Shauna Franklin Epps
Interview Summary

Interviewee: Shauna Franklin Epps
Interviewers: Laura Puaca and Mia LaRochelle
Interview Date: April 19, 2024
Location: Newport News TV (NNTV) station, Newport News, Virginia
Length: Audio (MP3) and video (MP4) files, length 55:54 minutes

THE INTERVIEWEE: Shauna Franklin Epps was born on September 30, 1949 to Nina Christian Franklin and Harry M., or "Julian," Franklin, in Richmond, Virginia. At the age of seven, her family left West Point, Virginia, due to limited educational resources brought by segregation. They moved to Newport News, where they lived on Moores Lane and, later, in the Denbigh area. From early on, her parents were both heavily involved in the community. After moving to Newport News, Epps' mother worked at Crown Savings Bank for a while before joining her husband at their family-owned restaurant, the Plaza Drive Inn, which served as a community and political hub until its closing in 1979. Additionally, Epps' father served as a member of the Political Action Committee, where he worked with other community leaders to expand Black political power, and worked as campaign manager for Jessie Rattley and Bobby Scott in the 1970s.

Initially, Epps attended Carver Elementary School and Carver High School, two of the city's all-Black schools. Later, she attended the newly-open and nominally-integrated Denbigh High School, where she graduated in 1967. She then attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee and graduated in 1971 with a degree in psychology, with an emphasis on education. Following graduation, she married and moved with her husband to several cities in the United States where she held a variety of positions before eventually returning to Newport News and entering the field of Social Work with the city's Health Department. In 1976, she began working at the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice (VA DJJ) Hampton Court Services and served as the Probation and Intake Officer for ten years. With this position, she prepared court-ordered reports and helped the youth and their families navigate the legal process. She later held a number of supervisory roles: she supervised the Probation Unit from 1986 to 1993 and the Intake Unit from 1993 until 2003.

Epps then began a position with the VA DJJ Central Office and served as the Disproportionate Minority Contact Coordinator until 2007. In this capacity, she coordinated the VA DJJ's efforts to address disproportionate minority youth involvement and confinement in the juvenile system. From 2008 to 2011 she served as the Disproportionate Minority Contact Policy Specialist where she assisted in providing jurisdictions involved in the MacArthur Foundations Models for Change Juvenile Justice Initiative. In 2012, Epps became the Interagency Services Coordinator for Juvenile Justice and Mental Health on the Norfolk Community Services Board, spending a year identifying and creating plans to address gaps in the mental health and juvenile justice systems. Finally, between 2013 and 2023, Epps worked as the Virginia Juvenile Community Programs Manager for the Norfolk Department of Human Services. During this time she created and maintained evidence-based programs for juveniles in the City of Norfolk. She also worked

closely with the youth and their families to minimize further court involvement. After retiring in 2023, she has continued to be an active community member.

THE INTERVIEWERS: Laura Puaca is Professor of History at Christopher Newport University and founding director of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project. Mia LaRochelle is a senior at Christopher Newport University majoring in History and minoring in Museum Studies. She hopes to pursue a career in public history.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: The interview was conducted at the Newport News Television (NNTV) station. Epps began by talking about her parents' involvement in the community and then reflected on her own experiences growing up in the city. Although the Black schools that she attended were underfunded compared to the city's White schools, she explained that they provided an outstanding support system. For example, she regards her teachers and administrators there as "surrogate parents." Denbigh, however, did not provide her with the same sense of community and she largely saw her time there as an "experiment."

The interview also explored Epps' involvement in the community. Extended discussion focused on her numerous contributions to the juvenile justice system in Hampton Roads. Additionally, she discussed her early work with community groups such as the Young Democrats. Toward the end of the interview, she shared her recollections of the "Shoe Lane controversy," or efforts to displace Black homeowners to make room for what was then Christopher Newport College. Although her own family was not displaced, she lived in the Shoe Lane area from age seven to fifteen and was close to many of the families who were affected. She described the situation as one marked by anger, disappointment, and frustration. She also mentioned the current task force recently created to explore the past and present of Shoe Lane and expressed disappointment that no members of that immediate community were on it. The interview ended with Epps reflecting on the unfinished work of the civil rights movement, stressing education and support systems. She also lauded the work of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project and encouraged a "well-rounded conversation" and as wide recruitment as possible.

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START OF INTERVIEW

LP: Alright. This is Laura Puaca.

Mia LaRochelle: And this is Mia LaRochelle.

LP: Today is Friday, April the 19th, 2024. We are interviewing Mrs. Shauna Franklin Epps. This interview is being carried out as part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University. Good morning, Mrs. Epps.

SE: Good morning.

LP: We are taking a life history approach and would like to begin our interview with a few questions about your childhood. When and where were you born?

SE: I was born in Richmond, Virginia. The first seven years of my life were spent in West Point, Virginia. And then the family moved to Newport News, Virginia, due to the lack of educational opportunities in the public school system in West Point.

ML: And when did your family move to Newport News?

SE: I was born in 1949. I'm terrible at dates, so, add seven to that.

ML: Okay, perfect.

SE: That's when we moved.

LP: And so, before we delve into your own experiences, we'd love to learn a little bit more about your parents and particularly their contributions to the area. Can you tell us first about your mother, Nina Christian Franklin? We understand that she worked for a time at Crown Savings Bank. What did she do there?

SE: She was the executive secretary to the vice president, Mr. Davis. I cannot remember his first name, sadly. And then my father opened a restaurant, and she left employment there and worked with my father in the restaurant business.

LP: Great. So, we're going to ask a few questions about the restaurant in just one second.

SE: Certainly.

LP: Just with regard to Crown Savings Bank, can you just say a few words about what that institution meant to the community, sort of the role that it held, the role that it played in the community?

SE: Crown Savings Bank was a [Black bank.] At the time it was called "Negro," "Negro-owned"–Black-owned bank that serviced the Black community. It was considered to be safe and secure, and it was trustworthy to Blacks who lived in the community. They could borrow money. They could talk to the executive directors, the staff. So, it was a part of their home to be able to go to that bank.

ML: So, as you just mentioned, your father, Harry M. Franklin, or "Julian" Franklin as he was known, owned a restaurant, the Plaza Drive Inn. Where was that located?

SE: It was located in the Denbigh section of Newport News. And let's see, I guess it would be considered [country at the time]. It's obviously north of here and south of Denbigh Boulevard, in that general area.

ML: And what did it serve?

SE: It was a general drive-in restaurant facility. It was not basically for sit-down purposes but, you know, burgers, fries, fried chicken, things that you would buy to-go. There was a section where you could sit and eat, but it was very small. And that's where a lot of politics was taking place. And that little, small section where you could sit down.

LP: Yeah, we'd love to hear more about that. So, first of all, do you remember spending time there? You know, what was it like?

SE: It was full of conversation, activity, discussions. You had the ability to speak your mind without fear even if you disagreed with whoever else was talking. It was really a situation where you could come and debate, drink coffee, have a sandwich, feel comfortable.

LP: And you alluded to sort of politics playing out there. Could you expand a little bit on sort of the role that it played in the community and even political life?

SE: Right. People found my father quite trustworthy and felt that they could come to him and ask political questions, discuss topics, and get a good conversation about how they felt. And if he, in some way, may have changed their mind from something that they had walking in [the door]. Or not. But the conversation was always civil. It wasn't aggravating. It wasn't nasty. It was an opportunity to speak your mind. And they knew my father was active in politics and came from a political environment, from Charles City County, that was also quite active. My father, in his young years, was very active in working against the poll tax. He was active in getting people registered to vote, and he just [loved helping others]. That was his passion.

LP: And you had said that [t]his [was his passion]. He had family members also that had been previously involved in politics.

SE: Yes. His grandfather, my great grandfather, was the commissioner of revenue in Charles City County. He was a city treasurer in Charles City County. He spent two years as a delegate in

the [VA] General Assembly. We were always community focused, community minded, and doing things that we felt were for the good of the whole, whatever we could do. And that's what I grew up with. That's what we were supposed to do. We were not to consider anything that would be looked at as selfish and not consider something that the whole community would not benefit from.

ML: We also saw that your father worked with community leaders like Dr. C. Waldo Scott as a part of the Political Action Committee. Can you speak about that organization and the kind of work that it did?

SE: The Political Action Committee was focused on getting minorities involved and supporting them. Just campaigning, raising funds, doing whatever was necessary to ensure that minorities were seen and received in a holistic, open-minded environment.

ML: And we would like to talk more about his contributions to the school board when we get to school desegregation a bit later. But we would like to first hear about his work on a number of political campaigns, like his work with Jessie Rattley and Bobby Scott.

SE: Yes, he was the original campaign managers for those individuals who were running. My father was gregarious. He had a great personality, and people were excited to be in his presence. He was not egocentric at all. And I think that helped, that they felt that they could just come up to him and talk. And, like I said, his passion was politics. So, he would do whatever he could to ensure that anybody that he felt was a good candidate would also be a winning candidate.

LM: Thank you. So, let's turn now to some of your experiences growing up here. We're interested, for example, in hearing more about, you know, what it meant to grow up and to live in a formally-segregated society. What were race relations like in Newport News, for example, when you were growing up?

SE: It's odd that I knew it was segregation, but because we had such a comprehensive and close family, close friends, relatives, it didn't feel that bad. In hindsight, you realize it was, but at the time, because our families and the school system [support]. Schools and teachers [acted] like surrogate parents. They wanted to ensure that you got a perfect education, that you would be focused on a career, that you would do well in whatever you chose to do as a career. So, in that way, segregation was good. Now, obviously segregation is not a good thing. I mean, it prohibits you from going places, doing things, experiencing various things in life. But when our family went on vacation, we went to Atlantic City. We did not go south. So, I mean, that was a decision that we made early on, that when it was time to relax, we were not going to go anywhere south of Virginia, and we did not. So, when you think about things like that and the school system–. I decided to go to Denbigh High School only because it was going to be new. There would not be any obvious cliques already established. I guess I was a junior, yeah, I spent two years at Denbigh. And that was the first time I actually saw a gymnasium that had gymnastic equipment. Carver did not have that. That was the first time I had a book that didn't have other people's names written in it. I was fortunate enough where I was in advanced classes, so I was exposed to microscopes. I had my own camera for physics class. None of that would have been available to me at Carver High School. We just did not have that. So, I found that just amazing that the differences between Black and White schools were so obvious to me at my young age, I thought.

ML: And were you aware of the civil rights movement as it was unfolding? And do you remember any protests or demonstrations in Newport News?

SE: Yes, I [was an exposed] person that was born up in the ‘60s. My family's talked about it. We even had discussions about being called a “Negro” or being called “Black.” We were very open and honest about discussions. We talked about Martin Luther King versus [Stokley] Carmichael,

violence versus nonviolence. Absolutely. I was called the "N-word" almost every day when I went to Denbigh High School. So–. But I was also taught to ignore ignorance, and I did that. And so that created a very good institutional person in myself, to learn how to walk away from stupidity, ignore ignorance. You know what you can and cannot do. And once you get to a position where you can make a difference–that's where my parenting skills from my parents came in–you have to network. You have to help people that may be less fortunate than you who didn't have opportunities. So that's what I learned. So, it was a good learning experience going to Denbigh.

LP: We definitely want to hear more about Denbigh, but maybe first we could just backtrack slightly to hear more about, sort of, getting started at–. You went first to Carver Elementary.

SE: Yes.

LP: And then Carver High School.

SE: Yes.

LP: Can you talk a little bit about your experiences there? You had mentioned things like not having the same sort of materials or resources necessarily, as you later had at Denbigh. But you know, do you remember any say, like, teachers who were particularly influential?

SE: All my teachers were influential. I could not name any one in particular. The teachers were influential. The principal, the assistant principal. Flora Crittenden was my counselor. So it was, as I said, the situation then was the teachers, executive staff, administration, they were all surrogate parents. And they just wanted–not just me–but every student to do well. And I missed that when I went to Denbigh. That was not available to me.

LP: So later you attended, as you mentioned, you attended Denbigh High School. And again, as you said, this was a new school at the time. Can you talk a little bit about, sort of, how that

decision came about? Was it simply a factor of your family then living in the area? Or did you have to go through something like “freedom of choice” in order to attend?

SE: In all honesty, I do not remember the technicality. I just remember discussing that option with my parents and saying, “You know, what do y'all think about me maybe transferring from Carver to Denbigh because it's a new school? I'd like to see what it's like.” And they were like, “If that's what you want to do, then that's fine. We will support you in that decision.” But in terms of a technical paper route, if I had to apply, I have no idea.

LP: Do you remember your first day at Denbigh?

SE: Other than being a little nervous? No, I really do not. The odd thing is I remember going to the bathroom and all these girls in there were putting on makeup. I was like, “What in the world is this?” Some were smoking. None of that I experienced at Carver. They were just very [different]. And people who drove to school, I was like, “Who are these people who have cars?” You know, they must come from money. You know, I rode the bus. So, I just found that all [very] interesting. Yeah. It was just a different culture.

LP: So, what was the racial composition at Denbigh? Either with regard to the students or the faculty?

SE: I don't remember any Black faculty. I believe there were maybe six other Blacks in my class. And they lived in [a] particular area of the city. They lived in an area off of Richneck Road and Fort Eustis area. But yeah.

ML: So, what were relationships like between Black and White students while you were at the school? And were there–. Could you, do you, remember any moments of tension or conflict?

SE: The tension, it was probably internal for me. It was making sure that I excelled. I did not want to be classified as being in the wrong place. “Why is she here? She doesn't deserve to be in

these classes." So, I was always stressing my need to study and perform because, like I said, I was in advanced classes. So, I did not, in any way, want to feel that people were talking about me behind my back, saying things that I didn't deserve to be there, because if I did, that would internalize anger. [I] did not want to be angry, but I always was cautious. I didn't want to say or do anything that would cause anyone any difficulty.

ML: And what was your friend group like at Denbigh? And did any of your friends from Carver attend Denbigh High School with you?

SE: There were a few that were in the band at Carver that went to Denbigh. Socialization was limited. I can't even tell you any of the White kids that I was in school with. I don't know if they have reunions. If they did, maybe I'd go. Don't know. But I have been to Carver reunions. Here again, that's where most of my relationships started. I guess, technically, I went to Denbeigh for an experiment. Didn't go to make friends.

LP: How were you treated by the staff at Denbigh? Did you feel supported by the administrators or teachers?

SE: Just indifferent.

LP: Indifferent. What were some–. Did you have any favorite subjects to study while you were at Denbigh?

SE: Other than–. My science subjects, that's probably what I enjoyed the most.

ML: And what kind of extracurricular activities were you involved [in at] Denbigh? Did you continue on with the band?

SE: I did, yeah. I was first chair flutist at Denbigh. That was a difficult challenge with the person who was trying to be the first chair. Yeah, so that was interesting. That was interesting. And so,

after she lost that competition, she was always very rude and negative to me, which didn't concern me. I wasn't shocked. Yeah.

ML: And so overall, how do you reflect on your time at Denbigh?

SE: It was, again, an experiment for me. I just wanted to see what it was going to be like. What was going to be different between that and Carver? And would I make relationships, would I not? It wasn't going to in any way destroy me. I have a very strong constitution. So again, it was an experiment. And I have friends who laugh about it now. And I said, "Yeah, it's the first time I ever had a book that didn't have ten other people's names in it." You know, I never had a new book before. All the books that came to Carver had been at the White schools. So those types of things I just wanted to experience.

LM: We realize that you graduated from Denbigh in 1967. But we were curious if you had memories of or were at least aware of the court-approved busing plan that was implemented a few years later, in 1971, to desegregate the schools in a more sort of extensive way. Your father, for example, was on the school board at this time.

SE: Mmm-hmm.

LP: Which, you know, we would love to hear more about. Either–. We don't know if you have a sense of sort of the role that he played in this process or, you know, even what his experiences were like on the school board more generally as the only African American at a time of very fierce debates about school desegregation.

SE: Mmm-hmm. My father was an excellent debater as well as an excellent listener. So, I think that was something that helped him in that position. Being on the school board, he would frequently say that, "You have to compromise." So, the art of compromise was something he was very good at, give and take. What's for the good of the whole? Again, this is how we were raised.

How is it going to benefit the majority of the students? “And they're going to be things,” he would say to me, “Shauna, you're just going to have to swallow. You can't get everything you want.” And this is what you'll learn as you mature and age and go to various jobs and careers. So that was his thing to me, that it's always about a compromise. And if you're not willing to compromise, no one will succeed. Everyone will suffer.

ML: And do you know what kind of response he received, either from other board members or the community?

LP: With regard to the court-approved busing.

SE: I'm assuming it wasn't that good. He didn't talk about it a lot in specifics, but I do know that there were lawyers involved in that process. And he would talk about going to Richmond to see various lawyers and talking about things. So, yes, he wanted to be well prepared for discussion.

ML: And did you have any family or friends who were affected by this change?

LP: Which not only, you know, reassigned students across the city but also effectively closed Carver and Huntington or at least, you know, turned them into intermediate schools.

SE: Right. My sister, who is fifteen years younger than I am, she experienced all the schools that were already open and available. So, I know the community, in general, was not pleased when the two predominantly Black high schools became middle schools. That was just a community displeasure. And I think to this day, changing Huntington to something other than is also a displeasure and was talked about at city council meetings. That's a part of our community, that's a part of our history that we feel like has been violated.

ML: So, after graduating from Denbigh, you attended Fisk University in Nashville.

SE: Mmm-hmm.

ML: Why did you choose Fisk?

SE: [laughter] I had aunts that had gone to Fisk. I had an aunt who lived in Nashville. And I didn't want to be close to home. I didn't want to go to Howard. I didn't want–. My mother went to Hampton. I didn't want to go there. Didn't want to go to Union, that's where my father went. So, I just wanted to, here again, experience a different culture, a different life, see what it was like. So, I decided to go to Fisk. It was also considered one of the high-ranking HBCUs at the time. W.E.B. Dubois went there, and I knew that. So, you know, it's a very strong school. And at the time, again, I was majoring in biology. Meharry Medical College is across the street from Fisk University. So, I was thinking, "Okay, just a step across," not knowing that I would change my major at the time.

LP: What was it like attending an HBCU after having, you know, come through Denbigh?

SE: Here again, I got back to my comfort. I got back to the surrogate parenting that teachers give you, the support that they give you. So, I got back to what it was like at Carver. So, it was a beautiful thing. Of course, Nashville is extremely segregation-focused, so I had to deal with that. Going downtown, and you'd go in a store by yourself, and all the Whites in the store were watching you as if you were some animal or something. That was very difficult. But again, I got over it. I'm strong. So, I was just like, "Ignore ignorance, keep moving, buy whatever you came in here for, Shauna, and leave."

LP: Were you involved in any extracurricular activities at Fisk or student organizations?

SE: Not really. No. I was just focused on getting my education, and it's a very small liberal arts college. I had friends that were involved. I just chose not to be. I didn't join a sorority, didn't join anything. Just stayed focused on why I was there.

ML: And so, what brought you back to this area after you graduated college?

SE: So, I graduated from college. My senior year, I was engaged, got engaged. So, I decided to come back home, save some money. My husband, at the time, then went to the University of Virginia. He was the First Black to graduate from Darden School of Business. So, and then, the following year, got married. [We] went to New York City–he worked for International Paper Company–went up to New York City, worked for a while. Then [we]moved to Ticonderoga, New York. Then we moved to Warwick, Rhode Island, close to Providence. We left there. We would always come back to New York City to ground ourselves, I guess. And then we went out to San Jose, California. He worked out there, and then we just got tired of moving around and decided, "Well, let's just come back home and see what it's like." So, then he worked for Fass Brothers as a comptroller there. He worked at Whittaker Memorial Hospital as a comptroller there. And then he decided to go into entrepreneurial ventures. So, he had a–. What did he have then? It was so many different things. [laughter] And then I came back and [finally] decided that I wanted to go into social work. Yeah, I think it was juvenile probation work. There were so many options for me that I thought of at the time. I will tell you this, I could not even get a job as a substitute teacher because my father was on the school board. Thought that was crazy. So anyway, I had to quickly find employment because I couldn't even substitute teach. Yeah. So anyway, back then, you had to take tests to be a social worker or a probation officer, you know, that type of thing. So, I had to go through that process. And your name goes into a pool in your various localities. So, I could have either gone to Newport News or Hampton and I went to Hampton. That was my first job, official job. I also worked at Colonial Williamsburg for a minute in between trying to get employment full time. So, I interpreted how silver was made in a silversmith shop. That was very interesting. It's amazing. I will try almost anything as long as it's legal. [laughter]

ML: So, what got you involved with juvenile justice? You talked about, like, getting involved here, trying to, becoming a social worker, a substitute teacher. But what was the motivation behind juvenile justice? Like why that specific part?

SE: I think it was, in reflection, some of the work that my father did in the community. And seeing how poverty, lack of connections, can influence you. And I thought, "Well, maybe this would be something I would enjoy." I felt like I could give my part to families in systems that could benefit from hearing my side, and maybe giving them some idea about what they could do differently. And I was also raised that, "Shauna, you are no better or worse than anybody that you may encounter. They have just had different–or lack of–opportunities." So that was always in my heart and soul. So, I guess I've just always felt like there was something I could offer, and that's why I chose that. And then I'd also thought about school social work. I took a couple of classes in adolescent psychology at William and Mary, decided I had been in juvenile probation work too long, that there was no really practical application of information in the courses I was taking. And I kind of was like, "Well, I'm going to be in conflict with my professor. I'm wasting my money because he's not going to want to hear what I've got to say." I'd be like, "That's not going to work. [laughter] I can't tell you what that book says, but practical application will tell you that's not going to work." So that's how I got involved.

ML: And what did, what kind of work did you do? Like what was–. You know, you talked about speaking to families and offering them solutions. But what did the day-to-day look like? You know, what were your favorite parts like? How was that?

SE: When I first started, the director of the Court Service Unit did what he called a "docket call." Who's on the docket to go to court today? And we would go over the cases, talk about them in general, and go to court every day, if necessary. Respond to the requests that the juvenile judges

would make of us once the child was found guilty of an offense. And then it was required that we do what's called “predispositional court reports,” where you interview the families, you would go to the school to get children's school records, you would interview the child, try to find out what's going on: “Why did you do what you did?” And we were in a position where, you know, it was very delicate. I would always say, “I'm going to ask you some questions that are very personal, and I'm not going to make a personal decision about them. But the judge needs to understand why you may or may not have done what you did. So, the more honest you can be with me, the better.” So, I thought that was very important to establish a relationship of trust with these families and not come in saying, “I know what's best for you,” because I don't live where you live. And once you go into their homes, I had no problem doing that. You could realize that they were living in poverty. They were struggling. So, for them to sit down, as I had as a child at a table, and have parents who could help you with homework, provide you with that kind of support, was not always there for these kids. So that was a reality for me. And I would try to do everything I could to support them.

LP: Did you have any role models in the field, or were there any particular people who encouraged you or inspired you?

SE: I didn't have any role models, no. I guess just oddly, I made that decision. I chose that career and decided to move forward in it.

LP: What do you see as your most important contributions to juvenile justice?

SE: When I left the city of Hampton after seventeen years, I guess, the director of the Department of Juvenile Justice for the Commonwealth–he is now a circuit court judge, Jerrauld Jones, who was active in the General Assembly–asked me to come to Central Office to be in charge of minority confinement issues. The department had gotten an Annie E. Casey Grant, and

they were looking at issues of confinement: why, disproportionately, so many Black youth were confined versus White. So, I went up there as the first director of that [unit]. Sadly, once I left, they did not fill that position. But that was an opportunity for me to do work that was specific to minority confinement issues and relationships. So, I did newsletters monthly, just putting out information to staff, things for them to consider, poverty issues. When you're doing the day-to-day work, you don't have time to sit down and read and research. So, I made that a focus for myself to do that and share that information. Then I would go to the specific court service units and talk to them and ask them questions about, "Are you comfortable? Do you see this minority issue as something you can't support? And you need to be honest." And I would say to them, "After I leave here and you all start talking behind my back, we've not done anything productive. So please be honest." And some people were very honest, and they would say, "Well, the Black kids are doing all the crime. I think they need to be locked up." And I said, "Is there not an alternative to being locked up? Have you ever visited a correctional center? Do you know what it's like for these kids to be locked up? They're treated like animals." And a lot of the staff had not been to these correctional centers. So, you know, it's a matter of exposure. And I had the ability, I guess I got that from my father, to not be confrontational, but to just be suggestive in how you think. And that was something that worked. But as in most instances, department heads are appointed by governors. So, when Jerrauld Jones left, the department got another director, and that director didn't see the benefit of having someone that was focused on minority confinement issues and felt that the department should be focused on volunteers, which I understand, but that's not anything that I felt I was going to be able to do in honesty, so I left. And I took a job with the [Center for] Children's Law [and Policy] in DC. And they had a grant with Annie Casey and the MacArthur [Foundation] –the Center for Children's Law and Policy.

And I did minority issues there in the state of Louisiana and Pennsylvania. So, I was able to continue my desire to put a focus on how you can treat kids differently, other than with just locking them in a detention center.

ML: Yeah, so you've just gone over a lot of issues that you've seen within the field itself and what you've encountered. And so, could you touch on, would you say that just locking the children up instead of, you know, trying to understand them and trying to rehabilitate them would be the most pressing issue? Or what would you say is the most pressing issue within the field?

SE: I have to be honest that, sadly, by the time we see these kids, [at ages] 12, 13, 14, a lot of negative things have happened to these youth and families. Their lack of exposure to positive things is lacking. Young males and females having babies at a young age has not been beneficial in our society. The support is not there that they need. So ideally, I would say to people, "Put me out of my job. You need to start when these kids are in the womb. You need to start at a very, very young age with these parents teaching them responsibilities." Sadly, young individuals have this need to be loved. So, they have these babies. That's what they'll tell you, "Well, I just had to have something I could love," not realizing the responsibilities that comes with being a good parent, both financially, physically, emotionally, and that sort of thing. So, yeah, ideally, I would like to say, "Put juvenile probation work out and put all that money in things that can be considered as preventive measures to help kids and families."

ML: And how have you watched the system change over time? You know, you've spent a lot of time in this area. How have you now, you know, not working in it anymore, have you seen that change?

SE: It's had to change because society has changed. The difficulties that young kids get in now was not the same when I first started. There was no heavy drug involvement. There was no heavy weapons, guns: none of that. There were no gangs when I first started. So, society has changed, which has forced the system to change, to recognize it. And sometimes the system doesn't change fast enough because, again, they don't have the capacity to do the research. Most people that are in positions of power will say, “Well, these kids just need to be locked up.” And you can't argue sometimes with public safety, there's something to be said. Yeah, everybody wants to feel safe in their community. No matter what your race, color or creed is, you want to feel safe. And I've kind of gotten away from doing my research. It gets kind of weary after a while. So I'm sure there are things out there now that can give you suggestions. But here again, I still think you need to just start as young as you possibly can and afford young families the opportunity to see things and life differently. Teach them trades and technical skills so that they can feel that they can do things that are supportive of themselves with any children that they may have, not just basketball and football.

LP: We'd love to learn now about some of your other community involvement over the years. We read, for example, in, it was a newspaper article from the ‘70s, that you had been involved with the Young Democrats, either as–

SE: Oh, I'd forgotten about that. [laughter]

LP: An early member, a founding member.

SE: Yes, yes.

LP: Can you tell us a little bit about that group and, you know, its goals, what you set out to do with it?

SE: Here again, it was bringing young folk into the political process, teaching them not to be afraid of it, teaching them to be able to feel comfortable expressing themselves, speaking their mind, but not in a negative, aggressive manner: just being honest and truthful. So, I did a lot of speaking–and I took delight in that–and trying to get young folk involved, making sure that they registered, making sure that–. This was back when you would do everything you could to get people to the polls. So, you know, providing transportation, getting poll workers. My parents, with the restaurant they had, they would make sandwiches and take [them] to the poll workers so they could sit out there all day and just, you know, pass out things and do things that they felt were supportive even though they couldn't be out there. And so that's how I was raised. I did the same thing just on a younger level. And I'm open and honest so, the kids would feel comfortable asking me questions, "What could they do?" That sort of thing. So no, I did–. I had forgotten all about that. [laughter] Time goes by.

ML: Well, now that we've brought it back to the light–

SE: [laughter]

ML: Do you remember any of its biggest accomplishments? The biggest accomplishments of the Young Democrats?

SE: I think it was probably just getting people registered to vote. That's always been a major issue. And the importance of voting. That's still an issue now where people [are] like, "My vote doesn't count." Well, yes it does. And your vote has an impact. So, then it was starting off locally. Most people will vote on a national level, but the importance of voting locally and going to city council meetings and expressing yourselves–. And here again, the Political Action Committee was good at that. So just doing things like that were important to me.

LP: So just to continue with the local community, we're interested–. I know you said that you have some memories of the displacement of Black homeowners to make room for what was then Christopher Newport College, or CNC.

SE: Mmm-hmm.

LP: Could you first just maybe say a few words about the Shoe Lane community in the years before CNC moved in, before CNC acquired the land?

SE: I lived in the community from age 7 to 15 and did not move until [several years after] my father opened the restaurant up in Denbigh, and they built a home up in the Denbigh section and we moved up there. So, I technically was not displaced by CNC. My husband also lived on Moores Lane, but he and I are eight years apart, so at the time it was like–. So, his mother died in that home and his brother lived there maybe for a year. But then the family decided to sell the home. But here again, it wasn't anything that they were "forced" to sell, in general speak. But to sell the home, no one was going to buy it because of the intrusion of CNC coming in. If you knew that a college was going to come in and build all around you, the ability to sell that home is minimal. So even though there was no one knocking on your door from CNC or CNU, the reality of selling your home in that community, in that neighborhood, was minimal. So that's, sadly, that's how it works. And you're forced out in that way, you know. And then there's a gerrymandering in that form. And we–my parents–sold their home prior to that. So, I think a family did move in. But not with my husband's family's home.

LP: When did your husband's family sell their home?

SE: I'm trying to think what that date is. I'm going to say in the [late] 1990s.

LP: Did you have any close connections to other folks in the Shoe Lane area beyond the ones you just mentioned? Whose, you know, stories you might want to share?

SE: I was friendly with the Enoch family, and they lived on Shoe Lane. We all went to school together. I was friendly with the Downing family and they're on Prince Drew. And then the Shavers family, and they're on Prince Drew. And the Shavers family, I believe, the daughter was one of the last to sell and was being–. Everything was being built around her. So here again, I think CNU would approach her periodically and say, "[Have] you still decided to stay or are you considering selling?" That sort of thing. And it's my understanding that the negotiation that she had with CNU was not very good. She felt that they would tell her things or give her an idea to expect this amount of money, or "we're not going to do anything, we're not going to force you." But yet, and still, they would. So, it was not healthy.

ML: And so do you–. Like you mentioned earlier, you had already moved to Denbigh at this point. Did you remember hearing anything about the decision to locate CNC in the Shoe Lane area?

LP: The initial decision.

ML: The initial decision.

SE: Oh yeah. Well, right. They came as a community college, and I don't think anyone was concerned-concerned, initially, because you know, you're thinking, "Well, this is something that–. Well, this is healthy. A little community college, what harm could it do?" But then, when you realized that eminent domain can come along and take your property, then it's another issue. And then you realize that your city council members, behind your back, are doing things. That means that they're going to take your property whether you want them to or not. That's when the community felt like they needed to be heard, and they would go to city council meetings. They would present papers. But, you know, the Black people were in the minority. And city council voted against them every time.

ML: And so, like you, you mentioned they would–community members would–go to the councilmen–

SE: To city council.

ML: Do you remember, within your own community, within your own friends and family who you were interacting with, what were the conversations like surrounding the Shoe Lane decision, if there were any?

SE: Right. It was anger, disappointment, frustration. These were homes, you know, 2,400-2,500 square feet. These were not just bricks. These were not just what we call "shanties." I mean, you know, this is not anything like that. These are professional [men and] women. These were dentists, doctors, school teachers, educators. These were prominent people in our community. And we felt like if the government can push us out, just think about poorer people that don't have the ability to argue their case. And that's what we felt like. That was a rude awakening to bringing segregation back up to its fullest, negative. And it was disheartening. It was very, very sad.

LP: Thank you for those remarks. We know that later on in, I guess it was the late '80s, the community then learned about a master plan to expand CNU's boundaries beyond what it had already been. I don't–. Do you remember sort of this moment or, as Mia said, sort of the sort of the conversations that took place, especially among community members hearing this news?

SE: It was just a matter of, here again, frustration: "I can't believe that they want to do this." Why did they, you know–. Once they decided they wanted this community college, fine. But then to make a decision to expand it, which meant it was an obvious effort to push middle class Black people out of their home and out of their environment. It was just always frustration and a lack of understanding. You couldn't make us understand it. I still to this day can't understand it

when there was land that could have been used, other than this land. And it's just like, “What evil?” So, then you don't want to–. You don't want to really go there because that just brings out the evil in you because you're so frustrated. But it is–. It's a very frustrating situation to think that you can be so easily displaced from a home that you built–you know, saved your money and built because you couldn't get a loan back then. Get a little bit from Crown Saving, but, you know, it wasn't a big bank or anything where you would go to. So you really had to save and work hard and then to have this happen to you. Extremely frustrating. Extremely so.

LP: Is there anything else on the subject of Shoe Lane that you feel like we might have missed, or you would like to add, to have documented?

SE: The only thing I did read about, the task force, and I was kind of disappointed that no one on the task force grew up in that community. And I'm not saying that for me. I don't need to be on another thing. [laughter] But I'm just saying there are other people. And I don't know that they weren't asked. Not quite sure. But I think maybe if the article had said–the newspaper article had said–“We reached out to people who lived in the community, but they decided they didn't want to participate.” That was just a disappointment for me, that I didn't see anybody who grew up in the community that was on the task force.

LP: So just as we wrap up, we had a few questions with regard to the broader civil rights movement. Do you see yourself as part of that movement or, you know, sort of a broader Black freedom struggle?

SE: I hope so. [laughter] Yeah, I always want to be a part of anything that can support Black folk, as I like to say. In any form or fashion, I will do what is necessary. Like I said, I'm almost seventy-five, so I don't move around as much as I want to. Ideally, today would have been a day I would have stayed in the house on a cloudy day and cold. [laughter] But I came out because I

had a responsibility to be here. But I will always be sensitive to minority issues, situations, circumstances, and I will always be open to anything that I can do to make it better. That's just who I am.

ML: And how do things like school desegregation and juvenile justice fit into this broader civil rights movement?

SE: Classification issues. When I was doing probation work. I'm going to say eighty percent of the youth were considered behavioral problems and put in special ed. And I thought that was not right. And then they would have these meetings with the parents, and they would talk over the parents' heads. They would use a lot of terminology that they couldn't understand. So, I would make sure that I would always go with a parent, ask their permission. Here again, I didn't want them to think that I was taking over. But I would say to them, "There may be some terminology, some things that are going to be said that you may not understand. If you don't mind, I'll go with you." So, it's very easy to, sadly, take advantage of people who don't know how to play the game as they say, don't know the system. So, these young men, these young boys, at twelve–. And I'm not saying they weren't behavior problems, I'm sure their cognitive behavioral skills were lacking. And now we have information and research that tells us that your frontal lobe cortex is not even fully developed until you're twenty-five. So, for you to make decisions that an adult should make, when we have adults that don't make appropriate decisions, why do you think a twelve year old should be held to that standard? So just things like that are just–. It's a constant issue and concern and a lack of money that goes into the school system. Teachers don't get paid appropriately. So, it's just hard. And until we as taxpayers are willing to put in that money and support for school systems, public school systems, I think it's going to be lacking. We will always have problems.

ML: And so, what do you view as the unfinished work of the movement? Obviously, there's a lot that's still to be done. What particular issues do you think, do you still see, that are unfinished that we can work on?

SE: I guess you'd start with education. Public school systems. Community support systems. I mean, we do have the Boys and Girls Club. But I've not been in them to see what criteria they have, how they determine who can participate. Those are things when you get down to the true issues about who is supported in the communities and what that young person has to do to participate. Transportation used to always be an issue when I was working to get kids to and from various activities. And the other issue was parents who had to come in and sign and do this and that. Well, if the parents were fortunate enough to have a job at the shipyard, you just can't take off from the shipyard. So, I would have to write letters to people who worked at the shipyard, to their immediate boss to say, “Please allow this parent to participate,” and so on and so forth. So just little things like that that we take for granted when we have the flexibility I was able to take a couple of hours off and do things that I needed to do. That's not always the case.

LP: So finally, is there anything that we might have missed in our questions? Is there anything additional that you would like to add to have documented?

SE: No. Thank you for the opportunity to present my life, as it were, quite quickly. But I hope you got what you needed for your oral history effort. I think it's a capital idea that you all are going out in the community and asking these questions and presenting them in the open forum. Sadly, I was not able to be there that day, but I think that was an excellent idea. I hope it can go forward, and I hope that we can get money to continue that. And maybe do a better outreach. I'm not quite sure how you selected [me], other than by name and recommendation. But just to maybe think about that. People who are not quite as active as I have been in my life, but people

who have struggled more. I like to see a well-rounded conversation about people in the community and how they did or did not struggle, to where they are today.

LP: Thank you.

SE: Thank you.

LP: Thank you for your participation and for your feedback. So, yeah.

ML: Yeah. Thank you so much for letting us interview you today.

SE: Thank you. I'm going to go home and get in the bed. No, just teasing. [laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW

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