you accepted, and she accepted you. And you all hung together and you ate together," and she, believe it or not,

our side of the school, [we] kind of got together and hung out. [I] just had the best time with her. And we would basically see each other in classes. She wasn't in all of my classes, but we would see each other in the hall. So, we're going through the process, now. And this guy named Willis—his name was Willis Guy.

MJ: Could you spell that? Sorry.

LJ: Willis. W-I-L-L-I-S, Guy. G-U-Y.

MJ: Okay, thank you.

LJ: Willis Guy was from Huntington. And he was in several of my classes. But he was smart, real smart! My mom always said, "Hang with smart people. You know, if you were making best friends, make sure they're smarter than you."

MJ: Absolutely!

LJ: You know, that was what I grew up with. And I'm watching Willis. And he's so intelligent. So he started being the one that I wanted to hang with. And then he started coming over to my house. Not boyfriend-girlfriend kind of thing. But just—. It's intellect. I just was, like, drawn to him. [Willis introduced me to his best friend while at Warwick.] We've been married fifty years [and together 52 years.]

DV: I thought I recognized that name.

MJ: Wow.

LJ: Fifty-two years.

MJ: So you met while you were in high school? Wow!

LJ: Uh-huh. Mmm-hmm.

MJ: Just pulled up one day?

LJ: Yep! With Willis, who ended up being the [class] president. He ended up being a president 'cause I said, "I'm gonna get all the votes for class president for you, Willis!" And Willis was like, "You think I can do this?" [I said,] "Sure you can!" And he ended up being class president.

MJ: For your senior year?

LJ: Yep! At Warwick! A Black [president]! That's right! So, we were just so happy, you know, that happened. Now, I will tell you this, and I told you I brought this [year]book for a reason. So, I was in art class, Mr. Rollins, alright? So you guys'll get a feel of it.

MJ: Please.

LJ: And, in these days, back here, in this time, Blacks as a whole did not have long hair. If you were light and mixed, you had long hair. But, Black as me? That was kind of like, the mm-mmn [no]. That's [rarely heard of,] okay. So, I brought this to show you I had very long hair. And that's kind of what stood out with [me.] My whole life it's just, "Oh you got long hair! You think you cute." Yes, 'cause we do have that [Black community]. As a Black race, I'm sorry.

MJ: No, I get it.

LJ: But we are-. I don't know [why] the anger, I don't know what it is, but I know we are jealous of each other sometimes. Not all, but we're jealous [race], okay? Because I think it's the way of who we are and our ancestral and what we went through. It has to be something that has been carried on because, honestly, if you look at Black history-. And back in slavery, you had the in-house workers, and you had the workers on the out. Most of the in-house? Light. Out-house, dark. Okay so, we have to feel that, "I'm a little

inferior, I'm a little [this or that]. Wait a minute, what?" See the issues that we're having now with our race stems back from way back. It's about feeling good about yourself.

MJ: Mmm-hmm, absolutely.

LJ: That is the key. And once you feel good about yourself, you can move on. But, not if you're gonna be [holding on to negative vibes.] "I'm going up, I'm going up." [And then the response that,] "We gonna push you back down!" "I'm going up, I'm going—I'm getting there, I'm getting there!" But you know the crab mentality? Crabs, if they're in a bucket, they don't help you get out. Their buddies are over there trying to get out. And what they do? They pull you back. Mentality. It's what you have here [indicating her head]. And, so, therefore, in my growing up—even at Carver—I had kids pulling my hair and stuff like that. I did. But that didn't really bother me as much as when I went to Warwick. Honestly, I got used to it. You know it's like, "Go on and pull, it's real." You know, and then you let it go, because it's like, "We can't get to her! We were trying to hurt her." No. It's real, it's not [fake]. So, with that being said, here I am.

MJ: Let's see.

LJ: To show you [flips pages of the yearbook]. Here I am. This is me. And this is my hair. I could sit on my hair.

MJ: Wow!

DV: Oh, wow!

LJ: [I] had hair down to here. In fact, that particular day—I'm gonna be honest with you—somebody was pulling my hair. They were pulling it, and I asked my teacher, because we were getting ready to take the picture, and I was complaining. And she said, "Sit on it!"

That's exactly what she said! And so, I never forgot that day. But, needless to say, I went to Warwick. I'm in Mr. Rollins' class, right? People are not nice.

MJ: The White students?

LJ: White students, not nice. I mean it's one thing to pull [my hair, that wasn't right.] But it's another thing to cut. You see that hair right there? I didn't even feel it, 'cause it's thick. [A white student in my class] cut my hair [and was holding a long piece of my hair.] And he held it like this [indicating]. [My classmates,] Dink and Dunlap—two Black guys that came from Huntington, I didn't particularly know them—. They got up [and snatched the hair out of his hand]. “What the heck you doing?” [Some choice words were said.] And I ain't saying what he said but—. But Mr. Rollins saw [the hair and] didn't know what was going on. He just knew it was a commotion. And I started crying 'cause I'm like, “Who gives you [the] right?” And I mean he's holding my hair!

MJ: Right!

LJ: And Mr. Rollins said, “We're gonna take this outside. Take it in the hall. Come on, come on.” All us involved. Mr. Rollins' Black, okay?

MJ: Mmm-hmm, okay.

LJ: And Mr. Rollins asked him, “Why did you do it?” And he said, “Because I could.” Dink and Dunlap and that guy went to the office along with me, because I'm the victim. Dink and Dunlap was taking up for me. Alright? Now when we got to the office, Dink and Dunlap got expelled.

MJ: Wow!

LJ: That guy got a call for his mama.

MJ: A call?

LJ: A call. His mama had to come [to school]. So, it's the things like that are big things.

MJ: I was gonna say those are big.

LJ: Big things! It's things like that just nip at you, and you don't ever forget that.

MJ:: Mm-mmn [no].

DV: No!

LJ: I will never forget that. I wouldn't know him if I saw him today.

MJ: Right.

LJ: But I do know—. It was just the mere fact that I hated that school. You wanna know?

Yes, I hated it.

MJ: And that's okay, it's your right to hate it! God! Were the White teachers sort of the same, or—?

LJ: You know I didn't [trust]. I think that was me personally. I just didn't trust. I'm like, "I'm gonna do what you say, but I'm not gonna do nothing extra."

MJ: I get that.

LJ: I didn't give them a chance. I just had my guard up at all times, I just didn't have no feelings for them whatsoever. I loved Secret.

MJ: Of course.

LJ: I loved Secret! But, after that, it was like, "Let's just get me the hell out of here." I didn't get a ring from them. In fact, I don't even say I graduated from there. I don't tell people . You know, [when people ask,] "Where you graduated from?" "Uh, Warwick," Only reason [I would say Warwick] is because my kids, they make so much fun of me saying, "Mom, you didn't graduate from high school? You graduated from middle school! No, Mom, you didn't even graduate from middle school, 'cause that's Crittenden!"

You graduated from an elementary school!” Because Carver’s the only thing left, Carver elementary.

MJ: Right.

LJ: The high school’s no longer—. [The building is] still there, but it’s Crittenden. [They didn’t] even keep its name! It’s not even Carver Middle! Ms. Crittenden was a counselor. She worked on City Council, House of Delegates.

MJ: Right. Right, we heard about—. We learned about Ms. Crittenden, yeah.

LJ: ‘Cause she was a counselor, you know? And Mr. Hines had been there for years, good principal. When we all got together, the student body, he was like, “It’s gonna be extra hard for us. So, you gonna try extra harder. And you’re gonna do well.”] And this is what we brought up [with.] This is what was so important. You do the best, and then guess what? You top that! You do the best you can, and then guess what? You gonna top that! I think about—. I guess it’s not like that now, you’re talking seventies. Man, that was such a different era!

MJ: Oh, absolutely.

DV: Yeah.

MJ: Such a different era. And then it wasn’t the era of the fifties and the forties.

Everybody had their own story, everybody. But that was totally—. That, to me, was a disappointment. My senior year. That was a disappointment.

DV: Understandably so!

LJ: And let me tell you about Secret. We lost contact. And then I had to have surgery in 2000, okay? Two. And I went to Riverside Hospital because I had a surgery and this nurse came up to me, and she was taking my vitals. And I looked at her nametag and I

said, “I went to school with a Secret.” I said, “That is an odd name. I had a best friend named Secret.” [I often wondered what happened to her.]

MJ: Yeah!

LJ: Okay, we talking [decades]. And she said, “What school did you go to?” I said, “I went to Warwick.” And she said, “I went to Warwick! I graduated ‘72!” And I said, “Secret, you don’t remember me?” And then she said, “Lyndia, I knew I recognized that name!” She said, “Lyndia!”

MJ: You look good!

DV: You look fantastic!

LJ: Thank you. Y’all, I’ll pay you later! We exchanged numbers. But it must’ve been the sedative or something, I didn’t get [the correct number.] [laughter] We did exchange numbers, though. I guess God put us together to say, “She’s okay. You’re okay. Now it’s time to move on!” It wasn’t for us to connect anymore because there’s a season for everything. And I believe our season was at Warwick to help me get through, and I believe the season was for her to see me [and tell me,] “I’m okay .” And the season for me to see her [and realize], “You’re okay.” So, that’s my story.

MJ: I mean, I would say we have, you know, probably, about like twenty more minutes- ish I guess we could go for?

LJ: That’s cool!

MJ: And we still have some more questions if—.

LJ: Sure, no problem, no problem.

MJ: [to DV:] I was thinking we could start at eighteen.

DV: Sure!

MJ: Sorry actually, maybe the part about civil rights?

DV: Where?

MJ: Eighteen, sorry.

DV: Oh, no, gotcha gotcha, thank you.

LJ: Okay.

MJ: 'Cause I will say, you actually addressed basically every question [we had planned.]

DV: You did!

LJ: For real, did I?

MJ: Yes!

DV: We didn't have to ask anything!

MJ: Yes!

LJ: Oh, oh, okay! Well, I'm glad, I'm glad.

DV: One of the other things we did want to talk to you about, though—

LJ: Yes?

DV: Did the civil rights movement affect or change student life, or the environment of school at all, in your personal experience, or in—

LJ: I think the civil rights movement did change a lot, and it was for the better, because it gave us hope. It gave us so much hope that things are getting better, and we got someone to basically stand up for us. And when we heard Martin Luther King [Jr.] was speaking, everybody had their TVs on. Everybody! You know, it was more like, "Hey, this man is gonna change things. He's gonna move mountains. And we had somebody that was leading us to, "Hey, this—. We don't have to stay here 'cause we getting ready to move

up, now! And, we're gonna have better lives." And, even though my life was very good—. I never, ever, ever considered myself poor or in an impoverished kind of lifestyle. My daddy and my mama always provided for us. Always. In fact, my mom would bring children from Magruder [Elementary School] to our house and basically give them clothes, go to Roses [a store]. We never knew who was gonna be over our house—we never did—because my mother was compassionate. And she saw the need. At that time, we didn't have what we have here now like, "Don't you touch my child. Don't you even think about taking my child home!" [It was never a trust factor.] It was like the parents were so happy that my daddy and my mom would go to the apartment and say, "We gonna take them for this weekend. We're gonna take them shopping." And this is what I grew up with. [During this time,] my mom worked on this side—not in Smithfield. that meant that my father took her to work and picked her up. Sheila and I learned that you're not to be selfish because we had good things. Christmas? Pssh! We had everything we ever asked for because it was just my sister and myself. So my mom had a good job. My dad had a good job. Christmas was like the biggie. And we had friends over [from the] neighborhood. Neighbors, friends come and have drinks, cheers, whatever. Kids go in the other room until it was time for Santa Claus and then, you know, they go home and [we] call each other the next morning [to ask,] "What you get?" "I got this." Whatever. And then you get together, ride your bike down the street. These children that my mother would bring home were not as well-rounded. Is that a good way to [say it]? They did not have—. They had necessities, but they didn't have anything extra. For instance, there was a family that had ten children, and the mother died. And the father was taking care of

these children. [My mother understood the struggle. My mother helped as much as she could.]

MJ: Wow.

LJ: Mom and my dad would go shopping and buy them [things that was needed.] And, so, this particular day, Mama had gone into school. And the buses hadn't arrived yet, and she was going to her class. There were ten kids lined up with their little brown bags and some of them were greasy. And they were like, "We're going home with you!" [laughter] And my mom said, "I can't take all of you." You know, it was heartbreaking for her. But, you know what? She did—and my dad did—what they could. So I had a wonderful bringing up.

MJ: Good.

DV: So, just a couple more questions—

LJ: Oh sure, sure!

DV: Almost done.

MJ: We don't even have to ask them all, either.

LJ: Oh, no no no, sure! Go ahead, uh uh, I'm just looking to see if I'm missing anything. [laughter] Okay, go ahead!

DV: So, in our research we found out you attended CNU [Christopher Newport University] or, I guess what would be CNC [Christopher Newport College]--

LJ: Yeah, yeah! I went to Norfolk State two years. My daddy was like, "Okay!" He was there—every time I turned around—he was there, [on campus driving that gold Pontiac.]

MJ: Oh wow.

LJ: Remember my husband? He was not my husband [at the time.] So he was always going over there [to see me.] And my daddy, after he was always saying, “You[’re not] getting with him. So, I’ll be there.” So, you know the students at Norfolk State [knew my dad’s car.] Oh, the best years. But anyways, they would say, “We saw your daddy!” Your daddy’s here. Your daddy’s on campus.” And the shows and stuff we used to have, somehow he always found out about it. But he was always there. He always said, “I happened to be in the neighborhood.” Those were his famous words: “I happened to be in the neighborhood.” Okay, so, I’m going Norfolk State. And I knew I was gonna be seeing [Ray]. And then I found out I was pregnant. So, once I found out I was pregnant, how do you tell your parents that has given you just the world? And then I’m going like, “Oh, Lord, this ain’t good, this ain’t good at all.” And, the thing about it is, my mama knew. I don’t know how she knew, but she knew.

MJ: Wow.

LJ: But, my daddy already said, “You getting married?” And you know, you didn’t have no choice: if you pregnant, you gonna get married or you never see him again. Ever!

MJ: Wow.

LJ: So, how did I get to Christopher Newport? My daddy said, “My job is done. I sent her to Norfolk State. You do the rest.” And first thing my husband say, “Go to Christopher Newport. I’ll pay.” And that’s the way that goes.

MJ: And, so, were you guys like aware, or was there any sort of, like, uncomfortableness going to Christopher Newport, especially ‘cause the Shoe Lane controversy? Was there anything, like, weird?

LJ: I went to class and I walked out of class. And [my husband,] he waited for me.

MJ: Right.

LJ: My husband was waiting for me every-. Even though I could drive and stuff, he was like, “Nope! I’m taking you, and I’m picking you up!” And you know what, if it was anything going on, I [didn’t] know [anything] ‘bout it. Nope. Nope!

MJ: Okay.

LJ: Because you know what? When the teacher asked me a question or whatever, I got up, I said what I had to say, did what I had to do, and I really didn’t have no communication, per se. I think I missed one particular day that I should not have, and I had to ask [a classmate] about it, “Did you take notes?” And they were like, “Sure.” But, that’s [as] far [as it went.] But conversation-wise, I didn’t really communicate.

MJ: You were just there.

LJ: I just went there to get my education [and] to go home. Simple as that, I didn’t-.

MJ: No, okay!

LJ: The story of my life.

MJ: Yeah, thank you! And I just-

LJ: I love the fact that y’all seem so interested.

MJ: Absolutely!

DV: That was interesting to hear!

LJ: Thank you, thank you.

MJ: We just ask-

LJ: I’m so glad I didn’t do the zoom. I’m not a zoom person.

DV: I’m not a zoom person myself.

MJ: Can I ask your opinion on one more thing?

LJ: Sure, anytime.

MJ: So, if we're talking about the civil rights movement, right? What do you regard as the unfinished legacy, or unfinished work, of the movement, now that you've lived through it and we're here now?

LJ: Unfinished movement—. I believe, when John F. Kennedy passed, Martin Luther King passed, Malcolm X passed, nobody picked up the banner. So, if nobody picked up the banner, [what do we do? We have plenty of good leaders but they can only go so far.] What, we don't have—. What do we do?

MJ: I agree.

LJ: [Now,] basically, we go anywhere we wanna go. That's a plus, because of them. But once you get there, what you gonna do? It's like we've come to a point, and it's like a stop. And once you stop, there's no more movement. We need somebody to step up. We need somebody to step up and say, "Hey, this is what we're going to do. We need some movement." Because I look at our young men and young [women]—I'm just gonna say young people, they have no direction. Where [are] they going? No direction. Yes, you can get education. But what happened to the after school programs that were free? Now, we don't have the money to go to all these expensive [outlets for children.] We went free. See, we had recreation at Carver, [in the] summertime, you didn't have to pay for none of that, and they kept you all day [and off the streets.] You got to go home at three o'clock. [This was a social and educational place for children.] have done it all right at the recreation center, right at Carver. And, same with Huntington. They had places that we could go. You had the basketball courts, you had the pools. You know they took the pools down, from downtown? You remember the pool? Oh my gosh, that's gone.

Everything. And everytime they had the boys on the field for playing basketball, that was a great thing. But then they started pulling them down. [We wondered,] “Why are you taking them down?” [The response was,] “Too many kids out here.” [We wondered,] “Where they supposed to go?” That was in Aberdeen. I was living in. Aberdeen Gardens, Black neighborhood,

MJ: Yeah, yeah.

LJ: They had the field out there, and it was kids out there all day long, not bothering nobody. And they loved the basketball court most of all. Bubba Chuck—[Allen] Iverson—right from out there. That’s where he played! And they took all the basketball courts down. So, what is a child to do? Oh, well, [the response they got was,] “They have this program where they could go. It only costs three hundred dollars!” You talking ‘bout a million for some people, [might as well say]. You not talking ‘bout no couple of dollars, no! That’s plenty. When you do free, and all the money’s going where? Out the window and paying for overseas. You got so many people in need right here, and the money just gone. I hear it everyday, millions and millions [of taxpayers’ dollars] are going across the sea, in other countries, helping everybody. And you got so many people, right here, living on the streets. Why? Why? And that goes for all races.

MJ: No, right, right!

LJ: But, I’m saying, you have the haves, and you have the have-nots. And it’s just that simple. And it should not be. Because the haves, like my parents say, give. It’s gonna hurt you, but guess what? In the long run, it’s gonna pay off. When will society realize? My neighbor, I hear they not doing so good ‘cause they don’t have no food, and they

can't take care of them babies. When are we gonna step up and say, "I'm here. I might not have a lot but I share what I got?"

MJ: Absolutely.

LJ: When is this world going to take charge and say, "We hear you. We hear you, we see you. And [we] care." The kids care but [they only imitate what parents do.] But if I care, and I see a need, you step up. And then you[re] blessed, overly blessed. That's Mama and Daddy right there. That's Mama and Daddy. Truth.

MJ: Alright, well thank you.

LJ: That's it?

MJ: That's it, that's it. You've completed it! You passed.

LJ: I never been good on tests, but thank you! [laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW

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