

**Nettie Orie**  
**Interview Summary**

Interviewee: Nettie Orie

Interviewer: R. Joshua Sipe

Interview Date: May 4, 2015

Location: Blechman Reading Room 215-Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia

Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 1:21:33.0

THE INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Nettie [McAllister] Orie born in 1946 at Whittaker Memorial. She has lived in the Newport News area most of her life. Orie lived in the Newsome Park community with her family for eighteen years. Following her graduation from Carver High School in Newport News, Orie attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee where she studied mathematics. After completing her bachelor's degree at Fisk in 1968, she returned to the Newport News area, to live with her husband Larry Orie, who she had married earlier that year. Later, in 1970, she began working at the NASA Langley Research Center. Orie had a long career at NASA working on a variety of projects, including work on many air-tunnel tests for airplanes and helicopters. Orie is now retired but remains active within the Newport News community.

THE INTERVIEWER: R. Joshua Sipe is a Fourth Year History Major at Christopher Newport University working with the Hampton Roads Oral History Project in conjunction with Dr. Laura Puaca as a Ferguson Fellow.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted in the Blechman Reading Room of the Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia, a quiet and cozy venue. Nettie Orie was enthusiastic about participating in the Hampton Roads Oral History Project, and her excitement shone throughout the interview. The interview took a life history approach exploring Orie's life from childhood through adulthood, with a large portion of questions pertaining to her time spent living in the Newsome Park community and her experiences there. In her discussion of the Newsome Park, she emphasized the loving and nurturing role of the community and its part in her development. Orie also discusses her experience attending Fisk University and some of the differences in race relations between Nashville and Newport News. Additionally, Orie talks about her career at NASA Langley Research Center, along with how race and gender relations were there during her tenure.

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**START OF INTERVIEW**

Joshua Sipe: This is Joshua Sipe. Today is May 4th, 2015. I am interviewing Mrs. Nettie Orie.

This interview is taking place in Room 215 of the Blechman Reading Room at the Paul and Rosemary Tribble Library at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good afternoon, Mrs. Orie.

Nettie Orie: Good afternoon.

JS: I am taking what is called a life history and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. First, what was your maiden name?

NO: My maiden name was McAllister. It was Nettie Ann McAllister.

JS: Can you spell McAllister?

NO: It's M-c-A-l-l-i-s-t-e-r.

JS: Alright. Where and when were you born?

NO: I was born in Warwick County in Whittaker Memorial Hospital on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1946.

JS: Who were your parents?

NO: My dad was named Clyde Lee McAllister, and, my mom, Hettie Mae McAllister. My father is deceased. He has been for ten and a half years, and my mom lives with my husband and me.

JS: Ok. What was your mother's maiden name?

NO: Her maiden name was Kelley. K-e-l-l-e-y.

JS: What did your parents do for a living?

NO: My mom was a homemaker. My dad was a supervisor for the Transportation Motor Pool of Fort Eustis, Virginia until he retired.

JS: What all did that job entail?

NO: For him?

JS: Uh huh, for him. Yes, ma'am.

NO: He worked on vehicles, jeeps, trucks, that sort of thing, for the army--.

JS: Oh, ok.

NO: --as a civilian.

JS: Where in Newport News did you grow up?

NO: In Newsome Park. 700 block of 41st Street. And then we moved to Chestnut Avenue, 2100 block, during my senior year in high school.

JS: Okay. How did your family end up in Newsome Park?

NO: That was--. It was just an area that a lot of blacks just were, I guess--I won't say driven to-- but it was sort of a middle area for people. You had teachers that taught in the high schools, elementary schools that lived there. You had people that were professional. You had blue collar workers. It was just a mesh of people in one community. And, from that, they moved out to their own homes, eventually. We stayed for quite a few years, as did a lot of people. But most of them moved into their own homes.

JS: Gotcha. Do you remember when your family first moved into Newsome Park?

NO: My mother--when she came up from South Carolina--she moved in with her older sister, who lived in the 700 block of 41st Street. And that's before she got married. She moved in with her. And then when she got married, they moved. My dad and mom moved maybe a dozen--not even a dozen--maybe eight houses from her sister and brother-in-law's house in Newsome Park. So it was before I was born.

JS: Gotcha. What was the community like there growing up in Newsome Park?

NO: Oh my goodness, it was--. Mostly everybody knew everybody, and parenting wasn't limited just to my mom and dad. We had neighbors that looked out for other people's children, and also corrected those children. Some of them would threaten to swat us, or something. But most of the time, they just told our parents. But the threat was enough to straighten us up, yeah.

JS: What were some of the houses like within Newsome Park?

NO: They were connected. You had units of four or two different apartments. And you had grassy front yards and grassy backyards. Some of the grassy backyards were not so grassy as just dusty because the grass would be worn down from children playing, and stuff. We had "mom and pop"-type stores in the different blocks of Newsome Park. And it was, I think, two and three bedrooms. I'm not aware of any apartments having more than three bedrooms, and living room, kitchen, and that was it.

JS: Since you lived there for almost eighteen years, what were some your fondest memories of living in Newsome Park?

NO: Like I said, it was--. For me, it felt like a family. Like, all of these people who were not blood relatives were actually relatives, because you knew that they truly loved you, and they were looking out for you. They rejoiced in our accomplishments--I'm talking about people who were not related to me--they rejoiced in the accomplishments of the kids on the block and were very supportive.

JS: Gotcha. Did you have much interaction with, or awareness of, Copeland Park?

NO: Where whites lived. That was all. My parents sort of sheltered us from a lot of stuff that was possibly going on around us. They had three daughters, and I was the oldest. And so boundaries were set, you know. We weren't allowed to just hang out. We weren't allowed, definitely not allowed, to be out after the sun went down. And my mother would, when we were out--and I remember this as a teenager, you know--she'd constantly come to the door just to peek to see what was going on. So I am aware that Copeland Park was there, but we didn't ever go into that

area.

JS: What were race relations in Newport News like, more generally, when you were growing up?

NO: Like I said, we were sort of protected from it. But there were some things that were obvious like in school. We didn't get new textbooks for a long, long, long, long time. I happened to have been in high school by the time I saw a new textbook. It was always previously used, sometimes used by several people over the years. So, the newer textbooks were purchased, but they were given to the whites--predominately white--schools, predominantly. They were given to the white schools because there was no integration when I came through. And during the course of that, Warwick County merged [with Newport News] and became Newport News. So [we became a part of the] Newport News School System. [Our] teachers provided some of the things that we didn't get from the school system. They purchased [things with their own money], yeah.

JS: I know you mentioned how your parents kind of sheltered you a little bit away from the bad things of the time, but did you face any segregation in public facilities or did your parents mostly keep you away from that?

NO: We saw the water fountains, that--like in Leggett's and Nachman's and stuff over town-- that had "for whites only." We learned early, you know. You went into Woolworth--it was over town on Washington Avenue—and if you wanted something to eat, you know, I remember my mother telling us, "We'll wait until we get home." And the explanation was that "we can't eat there."

And I don't believe that it went any further than that--you know-- just her telling us that we'd wait and that we couldn't eat there. We didn't ask a lot of questions because we were small, so you grew up knowing that you couldn't sit down at the counter at Woolworth or Grants, yeah.

JS: Can you maybe talk a little bit about--. You talked about how there were a lot of "mom and pop" shops in Newsome Park. Could you maybe talk about a few of those?

NO: Yeah. There was--. There was one across the street from where we lived. It was called Mr. Howard's, and he sold a few canned goods. I remember having--. He had jars of pig feet which were quite popular--not that my family ate them. But a lot of people did eat them--pig tails,

pickled pig tails, the dill pickles, cookies, potato chips, soft drinks, bologna. I remember that--the bologna and bread--because we would go there, sometimes, and get bologna and cheese for sandwiches for my mom. And there was a store that came along--when I was maybe about thirteen--that was just across from his smaller store. That [one] was pretty good size, and had a lot of groceries in the aisles and stuff. And that was family-owned, by a black family. And then, down a block from where that one was was another one that was called Night and Day Market. In fact, Mr. Britt (0:11:32.1) was the owner. Before he passed, he had three Night and Day Markets. And, right now, there is one on Wickham Avenue like around 23rd Street or something like that. But any way, it was run by his wife and him. And he maybe hired a couple people from the community as cashiers or as people that stocked the shelves, and all. And that's basically where we shopped. Later on, there was the Colonial Store that was not within walking distance. But unlike a lot of the people that lived in Newsome Park, my dad had a car. So we would drive to that store. The prices were usually cheaper than the stores that were right there in the area. And in the midst of Newsome Park, there was a little complex that was painted a dark green. And it had a barber shop, a drug store, and a grocery store. And it was right near the school that we went to, Newsome Park Elementary School. It was off limits, but some kids would go to that drug store to get candy bars and stuff. And so, sometimes, we would go there, yeah.

JS: As a child growing up, what were some of the activities you and your family did for fun and leisure?

NO: On Sundays--because things were not nearly as developed as they are now--we would get in the car and we would just take rides out into what we thought was the country. I think it was the Denbigh area, you know, at the time. And we would just ride around. We would go to Lincoln Park. You've heard of that, Lincoln Park? At the time, we called it Pinky's Beach. And lots of blacks gathered there. It was a playground for us to use, and parents would sit on benches or in the car while the kids ran around, and stuff. Going to church and Sunday school on Sunday, that was one of the things. But most of the times, it was just something for us to be together. We also

did a lot of visiting of my mom's brothers' and sisters' families. And they would, in turn, come visit us. But these things took place on usually Saturdays or Sundays. During the week, we didn't do a whole lot of going anywhere because my dad worked from four to twelve [4 o'clock to 12 o'clock] at Fort Eustis night-shift. My mom never learned to drive, so sometimes we would walk to her older sister's house who had moved to another area in Newsome Park, and we'd stay there with our first cousins until it began to get dark. And then we would walk back, with them walking us back. And there was a big tree that was about midway between the distance of the two houses. And we'd get to the big tree—and I remember my parents-- my mother and her sister--would stand there and talk, and talk, and talk. And the kids would be running around doing things. And then we continued talking, and we'd be moving back toward my aunt's house. And then we'd stop and talk. And then we moved back beyond that tree again. Eventually, we would get home, you know [laughter]. But that was just a ritual. We did that at least once a week, usually on Friday because we would have our meals together. My mom and her sister would fix meals for all the kids, yeah.

JS: Well, I guess I'd like to turn now to a few questions about your education.

NO: Ok.

JS: Is it correct that you attended Newsome Park Elementary?

NO: Uh huh.

JS: What was it like at Newsome Park Elementary?

NO: When you say what was it like--. Like I said, you knew a lot of the kids, and those that you didn't know, you got to know them through school. It was grades one through six. And the teachers were really into your development. And there was no hesitation about reaching out to your parents, if--. And I wasn't a kid that misbehaved. But I do remember, in the second grade, I was a pretty good little artist. And I was listening to a lullaby--the music teacher had come in-- and we were listening to the lullaby. And then she told us to draw whatever thoughts it invoked in us. And so I drew the mother in a rocking chair, and the baby in a cradle, and--. And I was

coloring, just busily coloring, and she was telling us we only had like ten minutes. And I was just frantically trying to finish. And she said, "Put your crayons down." And everybody put their crayons down, except for me. I still tried to finish coloring. I was so focused on it, I didn't even see her come up. And everybody was just so quiet. I looked and there she was with the ruler. And she asked me to hold my hand out, and she whacked me twice. And kids were amazed because I was the goodie-two-shoes. I never got in trouble, you know [laughter]. I was amazed. And she said, "I'm going to have Mrs. Goode"--which was my second grade teacher--notify my mom and dad about my behavior. And I was devastated, you know, I could not-- Oh man, I just could not believe that anybody was going to have to talk to my parents. And when I got home, I told my mom. And she was like, "I'm glad she got you, because I would get you, because you just did not listen." The lady said, several times, "Put it down." And I didn't. And you didn't disrespect adults like that. So that stuck in my head for a lot of years, you know, that the music teacher had hit me. And my second grade teacher was, she was like, "Oh, I'm so hurt. I can't believe that you didn't listen to Miss Briar." "I'm sorry, you know, but--." It was a caring community. And you learned that the respect went both ways.

JS: After you finished at Newsome Park, what high school did you attend?

NO: No, we went to elementary again. We went to Carver--George Washington Carver Elementary School off of Jefferson Avenue, next to Flora Crittenden Middle School--which was a high school when I was there. But anyway, we went to seventh grade at Carver Elementary. And for the first time, I had to ride the bus because all before, everybody walked to school. We didn't walk every morning, 'cause my dad would get up, when the weather was bad, and drive us to school. But we had to walk back because he was gone to work by the time we got out. But from Carver Elementary in seventh grade, we went to the school next door which was Carver High School. And that was eighth grade through twelfth grade.

JS: What was Carver High School like?

NO: Well, when we got there, I remember thinking it was the largest place I'd ever seen, you



know. I've been back, for like a class reunion, and I'm like, "Man, this place was small," you know. It really was. But going from elementary school to a school that was two-stories and an annex. You had to walk under a little area that was covered to get to the other part of the building, the main part of the building. So, to me, it was overwhelming, because it seemed very large at the time. And then you were a little in awe of the bigger people. You know, I mean, we were eighth graders--barely a hundred pounds--and the guys were small. And you had these real big people that looked like grown-ups, you know, juniors, seniors that acted like they were so much older also. But then after the eighth grade, you know, you were ok. You had moved into the high school stuff.

JS: What was it like attending segregated schools in Newport News?

NO: It was all we knew. We didn't have anything to compare it to. I do know, as a senior--I graduated in 1964--so as a senior, when we were applying for schools, I knew what I did not want to do because I was aware of things on the news and also in the newspaper, you know, the Civil Rights stuff. And I wasn't comfortable putting myself out there to help, you know, as a seventeen-year-old. I got scholarship offers from a predominantly white school in Kentucky, and I got one in Tennessee. And I didn't elect to go to either one of those. I stayed with the predominantly black schools, and ended up in Nashville, Tennessee at a school called Fisk University, mainly because of influence from some of the teachers. And my math teacher, in particular, thought that I would do well, even though I had a scholarship from Hampton University, also. But she wanted me to just grow a little bit. She said, "Your parents have always looked after you," and stuff, and "I think it would do you well to just move out and try your wings." And I believed her, until I got there. And then I was like, "man." I went from being popular to nobody knowing me. And it was hard to get in with people because some of them came with friends from their high school, and so they were together. And nobody was mean. It was just a shock to my system. And I wanted to leave and go back home in October. And my mom said, "Well, we'll talk about it when you come home for Christmas," because there was no

flying back and forth. I rode a bus for about twenty [or so] hours to get from Newport News to Nashville, Tennessee. And I wasn't the only one. We picked up kids all over Virginia, black and white. And we all went that way. By the time I got home at Christmas time, I was fully into my school, and I was ready to go back. So it did help me to achieve some independence, what my math teacher was striving to get me to do. And I majored in math, and it helped me to get a career at NASA Langley Research Center after graduation.

JS: What--. How did you become interested in mathematics?

NO: I don't know. I always loved math, ever since I can remember. I loved challenging math. I remember when I took algebra in the eighth grade, in the text book, there would be problems that had stars beside them which weren't assigned to us. But after doing my homework, I would move down to those problems which were the tough ones. Sometimes it took me a little while to get the answer, but I was always excited when I got it. And my teacher was equally excited because I would share. And I had that math teacher for eighth, ninth, tenth, and twelfth grades. Eleventh grade, I had another lady that taught me. But I developed that habit of sharing with her how I solved the star problems. And she encouraged it. And, so, that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to just do research of some sort and [I] did that. When I ended up at NASA, I ended up working with a wind tunnel and programming computers to simulate test results of model helicopters, shuttle, [and airplanes]. Still, I wasn't developing new theories or anything. That's what I had in the back of my mind. But that didn't pan out, [however] I had a glorious career at NASA. I really did.

JS: While you were at Fisk University, what activities were you involved in?

NO: I was in the honors program, and I joined a sorority. I did tutoring. I volunteered at Meharry Hospital which was just across the [street]--. Well, their campus was across from our campus in Nashville. And I guess that's about it. Those things and just--. Oh, I was a math instructor's proctor. I helped out with class stuff and everything.

JS: What were--. When you moved to Nashville, what were race relations like there?

NO: Hmm. In the immediate area--'cause you had Tennessee A&I ,which was about a mile up from Fisk, and then you had Vanderbilt, which was a white school that was not too far. And before I graduated, we had programs where we took courses, could take courses from Vanderbilt for stuff. I do recall sometimes trying to get to Vanderbilt to do research on something at the library. My girlfriend and I--. She was my roommate. And, also, she was a chemistry major that changed over to math. And, so, we would be going to work on a project, and we would sort of thumb [hitchhike]--which my mom and dad had no idea that that was going on. But it was during the daytime and usually on a Saturday or Sunday--thumb to get to Vanderbilt. And we would be picked up by black or white couples. We didn't get in the car with just somebody by themselves. It would always be a couple, and they would take us where we needed to go. But on the same hand, I remember we had several African students from the different nations at our school, brilliant young men who were sent from their countries to get their education and then go back to Africa. We also had white exchange students from places like Cornell and Berkeley in California. And there was an African student and the young lady from Berkeley who had gone into one of the places to eat. And I don't know, 'cause we got different details of it. But at any rate, a white policeman approached them. And he didn't like them being there together. There were some words exchanged. Then, I believe they said the girl was doing most of the talking, you know, [she said that] she could eat with whoever she wanted to. And he ended up using his billy club on the African student. And then the comment made in the paper was, "He didn't know he was a foreigner," which, ok, if you're just a regular black person, you know, that justified it? No, it didn't. So that caused some demonstrations against city hall. And it also caused the different countries to come and [retrieve their charges]. We had maybe fifteen to twenty African students that were removed from our campus and were taken to Purdue, Notre Dame, you know, those places. So that stands out in my memory. That's just a little snapshot. But there were things that were based just on sight, you know. My color was not appreciated by some people, you know. But, generally, I had a basically good experience at my school.

JS: Did you ever participate in any of the protests right after that incident?

NO: Yeah. Ok, there was a big one, when Martin Luther King [Jr.] got killed. It started out as a peaceable one, but there were so many angry young black people from not just my school but from the surrounding community and Tennessee A&I that it just erupted into [a full blown riot]. But it also radiated to places like Detroit and D.C. and places like that. Our campus life was in an uproar. There was a young man on campus that was shot in the back by a police officer because they were on campus with their riot gear. And, of course, I was not out there. I'm not into the violence part. I wasn't out there then, but I was looking out my window when the gunfire started. And then, of course, I didn't look out the window any more. But we discovered that Dan, his name was Dan, had been shot. And he ended up being paralyzed for the rest of his life. I do remember just a peaceable demonstration [for civil rights in] downtown Nashville, and people just shouting the "N-word." And they were just so full of hate, the expressions on their faces. They were spitting at us. Like I said, I didn't get any of that, you know, but it was a very scary, scary feeling, you know. You went, and then you wish you'd never been there, you know. It was that kind of thing.

JS: How would you compare race relations between Nashville and Newport News at the time?

NO: At the time? But, see, like I said, we weren't exposed. My parents just sort of kept us in a safe zone where you don't have to--. You don't walk through this neighborhood because people, you know, are going to possibly hurt you, you know. And, so, I didn't see any of that until I went to school. And it was--. It was surprising because, you know--. I mean, I knew that there were whites that did not like me because I was black, and that was the only reason that they had. But just to see it was unnerving, yeah.

JS: So, you graduated from Fisk in 19--?

NO: 1968.

JS: Okay. And after that, you went to work at NASA?

NO: No, I, my husband [and I] were high school sweethearts, and we got married during my

senior year at Fisk in March [of 1968]. And then we had a son in May of '69. And I didn't really start looking for employment until he was almost a year old. And I was about to accept the job for becoming a math teacher because my homeroom teacher was the principal at the school at that time. And he needed me to come on board for that. The army notified me that they were developing a new lab at NASA Langley Research Center to devote entirely to helicopter research. And so, I held off on going into the high school system until I could hear from them. And that took until November the 10th, when they notified me to tell me that I had been accepted for the job.

JS: What year was that again?

NO: 1970.

JS: What interested you in that job in the area?

NO: What interested me in taking it?

JS: Uh huh.

NO: Because it was related to research, and it was NASA, you know. That had, for me, that carried a lot of clout, you know, to say, "I have a job working at NASA Langley Research Center," you know. And it was just a good fit from word go. It really was.

JS: What types of projects did you work on once you got there?

NO: Oh, ok. There were all sorts of airplanes, model airplanes that were tested at NASA Langley Research Center and the helicopters. I wasn't exclusively just doing helicopter research. A lot of tests were done on the Shuttle before the people actually became airborne. There were tests done after they became airborne to see about the safety of them ejecting. We had Boeing aircraft that was tested. We had fighter planes that were tested. It was--. I mean, what you did was you tested the model. Some of them were small models, no bigger than this table; and, some of them were a little larger. Maybe, you might have one that was, maybe, half that size, but not too often. And they were attached in the tunnel, and then, the wind was turned on so that it simulated these things in flight. And my responsibility was to program the computers that controlled all of that

stuff. It was working with technicians, engineers, the whole time. If the computers didn't run like they were supposed to, that was a problem because, then, the models couldn't be tested. So sometimes, something would happen that was unforeseen, like you know this condition can never happen. You're never going to have a ratio of zero over zero. Unfortunately, sometimes, with the numbers being simulated through there, it would happen. And you've already looked at the program, and you're like, "Well, it can't be this, it can't be that." But then eventually you'd find that that's what it is. Then, you put a little fix to go around that. If that condition happens, then you want to do something else. And I worked with engineers from the west coast, from up north, Grumman. I mean, it was

just--. Like when I say it was--. It was something different all the time. It was something challenging most of the time, and I'm up for challenges. That's just been me: I've always been that way. And, then, it was not bad getting the accolades, either, you know, people saying when they came back they want to make sure that I was going to be the one assigned to their test because they got good results, and they were pleased.

JS: So, I know you worked largely with like aircraft and stuff, but did the space race, in America at the time, did that affect your work at all?

NO: Mmm-mnn [no].

JS: Well what were race relations like when you started working at NASA?

NO: They were pretty good. The evidence of how they worked, how they had been, was with the bathrooms. Well, let me back up. I was prepared to be a little cautious because of experiences in Nashville. So when I went to work at NASA, I was one of few blacks working like in my building. And all over NASA, it was pretty much the same way. But in the building I was in, for the men's bathroom, if I went down the hall this way, there was a door. But if I went that way, there was also a door into the same men's room. The same thing was true of the women's bathroom. And I couldn't figure it out because, I'm like maybe, you know, somebody's on this aisle they don't want to walk all the way around here. But my co-worker who is deceased now,

Eula, said, “No, back in the day, they had it separated so that,”--she said “colored.” And she learned to say “black” by working with me--but, she said, “The coloreds had to go in this door for the men’s room, and the coloreds went in this door for the ladies’ room.” So it was evidence of it, you know. But it was not anything that was overt. My whole working career was mostly, predominantly white fellow employees. As my dad told me, when I went to work there, “You’ll be alright.” He said, “Just make sure that you are a little bit better than the person in your slot that’s white: just try to be a little bit better.” And that’s what I focused on. I focused on excelling. I gave 100 percent every task, and it paid off, yeah. And when I retired, it was a lot of people that came out for that, and my office mate that had moved to Wilson, North Carolina, we still keep in touch. I consider her a very good friend--she’s white--I consider her a very good friend. We not only learned to work together very well, but we shared family things. If you’re in the same office for a lot of years, you talk about families and everything. And she helped me to develop a team attitude where, if it went wrong, it was ours; if it went right, it was ours. And I kept that with all the new employees that came after her. When I was managing a group, and it was only six or seven in that group, sometimes, it was a little challenging because if you had that--. If you had someone that had a PhD in physics, for instance, and he had been used to being in charge, and then he had to come work under a black female, sometimes that was a little bothersome because there was a particular one that when we were trying to get our information for a particular test, he was doing other things. And I was like, “Kevin are you paying attention?” because he was supposed to be doing the dynamics side. And, he said, “I got it, I got it,” you know, which was disrespectful, but--. ‘Cause people were like “Wow,” you know. And, then, come to find out, he didn’t have it. And he couldn’t come back to me. He sent his office mate to ask me to tell him again what he was supposed to do. And usually, I’m a very easy person to work with, but I said, “He’ll have to come talk to me.” And we did. We worked through that, you know. But basically, I loved my years at NASA. They were good. They were good.

JS: In addition to race relations, what were gender relations like at NASA at the time?

NO: It was--. The girls, females, for a lot of years, most of my career, did not elevate to the status of the males. They--. Their grade level was lower, even doing the same thing. And that hasn't changed a whole lot, you know. But, at least, some of the women began to be in the groups. Large groups were called branches. And, then, you had division heads, and, then, the director, and stuff. But that has, over the years, allowed some women to move into those slots. When, for the most part, it just didn't happen, you know. We just--. The one who was in my office, she retired; and we were doing the same job. She retired in '87, and I retired in 2001. And when I retired, my grade level was two above what hers was. And she was just as capable as I was.

JS: Going kind of off that vein, you touched on a little bit earlier, what was the composition of the workforce like in terms of race and gender at NASA Langley?

NO: You mean how many?

JS: Uh huh., approximately.

NO: It's hard to say for me because I was on the research side, and I was exposed to mostly researchers then. And most of those were white. On the secretarial side, you had more diversity. You had a lot more blacks as secretaries and office assistants. But on the engineer, and mathematician/system analyst side, it was a lot more whites than blacks. On the technician side, it was, maybe, a third of them were black when I started. But then it began to get more, and they got females, because when I first got there, the technicians were males. But then you had more black and white kids going through Thomas Nelson's program to work as co-ops there and eventually get hired. So it was--. It was predominantly a white environment, but it was like a college campus, actually. People didn't focus on--well some people may have--but, the ones I dealt with didn't focus on the color thing. They focused on being able to accomplish a particular task. And, if you were able to contribute to that, then you were appreciated.

JS: I know you had mentioned that you had certain experiences in Nashville that kind of made you a little apprehensive before you started working at NASA. What were some of those experiences?



NO: Well, that didn't happen directly to me, but like just seeing some--. Like the police force with the African students. And then having people lined up on the sidewalk taunting us when we weren't doing anything except just demonstrating peacefully, being told to go back to Africa. Just to see the hate, you know. The faces were distorted and stuff. And I went through a period where I just didn't think that I could deal with white person, and how wrong I was. My office mate and I became very, very close. And then there was a young engineer--she went to Houston during the course of her career--but, she came to work for us. And she and I were about the same age at that time, and we became inseparable, you know. And, I realized, when I started working with my office mate, that you need to put that stuff aside, and accept people for who they are, not do what I was disgusted with, people pigeon-holing you and saying this because of your color. Was I not doing the same thing, you know? And, so, that all went away, and I loved both of them dearly. I really do. So the apprehensions and all went away. Those people know my family, they've been to [my house and] my mom and dad's house, and I've been to theirs, not since Jenny moved to Houston. But anyway, it changed.

JS: Were there any barriers you had to face at NASA Langley whether in general or specifically because of race or gender?

NO: I'm going to be honest. I got my job at NASA through the army because of a quota that needed to be filled. They had two with me, black female. So that was not a barrier for me. But I was like, "I don't care, you know, because I'm going to get in here, and I'm going to show them that I can do this job." That was my attitude. But yeah, there was no barrier. They were looking for a black or female, and they got two points with me [laughter].

JS: Did you ever face any kind of troubles or problems while you were working at NASA Langley?

NO: Well, I guess not, not with anybody that mattered. There was--. There was a guy with EEO, Equal Employment Opportunity, that tried to hit on me because of the position he was in, and he was telling me that there were things that he could do for me, and stuff. But that didn't last but a

couple of weeks because I told him my husband wanted to talk to him [laughter]. So that was the only negative thing I had. I was well-liked. I was respected. And that was the only thing. And he was black, you know, yeah, which really irritated me. My husband really did want to talk to him because I told my husband [laughter]. Yeah, because there were things that--. And, I told some co-workers also. And they wanted me to take some legal action, you know. But he backed away, [after] I told him Larry wanted to talk to him.

JS: What would you say is your biggest accomplishment when working at NASA Langley?

NO: I guess it was putting in, at that time, it was the latest and greatest data system that I oversaw. And I wrote--with the assistance of one of the other persons in my group--a users' manual for the people who would be using it. I'm not saying everything I touched was gold because it wasn't. But, generally, it was being the "go to" person, you know. If there was a problem, they would seek me out. In fact, after I retired, I still assisted without [being there]. I just would help by getting phone calls, you know, and telling them what they needed to do. Now, if they ask me now--because things have changed --I probably couldn't do that. But when I first retired, I was available if this computer locked up, and if this happened, or that happened, then I would be willing to talk to this particular guy and help him to troubleshoot for several months after I retired. So, it was just a good feeling to know that I mattered, you know.

JS: Did you work with Katherine Johnson at all?

NO: I knew her. Did you interview her?

JS: No, we haven't.

NO: Are you?

JS: Potentially, if we get in contact.

NO: Ok. Aw, she was amazing. I didn't work with her. But when I first started working, she was in a building that helped people acclimate to using those mainframe computers and everything.

And, so, I got to meet her that way. And she was phenomenal. A lot of people had respect for her, and she's still sharp, you know. It's been a few years since I've seen her. But it was just amazing

that she was still so sharp, yeah.

JS: Although you didn't work with her, do you remember what she was like as a person in work and stuff?

NO: She was a very willing and cooperative instructor because we took the little computer class that was in-house. And you had homework, and you had to solve these problems. And I remember--she wasn't my advisor--but, I remember going to her to get some assistance a couple of times. And she was more than willing to assist. Like I said, she was sharp then, and she's sharp now.

JS: Gotcha.

NO: She was definitely a team player.

JS: Turning back, a little bit, towards your--to a couple things earlier in your life, you mentioned your family moved when you were eighteen to a house on Chestnut. Correct?

NO: Uh huh.

JS: What influenced that move from Newsome Park to the house on Chestnut?

NO: They were going to be tearing down that old Newsome Park. And, so, people were beginning to move out, buy houses. Some bought brand new homes in Hampton, and stuff. But we bought this house on Chestnut Avenue. And at the time, for about two blocks, there were no other blacks. And, so, when we moved there, you know, you heard the "N-word." And when the kids got off the bus, you know, they would be cat-calling, and stuff. And we just basically ignored it. There was no hanging out anyway. So we basically just kept to ourselves. And, then, over the years--because I went away to school that following September--and over the years, it began to be more and more blacks moving into that two-block area, from like-- I'd say, maybe, more than two. No, from 21st to 23rd Street on Chestnut, we have more blacks moving in. And now it's just sort of sad because people, the older people like my mom's age, they have died. And they have left homes to their offspring who either didn't want them, or they rented them. And then the whole climate of the area began to change. Before my dad passed, I was real concerned.

And after he passed, I was more concerned because my mom was there by herself. And, so, I was always down there. And then when she got ill, six years ago, we just moved her in. Trying to rent it is not fruitful because nobody wants to move down there, not anybody that I want to put in the house. That's the thing. I mean it's already enough blight without us adding to it. So it just sits now.

JS: So, you talked about the changing community. What was the community like before that change occurred?

NO: Before the children grew up? It was okay. But you have to understand I wasn't there much. I was a young adult. I was in Nashville. And then I got married in my senior year. And my husband's family lived on 23rd Street, in the 1300 block. And we moved in with them. But I was a married adult at the time.

JS: Well, I guess I just want to wrap up by asking you a few questions about the Civil Rights Movement in this area in a more general sense. I know you graduated too early to really be affected by school integration and desegregation. But I was curious if your son was affected at all by this process.

NO: Well, he was born in '69. So, he grew up in an integrated environment. And when he was five, we moved into an integrated neighborhood, which we still live in, but it's not as integrated as it was. And by that, I mean it was more whites in the neighborhood when we bought the house. And now there are less whites in the neighborhood. But he--. He, unfortunately, did experience some things like during summer camp. Some of his best friends were white kids. That was what you would hope for. But he went to a summer camp through the city of Newport News. And one of the teenagers that was working a summer job, made a comment about his mother being on welfare, you know. And we dealt with that, as we should have because he was just a child. But he knew that was wrong, you know. And so he told us about it. And I remember saying, "I had hoped by the time he got to be an adult, that all this would be behind us." However, that didn't happen.

JS: I guess--. What was it like for that transition into the integrated neighborhood for you and your husband?

NO: Not a big deal at all. Not a big deal at all. We weren't running back and forth in anybody's house, not even the blacks' houses. But you spoke and all that stuff. And maybe, in walking, you might stand in the street and talk. But, not a problem.

JS: What do you view as the most important aspect of the Civil Rights Movement?

NO: I guess the most important aspect of it was to allow blacks to be afforded the opportunity to compete on the basis of their knowledge, their character, leaving color out completely. That's what I think Martin Luther King Jr. was striving for. And I think, the equal employment opportunity thing was an effort to correct. Sometimes, it went a little too far. But I think the premise was to just try to correct what had been going on for so many years, so many years.

JS: What do you regard as the unfinished legacies of the [Civil Rights] Movement?

NO: I think the unfinished legacy is that we need to go back to basics. And, for me, that is the family unit. Because when I grew up, families consisted of two parents and neighbors also being involved. We need to get our young people to have a better attitude about themselves. Their self-esteem needs to be elevated. They need to be convinced that achievement can be accomplished through hard work, still. The quick and easy way, the drugs, the black-on-black crime: all of that needs to be dealt with. Trying to get employment opportunities, so that you don't have these young people hanging around on corners and with too much time on their hands doing things that they shouldn't be doing anyway. But that's going to require some work, to change the mindset because dealing drugs doesn't take much. And if you get away with it, you know, it's lucrative. And we may have had drugs back in the day. I just wasn't aware of it, you know. The first time I even knew about anything was when I went to Nashville, Tennessee, and some people were smoking marijuana. I didn't even know what it was, you know. (1:11:13.7) sheltered life. But it was nothing as rampant as it is now. And, also, of course you had LSD that was sometimes laced in the marijuana. Never exposed to that either, but I knew people that were, yeah. So we just need

to recapture what the dream was because it can happen. I mean, it's possible, but we've got to get rid of all of this other mess that we've gotten involved in.

JS: What do you feel are the most pressing problems facing African-Americans today?

NO: I think the most pressing are unemployment. I saw on TV where for the age group of twenty to twenty-four, in Baltimore, you have thirty-four percent unemployment, compared to less than ten [percent] for whites. That's pretty sobering. So we need employment opportunities. We need our kids to stay in school and succeed, you know. Just to have kids come out and can't read and can't do multiplication. And I'm saying this because I work with an after-school program. I see it. We need to go back to teaching as a career, as opposed to a job. Our kids need to stop acting like they're owed something, also. They need to grasp the opportunities that are there, whether it's applying for scholarships, taking a test, or whatever. They need to apply themselves. So, that's where I am. I think more adults need to be mentors to those kids. You know they have--. They come from a background, for the most part, that has all the markings of failure. And we need people like me, my husband, my son, my daughter-in-law--I'm talking two generations here--to still reach out to those kids, you know. And over the years--since working with these after-school kids--I've seen the change, you know. We have younger kids, six and seventh graders, who are not as respectful as they used to be when they're in the six and seventh grade. So that's challenging in itself. But we need to not just throw them away. And it's challenging to still deal with them when they are disrespectful. But we need to hang in there for as long as we can and to reinforce positive stuff so that they can be successful. And we've been rewarded. We've had children that have come back to us who are in college, in the air force, in the army, and say, "Man, I just want to thank you." And, that's [a great feeling]. We need more of that, yeah.

JS: Is there anything else, any stories, or memories, or anything that you wanna add or contribute?

NO: I don't know. You did a pretty good job with your questions [laughter].

JS: Thank you.

NO: [pause] I don't have any more stories. But, I just want to reinforce the fact that it is vitally important that we continue to try to save as many young people as possible. And you do that by including them in activities, taking them to places that they normally would not go. We just took twenty-nine kids, Saturday, to Virginia Union University just for the exposure. We've taken them to Howard University. We've taken them to Georgetown. Last year, we went to Georgetown, so they can see what opportunities are there. We have people on campus, young students that are still matriculating there, who volunteered to tell them about the college experience, to tell them that this can be yours if you do this. They talk about what you need to do in middle school and elementary school. Before you even get to high school, you need to set the pattern for how you will apply yourself because, as all of them have said, including the ones Saturday, "It's no joke." If you think it's hard now, wait until you get here. It's all about how you schedule your time, you know, because you can--because one of the young men said, "When you come here, you can't do anything else." No, that's not true. You just have to learn how to put your time so that you can do all things. But the main thing, the main reason you're there, as the young man said, is to get that degree. These guys were football players, and they said they couldn't afford to do a whole lot of other things, you know, if they didn't have their time. So that they knew what they could do and what they couldn't do.

JS: I just had this kind of pop in my head. What--. You talked about kind of showing the different opportunities that young people have. When you--. How did you become aware or were shown the different opportunities for places to go after high school?

NO: Actually, my mom and dad--. My dad was a high school graduate, and my mom dropped out in eighth grade. Of course, school only went to the eleventh grade back then. But, my mom and dad both, as we grew up, it wasn't like, "When you finished high school you need to get a job or you going to do this." It was, "You're going to college," you know. And they didn't actually save for us to go to college, but they instilled that in us, that you're going to college. And, so, mine was covered with scholarships, and a small part was the National Defense Loan which my

husband and I paid off after graduation because it didn't become due until a year after graduating. And the interest was negligible, and it was paid off quite quickly. But your parents--. And, my other cousins and stuff--they were sort of raised the same way--that, you know, college is the answer if you want to get a better paying job than what your dad has. That's what my dad said, "You want a" [better paying job], 'cause his job was considered pretty good, considering. He was a civil servant. And he said, "You want to do more." My second sister went to college, and she majored in French and Spanish. Then, she changed, after she got out of school, because her opportunities were overseas and nobody wanted her to go overseas to teach [laughter]. So, she changed to Elementary Ed. But she did well at that also. And my third sister went to nursing school. So it was just instilled that, you know, after graduation you don't have to go look for a job, you know; you can do something else. And even though the money wasn't saved, they knew that we could have other means of paying for it. And that's what I tell young kids now. My son also tells them [that] "where there's a will, there's a way," you know. Other things are out there.

JS: Well, I think unless you have any thing else you want to add, that will conclude our interview on this Monday afternoon with Mrs. Orie. Thank you, again, so much for participating in the project. We appreciate it.

NO: You are so welcome. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed that.

JS: I'm glad. We really appreciate you participating and again this concludes our interview with Mrs. Orie. Thank you very much.

NO: Ok.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Dr. Natalie S. Robertson (360 VIRTUAL ASSISTANCE), August 1, 2015

Edited by Joshua Sipe, January 15, 2016

Edited by Laura Puaca, January 21, 2016

Edited by Nettie Orie, March 1, 2016