

Helen Parker Interview Summary

Interviewee: Helen Parker

Interviewers: Phillip Spencer and Karen Salazar

Interview date: October 16, 2021

Location: Blackboard Collaborate (Virtual)

Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 1:02:57

THE INTERVIEWEE: Helen Parker was born in Hampton, Virginia in 1935 at Dixie Hospital. She was born and raised in the Hampton, Virginia area. She went to Union Street Elementary School and attended Phenix High School, where she graduated in 1948. After high school she began working for PENTRAN. She also worked for the Devonshire retirement home. She was an active member of local churches and had 5 children in the Hampton area.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Phillip Spencer attends Christopher Newport University and is a history major. Karen Salazar is also a student at Christopher Newport University and is studying neuroscience.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted virtually on Blackboard Collaborate. The interview took a life-history approach, it began with early life, her education, her children, and her work experience. Then she discussed life during segregation, integration, and her experiences with racism. Other things that she discussed was her property ownership and Black businesses on Queen Street. Helen Parker's daughter, Renee Parker and granddaughter, Maya Arrington were present at the time of the interview to assist her with technology. They can both be heard at various points in the interview trying to clarify some words or repairing phrases that were said from the interviews. Renee Parker currently lives with her mother, and helps with her care. Maya Arrington is currently a senior at Christopher Newport University, majoring in psychology.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Phillip Spencer: All right so, I'm Phillip Spencer and I'm working with my partner, Karen Salazar. Today is October 16th, 2021. We are interviewing Mrs. Helen Parker. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good morning, Mrs. Parker.

Helen Parker: Good morning.

PS: We're talking [taking] what is called, a life history, and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. When and where were you born?

HP: I was born on Lincoln Street in Hampton, Virginia. I was born in Dixie Hospital.

PS: What did your parents do for a living?

HP: They worked at Hampton University.

PS: Okay. Can you describe what the race relations were like in the town that you grew up?

HP: Well, really, I grew up in an Afro-American community really, so I didn't have too much communication with the other side of the—. You know. But it wasn't that bad really. But when integration came in, that's when most of the problems started. Like in, I think like 1968, that's when most of the problems started. As for me, for a child, I never had a whole lot of problems.

PS: Okay. Did you notice or experience any discrimination like in public facilities?

HP: Yes. When I would come home from high school, we would have to walk across the bridge, the Booker T. Washington Bridge. And when you got over the bridge, it was the beginning of businesses on that street and they have a five-and-dime store. We used to go in there to drink water. And they had a sign, “Color” and “White.” So we knew not to drink out of the “White” [water fountain]. But me, I was rebellious. I was going to drink out of that “White” [water fountain] because the water was cold.

PS: Yeah.

HP: Buy anyway, then they would come down and the businesses there wouldn't let us buy anything from their store. But that was the only problems, really, that we had. We didn't have no fighting or anything like that, that I know of. There was some racism. Then there were some stores where you couldn't buy anything out of their stores.

Karen Salazar: What did the backlash look like when you drank water out of the labeled “White” water fountain? Was there any sort of huge conflict?

HP: Yeah. When I was drinking water out of the water fountain that says, “White,” this man approached me and say to me, “Can you read?” And I looked around and told him, “No, I can't.” [laughter] So, I left the store and didn't have any problems. But we were told not to do that. You know, when I went to school the next day and reported it. And they told us not to do that. So I didn't do it anymore.

KS: And when you reported it, like—. You said you reported it at school?

HP: Yeah, I went to school and I told my principal what had happened. He said “Little Parker, did you read, did you read the sign?” I said, “Yes, I did.” “Well,” he said, “well, why didn't you obey the sign?” I said, “Because I'm a human being and I was thirsty. And what difference does it make, the water fountain?” And then he said, “Well, it did make a difference.” But, he wanted

to, you know, side with the owner of the store, which I guess was his right. But he was just telling me that was the wrong thing to do, [that] I was rebelling, which I was. Well, that was the biggest problem I had coming down Queen Street, was stores that didn't want to sell us anything or let us in the stores. But like I said there was no rioting or anything like that.

KS: Speaking of schools and education, we wanted to start talking about more specific experiences in regards to education. So we had—. You kind of touched a little bit on this, but if you have anymore to elaborate—. When you were growing up, you attended segregated schools, as you mentioned. You mentioned which school you attended—

HP: Can you repeat that, please?

KS: I'm sorry?

HP: Can you repeat that, please?

KS: Yes. So, one of our questions was, when you were growing up, you mentioned you attended segregated schools. Correct? And you mentioned the school. Could you repeat the school one more time?

Maya Arrington: What school did you go to, Nana? What school did you go to?

HP: What school did I go to? I went to an elementary school which was called Union Street School. I went there, and I went there until I got to the eighth grade, and then I went over to Phenix. That's over on the Hampton University campus. Over that way.

KS: Yeah.

HP: Yeah.

KS: How did the conditions there compare to the local white schools that you know of?

MA: She's not here. Can we pause real quick, is that okay?

PS: Yeah.

KS: Yeah, if she hears Phillip better he can ask the questions and I can just put commentary in. If she does hear Phillip better.

PS: Yeah.

KS: He might have a better microphone.

MA: Do you hear the boy better?

HP: Huh?

Renee Parker: Do you hear him better than her?

HP: Uh-huh [yes].

RP: Okay, that will work.

PS: Okay, yeah. That's works. Okay.

MA: Nana, you can go ahead and pull your mask [down].

RP: We're social distancing.

MA: You can pull your mask.

PS: Okay, so how did the conditions compare at your school to the local white schools?

HP: I don't know. I was not in the white schools. I was in a predominantly Black community. We had our schools. Everything we had was in that community. So I didn't have to interact with any white people at all, or my parents didn't let me do that. Let's see, my aunt—. I was raised by my aunt. I was not raised by my mother.

PS: Okay. Do you have any or did you have any teachers who influenced you?

HP: Have any what?

PS: Have any teachers that especially influenced you?

HP: Yes, I had teachers at my elementary school and they guided me. They kept me on the right track. And then when I went over to Phenix, I had some principals over there that were very

good. I had one principal—this is funny—he didn't allow me to chew gum. I was chewing gum one day, and he said to me, he said “Little Parker, come to the window.” And I did. And he said, “What do you see out the window?” At that time, there were cows grazing. And he said, “You see how they chewing?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “That's what you look like.” [laughter] So that stopped me from chewing. That embarrassed me, so it stopped me from chewing gum. But my teachers were very instrumental into helping me.

PS: What did they do that was very influential for you?

HP: If I had a problem, like [trouble] solving a problem, instead of walking out the class and coming home, not knowing what to do, I stayed behind. And they would help me with that problem.(9:34-9:36) My paperwork, they would always tell me that my paperwork was so neat, that they would use my paperwork for an example for the class. So they guided me. And like I said, I was a good student. [laughter]

PS: What subjects did you enjoy most in school? And were you involved in any extracurricular activities?

HP: I liked English, and I liked business courses. I liked that. I won't too good with geography. But I did like English, and I like math. So most of my courses I liked. You know, they were good. Then they had a class called show-and-tell. I liked that because you can be creative in that class, and I enjoyed that. But of course the cooking.

PS: Were you involved in any extracurricular activities after school or during school?

HP: I was in the choir, I was in the creative dance group, I was in the band, and I was on the softball team. So I was quite busy.

PS: Yeah. So, much later on, Phenix High School was renamed Pembroke as part of the integration process.

HP: Yes.

PS: What was your reaction to that announcement? And how did it affect the identity of the school?

HP: Oh, the children—the students—were quite upset. They did not want Phenix to be changed over to Pembroke, because Phenix got a name. And they did not—. They rebelled. I don't know of any fighting or anything, but I know several times they put the school name up. Took "Pembroke" and put "Phenix" up and they took the sign down. But the students didn't seem like that. But eventually they accepted it.

PS: Okay. We know that you have five children. Did they attend any segregated schools or integrated schools?

HP: Not till 1968, I think that's the year. My daughter had a problem at Phenix. One of the girls called her out of her name [racial slur]. And we weren't going to go for that. So I settled that. But I don't think anybody else had any problems.

PS: As a parent how did you feel about your children attending these schools?

HP: Well, I felt like this: sending my children to school, I felt as if I was sending them in a safe place. I felt as though the teachers would look over them, guide them. So I felt like they were safe. And they knew, the teachers knew, if they had any problems, they knew to call me, not take it out on my children. Call me and I will, you know, take care of it. So I've never had any problems with my children. And right today, any of the teachers that I see in the street that taught my children would tell me how well-behaved my children were, how well-groomed they were, and how smart they were. So that makes me feel good to know that I did my job. So I had no problems with them. I don't know—. If they had any problems at school, they didn't come home

to tell me. I guess they'd figure, "I better not go home and tell her," because there might be another side.

KS: Were your children as active as you were in school? Do you think?

HP: I had one child that was in track and played tennis. Then I had another one that was in the school choir. And that was it. That was it. Oh, then I had one in band.

KS: In band.

PS: Did your children play any role in integrating the schools?

HP: Not that I know of. My children were positive children. You do what the best thing for you to do. They were leaders, they were not followers. So they tried to do the right thing. I had no problem with my children, because like I say, they weren't followers, they were leaders.

PS: Yeah. How were they treated by either their teachers--? I know you said that they would call you whenever there was any problem, if there was any problem. How were they treated by their teachers and the students?

HP: Well, I had no problems with the teachers. But, you know, some of the students were very envious for so many reasons, and that's child-like. But anyway if they came home and told me that they had a problem with one of the children, well I'm going to the scene, and find out what is the problem. Now, if I have to take it to your parents, we would do that. But nine times out of ten, I didn't allow my children to be fighting in the street, or no such foolishness as that. Come home and tell it to me, and we would solve it together. (17:00-17:03)

KS: Yeah.

PS: Okay. Do you think any of their experiences with extracurriculars were affected with integration? Like you said some track?

HP: Well, I hope the examples that my children led, I hope other children follow through to figure, "This is the right thing to do. It worked for her. I'm going to do that same thing." And I hope that example from my children rubbed off on other children, not the negative things.

PS: Within the community, how did people respond to integration?

HP: To what?

PS: Within the community how did people respond to integration?

HP: Well, like I said, in my community it was fine. And when they integrated we had no problems. We got together. One thing was so funny: we wanted to go to a white church, and we decided, one Sunday, we were going to go to this church. We figured that we were going to be turned away. But we went to the church and we were accepted. I mean we had no problems. We didn't enjoy it, because the way we do in our churches is entirely different in the way they did in their churches. We didn't enjoy, but we stayed there for a while and then we left. So we were accepted, had no problems—

PS: How were the churches? Sorry. What were you saying?

HP: There are always some who will do the devil's work. That's how I put it.

PS: How were the churches different? You said you didn't really like it, at the other church. How were they different?

HP: How were they different?

KS: Yeah.

PS: Yeah.

HP: I don't know if you've ever attended a Black church. It's a difference in the worship service.

The way we worship, you know, they say you praise the Lord with instrument, and song, and

dance. The other churches, that's laid back. And our church is a vibrant church. You know, we get into the worship. It's a difference. You have to visit one to even know what I'm speaking of.

KS: Yes.

PS: Do you remember any debates over busing, and what was the process of busing like?

HP: I didn't get that question.

PS: Do you remember any debates over busing and what was that process like?

HP: Didn't I get any what?

MA: The debate about busing, like on the buses?

RP: Take your mask off.

MA: Any debate about busing, with the buses?

HP: Buses? Oh Lordy, yes.[laughter] Well we found out with the busing—. Like I said, there are some people who are nice and some people who take things too far. Now basically, the busing was all right. But I'll never forget, as a child, we were coming from Newport News, and when we got to our bus stop, we went to get off, the bus driver—. We went to the front to give the bus driver the zone check. And she said—and I went to get off—and the bus driver said real nasty to my mother, “Where's your zone check?” And my mother said, “You didn't give me one.” She [the bus driver] said, “I did give you one.” So she said, “Well, you didn't give me one.” So she told me, she said “Helen, get off the bus. I'm gonna take care of this.” But I didn't know what my mama was gonna do. My mama was real feisty. I got off the bus and my mama hit the bus driver, because she told her, “You didn't give me no zone check.” And she got off the bus and she said, “Come on, let's go home.” So we went home. So that was a bad experience, but like I said, some of the bus drivers were nice, and some of them were bad. Now, going to the beaches, the bus drivers would drive us to the street at the beginning of the Black beaches. We couldn't go

no further than that. They'd tell us, "All y'all off." We all had—all Black people—had to get off. And then the bus proceeded to go down to the next block for the next stop, to let the white people off. So when they got ready to come back, they did the same thing. They loaded up all the white people and then, on the Black side, when they got to the Black side, if there were too many Blacks to get on, they'd tell them, "Y'all got to wait for the next bus." We used to have problems like that. You know, the busing was lousy. Remember, like I said, there were some good bus drivers and there were some bus drivers. And then some of them, we used to have to pull the cord, and if you pulled the cord and the bus driver act like she didn't hear—he or she didn't hear it—they'd bypass your stop and take you to the next stop. So we used to have stuff like that. But other than that, it was bad but not that bad.

KS: Do you remember what beaches were—

MA: Hey, Karen can you wait one second?

RP: When you finish your statement about the beaches, I think they were referring to bussing from schools.

HP: Uh?

RP: From our high—. Like on our bus from Pembroke to Kecoughtan.

HP: Come closer.

RP: When she is speaking of busing, I'm thinking she is speaking of busing from Pembroke to Kecoughtan.

HP: Well, Kecoughtan?

RP: Yeah. I'm the only one that was bussed, from their area.

HP: Oh, yeah, yeah. Let me tell you what they did, but this is the school system.

RP: Yeah, I think that [is] what she was talking about.

HP: Well, they would bus children from their area, school area, way across town to some other area. Like my daughter was right here at Pembroke High School. (24:32-24:36) And over here, at (Whites Chambers? 24:36.4). We were in between (Whites Chambers? 0:24.37) and Pembroke. They bussed her all the way to Kecoughtan, which didn't make sense, with these schools right around us. But I am glad she did go to Kecoughtan. But that's what they did. There were bus drivers-. And they're still doing that today. They are busing children away from home.

KS: And was there any white children that you knew of, or any busing to Phenix High School, when your children attended? When was it integrated?

HS: In what?

MA: Were there white children on the bus? Going to school?

HP: Oh, I don't know. I was not down, I was not at the bus stop.

RP: All your children walked to Phenix, which was right there.

HP: No, I was not at the bus stop. I couldn't tell you that.

RP: Tell them your children walked to school.

MA: She can't hear you.

RP: Mom. Tell them your children walked to school.

HP: Walked to Pembroke?

RP: Yeah. They didn't get that.

HP: Well, they walked to Pembroke yeah. But, you [in reference to her daughter out of frame] had to catch the bus to go to Kecoughtan.

RP: Yes, Ma'am.

HP: You had no problem. Only problem I had, [was] her missing the bus.

PS: We're also interested in learning more about residential segregation. What kinds of obstacles did you encounter when purchasing your own property? And when did you first [purchase] your own property?

HP: Well, stop and think. When we got into purchasing property, we were military people, and they gave military people a lot of breaks. A lot of things that other people didn't have to do—. We didn't have to. It was easier to go down to the Virginia National Bank or whatever down there and apply for a loan. There wasn't that many problems, because like I say we were military. But now, I hear people now are struggling, trying to get a loan. Then, they won't loan processes at the banks. Apparently, they are really, really, really restricted [now]. You have to dot every "t"—. I mean dot every "i" and cross every "t" to get a loan now. But, in my day, it wasn't that problem. And you stop and think. You could go downtown and get a loan. A house will cost you like, fifty-six thousand dollars. Today it will cost you a hundred and fifty-six thousand dollars. So it's a big difference, things have changed.

PS: Yeah. When did you purchase your own property and where was it located?

HP: 1963, in the city of Hampton. The settlement was called North Hampton. It had a silly name: (Harmon's Farm? 0:28:04.9). That's because a lot of farming was done in this area. That's why it was called (Harmon's Farm? 0:28:12.9). And then the city comes along and they change it to North Hampton.

PS: As a property owner, what are some experiences that you faced or noticed in regards to redlining?

HP: Whoo. As a property owner—. Well, I'll tell you what, in my section, they don't seem to keep up this section like they do some of the other sections. You know, that's a bad thing. I think all sections should be kept up. Like doing sidewalks, and gutters, and street lights and—. I think there

should be things that should be taken care of all over the city, not just parts of the city. I don't think that. Then I'll tell you what the city did to me, is that my children had toys in the backyard— . And, you know, when you have five children, you have a whole lot of toys. And so, they were all bundled up in the—. I had them in a corner. And they told me that I would have to cover them up. Cover them up? They were children's toys. And when I came home from work, they had set them on fire. They burned up everything back there, in my backyard. So, you know, at that time they were going through doing hateful things like that. I had a car in my driveway and my daughter couldn't drive it anymore. They said I had to put a tarp over it or move it in the back. Well, I did that, but they stayed on me on every little thing. They stayed on me. Then now, I see they just let people just do things that they want to do. And to me, that's unfair. Well, I have experienced a lot of unfairness in the city of Hampton and they may shoot me for this. [laughter]. But anyway, that's the truth.

KS: Those were city employees that set fire to those toys?

HP: We don't know. That's it. They weren't bold enough to come forward and say, "I did this." They did it while I was at work. I don't know who they were. Today, I don't know who did it. It was a sneaky process.

PS: What ways were you reminded about segregation in your neighborhood?

HP: Who?

PS: What ways were you reminded about segregation in your neighborhood?

HP: We all Black in my neighborhood. [laughter]

PS: We also see that you are an active member of your church.

HP: Yes.

PS: Do you recall how young you were when you started attending Queen Street Baptist Church?

HP: Well, I was attending Queen Street Baptist Church as a child, going to Sunday school, going to Vacation Bible School. Then as I got older, I guess about twenty-some years old, that's when I joined Queen Street. Before then, I had attended other churches in our neighborhood. But I joined Queen Street at about twenty-seven years old.

PS: As you grew up what roles did church play in your life?

HP: What roles did Queen Street play in my life?

PS: Yeah. Just church in general.

HP: Pardon?

RP: Or church in general.

HP: Well, they played a spiritual role, because I learned a lot from my church. And I enjoyed going because, every Sunday, I could learn something from my pastor. And then I was a member of their choir, of the choir. I was a member of the Baptist Young Women, which I enjoyed. And any other way that I could serve, I did. Like I say they were—. They guided me in my church. And I liked that.

PS: What did your church do for the Black community locally?

HP: What?

RP: What did your church do for the Black community?

HP: My church—. Well, they feed the homeless. They have—. What you call “closets” where people can go down and get clothing and what have you. I think that they're doing tutoring. And so they're really active in the community. And they're doing things that I really don't know.

PS: We're also interested to hear about your experience in the workforce. What was your first job?

HP: In the workforce?

PS: Yeah.

MA: Your first job. What was your first job?

HP: Well, worked over at Hampton University, which was Black. I had no problems there. Okay, then went I worked for PENTRAN, and I had no problems there because I wanted to go into the section where you could work with the senior citizens. And that's what I did. I enjoyed working with the senior citizens, I enjoyed helping them. Anything I could do to service them. That was my thing, so I had no problems. The biggest problems I had with PENTRAN were the employees, but other than that-. And then I went to work at Devonshire and I worked out there for eighteen years. I had no problems there, except for-. You know, there are some people who are going to be people. They're going to do it their way, their way or no way. But basically I had no problems except for some of the employees. I'll tell you a funny thing I used to do. When I went to work at the Devonshire in the morning, and I knew there was-. I anticipated a problem. So what I would do when I get to the back door, I opened the door, and I said, "God you go first, because I know it's gonna be a problem that I might not be able to handle like you." So, "You go first and then I'll come in after you." With that said, I stayed there eighteen years. [laughter] But I had no problems with the workforce to admit, so not too many problems. Nothing that I couldn't handle. You know it all depends on your attitude, is how the problem is going to be solved.

KS: Yeah.

HP: So, I have no problems.

PS: All right. Why did you go into those fields of work? Like you said you worked at Hampton [University], and the Devonshire.

HP: Because, you know, those fields that I had, didn't fulfill me like the one I had at Devonshire. Like I said, I like people. I like older people. I like helping people. And then, I tell you, some of your wisdom comes from older people. And I like that. I learned more from older people than young people. [laughter] Excuse me y'all, I know y'all young people, but—. [laughter]

PS: Okay. Were most of the other people employed white or Black?

HP: Where?

PS: At any of them.

HP: Well now. Basically they're going to hire Black, because the labor is, the pay is cheaper. But let me tell you something, they had a lot of Black people at the Devonshire because, like I say they, could hire those people for cheaper wages than they can hire the white man. He's going to come in, he's going to want to pop out. The white men, he's going to come in, and he's going to do it because he needs a job. But, I have no problem there, you know, I spoke up for myself, you know. You have to speak out and that's what I did. If I thought I was worth more than you're paying me, I spoke up.

KS: Of course.

PS: Okay, did you ever notice or encounter any discrimination in the workforce?

HP: Yes, [pause] I did. But, like I'd say, they may act like that, but my response is you need to take a break and go pray because your heart is not right and your mind is not right, and God don't want you to treat me that way, or anybody else. So, you need to take a break and go somewhere and pray. No need for me raising my voice and getting all upset, trying to make you see otherwise. I'm getting myself upset. It don't work. But I'm—. You know, I think I did pretty good all these years and working and not having a whole lot of problems.

PS: Okay, like what experiences, like what did you encounter?

RP: Can you repeat the question?

PS: What did you encounter while you were facing those problems.

RP: Discrimination?

PS: Yes, discrimination.

MA: Specify more about—. She wants to, they want to know what discrimination did you face.

What does it look like, that you remember?

KS: If there are any moments that you remember?

PS: Yeah.

HP: What discrimination I experienced on my job? At the Devonshire? It was a disgraceful one. They said—my supervisor, not my manager—my supervisor says that all employees had to come through the back door. Okay, now all the Black employees come to the back door. All the white employees went through the front door. So anyway, one day when I got off, I got off at night, it was late, my car was parked in the back. Well, I know I had to go in the back and get my car. But the devil told me, “You're not walking all the way around the back.” So what I did, earlier before I got off, I went and got my car, and parked it on the front. So when I got ready to leave I started through the front door. And the security guard told me, “You can't go through that front door.” I said, “It's opening and closing. Why can't I go through it?” He said, “Because you're supposed to go through the back.” I'd said, “Who's saying that?” and he said, “The supervisor said you're supposed to go through the back.” I said, “Well, tell her to come on around here and go with me, because I'm not going around that back.” But that was a disgraceful thing that they did. They made the Black employees go through the backdoor. So, I have said to the girls—which were housekeeping, security guards in there, cafeteria workers in there—I said, “Let me tell y'all something. If we all pull together and get a class-action suit, we can change this mess. We won't

have to go through this.” But, nobody stood with me. Everybody had a lot of mouth, but when it comes down to doing something, mmm-nnnn [no]. But I was determined I was not going to go to no back door, uh-uh, that particular time. But then I got to the point I started going to the back door, because my car was back there. No, I didn't like those rules that they had changed. And then another thing, I was working as secretary at the front desk, and so when I got to go eat my lunch, they told me I had to go in the break room, which is the room where the mops [and] all the cleaning equipment was. I had to go there to eat. No, uh-uh. “Y’all [the white employees] go eat in a nice clean area.” The other secretaries or whatever—white people—they go eat in a nice clean area. I'm not doing this. My health is just as important to me as yours is to you. So, I went into the room and then the manager came in and said to me, “Helen, what you doing in here?” I said, “Eating my lunch.” He said, “Well, you know you're not supposed to be in here.” [I said,] “Why not?” He said, “You're supposed to be down in the laundry room.” [I said,] “I'm not a piece of equipment. I'm not a mop, I'm not a broom.” So, I'm not going to sit down there. I'm not a little laundry bucket. I'm not going to sit down in that filthy room. And then when they come out the bathroom—. The bathroom was like that too. And when you come out of the bathroom, all the odors come up behind the people, and you sit there eating. I said, “Nah, nah. I'm not doing that.” Yeah. So, that was the biggest problem I had with them, is that they did not want me to eat. So then they came and told me the residents said, “They don't like to see you sitting in their area.” You know where they eat. I'm not sitting in their area where they eat. They eat in the cafeteria. I'm not eating in the cafeteria. I'm eating in the break room or something like that. So the residents didn't say that. And then I'm gonna tell you something. We had one young man that worked security, from Africa. And, he had dreadlocks. I don't like them, but his were real neat. And he was real dark. He could not help the pigmentation of his skin. He could not help that. So,

anyway, they called him in the office, and told him that they would have to let him go. And so when he came out crying I said, "What is the matter with you? Grown men don't cry!" He said, "Miss Judy told me that they will have to let me go." I said, "Why? What is the reason?" He said, "She told me that the residents said, they didn't like your [my] hair, and they don't like the color of your [my] skin." I said, "You know, one thing, 'Judy,'"--and y'all excuse me--"and all these residents can go to hell in a handbasket, because they can't do that. They can't do that, because of the pigmentation of your skin. You were born that way, you did, you can't help that. And your dreadlocks are real neat." So, the boy was so upset, he left. He didn't fight it. But, I said, "You have a good case here, don't leave." He did. But there used to be things like that that would irritate me, because I know they were wrong.

KS: Yeah.

HP: Then one day, my supervisor says to me, "Miss Helen--." She said, "Do you know what--." She took the end of my collar, her hand [around] my collar. She said, "You know what Miss Helen? I could terminate you today." I said, "Oh really?" She said, "Yes," She said, "You know Hampton--. Virginia is a commonwealth state." I said, "Yeah, I know that." She said, "but I could terminate you and don't have to give you no reason why." I said, "Really?" I said, "Where'd you learn that from?" She said, "I learned that from school last night." I said "Judy, let me tell you something: you go back to school and you tell them to give you the second part of what you learn. The second part is you can terminate me, but I tell you one thing, it will be hell in the camp before it's all over." But you don't terminate me (0:49.02.5) like that. So she walked away from me, and I never had no more problems for her. But, some people you have to speak up to. Some people you're not. And that's, one me for having a big mouth I guess.

KS: Just for clarification, were most of these residents you were working for white?

MA: Were most of the residents white? Were they white?

HP: Most of the residents? Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Most of the residents were white.

PS: Okay. Let's wrap up with a few questions about the legacies of the civil rights movement.

What do you view as the most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement?

HP: I feel as though—. If they would learn to treat everybody on an equal basis, you know. I don't believe in treating people according to the pigmentation of your skin. All of us are human beings. All of us are God's children and I feel as if we all should be respected and treated like that, you know. That's my belief.

PS: Okay. What experiences can you share about being an African-American woman now, that was different from growing up?

HP: What's the difference?

PS: Yeah. What experiences can you share now than when you were growing up?

HP: Well, when I was growing up, I knew I didn't know anything, you know, what's going on. But, like I said, now that I am grown, my thing of it is, to be honest, trustworthy, and trust people as people, not as a commodity or something like that. I believe in trust[ing] people, and to get along with people. That's my thing. And I feel like if you learn those things, all this negative stuff that's going on in the world, you wouldn't be part of it.

PS: How did living through two eras of civil rights movements affect you? You know, back in the '60s, that one, and in the Black Lives Matter movement of the 2010s and 2020s?

HP: Well, it really didn't bother me too much because, like I say, you mind your business, you know. You what you had to do, and you know what you're supposed to do, and you go do that.

And so it didn't really bother me too much. And like I was saying, back when the integration

started, well, I was used to being around white people anyway. So it didn't bother me. You were just another person, you know. I have no problem.

PS: Is there anything else that you would like to contribute or something you feel we might have missed? We'd love to hear anything else.

HP: Yes, you have missed our Black businesses that we had in Hampton. We had—. I guess you've heard of Queen Street?

KS: Yeah.

HP: Queen Street had Black businesses from the end to the beginning. We had, down there where Queen Street Church is, we had a funeral home, a bakery, a grocery store. We had restaurants. We had a Black-owned drugstore. We had supermarkets, cleaners. That street was just popular with Black businesses. And you come along on Armistead Avenue, we had service stations. And then come along on Pembroke Avenue, we had beauty shops, service stations. We were a well-rounded community. We had everything, churches, several churches.

RP: Barber shops.

HP: Huh?

RP: Your uncle's barber shop.

MA: Barber shops.

RP: Uncle Johnny's Barber shop.

HP: Yeah, we had barber shops. In this community, we had everything. Then we had—. What do you call? We had a place on Pembroke Avenue called the Beacon, where they would tutor. They would help tutor. And that's another thing Queen Street did, they would tutor children and what have you. We were a well-rounded community. So in essence, we didn't have to go out anywhere to do anything. We had a theater. And I don't know, we had just everything in this community.

And then, when they came along and started shifting these things away, people were upset. Then we had to go into the—to get along with the white community. And I don't think they were too receptive. Some of them weren't too receptive, like they are today. A lot of them don't want us to just come in there now. But the thing with it is, you know, it wasn't our doing. But this community, our Black community, had everything in it that you would want: dealership, everything. And we were forced out. We didn't leave because we wanted to. We were forced out. So, that's what I wanted to tell you about the community.

PS: Okay.

HP: (55:50-55:52)

KS: So that was when the integration process happened, when those businesses were getting lost?

HP: Yes, yes. When that happened, the businesses started shifting. They'd come up with some idea and so the businesses had to leave. Yeah, I can't say what it was. I don't know if they went, they raised the rent, the mortgage or whatever. But I do know the businesses started shifting and we had plenty of businesses. We didn't have to go nowhere because we had everything around in our community.

KS: Of course.

PS: Okay. Is there any more experiences that you would like to share with us?

HP: Oh. I told you about going—. I told you—. No, I didn't tell you about going to the beach. We had two beaches—.

KS: Yeah.

HP: We have Buckroe [Beach] and a Bayshore [Beach]. The Buckroe was the white beach. They had all kind of things. We used to—. They used to have a roller coaster—

KS: Wow.

HP: That was so long we would stand on the street and watch it. We could not go to the white beach, they would not allow us. So, we would go to our little beach, which was Buckroe, [Bayshore]. We enjoyed the sand, the water. And it had a like a ferris wheel and stuff like that. We had fun. But then when they integrated and they said that we could go to the white beach, I think the Black people bombarded the beach [laughter]. Because, it was so much they wanted to get involved in, you know, that big roller coaster they had down there. We had nothing with that! But I couldn't understand that—. I used to say—I had a spiritual leader growing up, and I used to say to her—I say, “Why would they call it Buckroe Beach and Bayshore, when the water is all the same? The same tide that goes into Buckroe, comes into Bayshore. So what are they doing? It sounds crazy to me.”

KS: Yeah.

HP: But that's what they did, you know. They had nothing to do—. And they couldn't divide the water. And on our side of the beach, we had some lawyers got together and they built this big hotel, and they had entertainers coming in from all over the world, down there to give shows and what have you. And it was built up. We had restaurants down there, seafood restaurants. It was built up but we didn't have no roller coaster. [laughter]

KS: Yeah. So Bayshore—.

HP: Huh.

KS: Bayshore was, at the time, the white beach, correct?

HP: Bayshore. Bayshore was the African-American beach and Buckroe was the caucasian.

KS: Okay.

HP: Then after they opened up Buckroe, then Bayshore decided they [were] going to Buckroe and they deserted it.

RP: But it's now a historical landmark.

HP: And they deserted Bayshore.

KS: Wow.

HP: So now that's where they are today, Buckroe.

PS: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Parker, for talking about your experiences and contributing to the oral history project. We really appreciate it.

HP: Thank you so much.

KS: And taking your time to be able to speak about these difficult experiences.

PS: Yeah.

KS: We really appreciate it.

HP: Thank you, I hope I have helped in some way. I hope I'm not getting myself in jail though.

KS: No. [laughter]

PS: No, not at all.

KS: People have said worse things specifically about CNU, part of the project.

PS: Yeah.

HP: Alright. Alright.

MA: Is there anything about CNU being built that you guys remember. Do you remember anything about CNU being built?

HP: Huh.

MA: Do you remember anything about when CNU was being built in that community?

HP: When what was being built?

RP: Christopher Newport was being built, remember how small it used to be?

HP: What?

RP: Christopher Newport.

HP: Oh yeah.

MA: The university.

HP: Oh yeah. Christopher Newport used to be like a high school—.

RP: Yes.

HP: And now look at it today.

RP: I know.

HP: I'll tell you.

RP: Remember it was, like it started as a community college back in the day.

HP: Mmh. Yes.

MA: Black neighborhoods were all there right?

RP: Yeah.

PS: Yeah.

HP: They didn't give all of this credit to Paul Tribble, did they?

MA: Did they give him credit? Yes.

RP: Say again.

MA: What?

KS: After the small group, they did give him credit.

HP: Oh, they did.

RP: Yeah.

HP: Uh-huh. Because I know Christopher Newport, like I said, was like a high school.

PS: Yeah.

KS: Yeah.

HP: Then, later on they started building and building and adding on and adding on. And then the next thing I know, good gracious, it's a terrible campus, it's a beautiful campus. And I was just wondering if he was, you know, if most of the credit went to him.

KS: From what I heard.

HP: (1:02:26)

KS: From what I know, I think so. Yeah. Go ahead.

HP: After he left politics, that's when he went into Christopher Newport.

KS: Yeah.

PS: Yeah.

HP: Hmm. Amazing, amazing.

RP: Okay.

MA: Alright, is that all you guys. Was that good enough?

PS: Yeah that was perfect.

MA: Alright.

PS: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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