

Becky Livas Interview Summary

Interviewee: Becky Livas

Interviewers: Judiclaire Kinerney and Hannah Washington

Interview Date: October 14, 2021

Location: Blackboard Collaborate

Length: 1 audio file, WAV format, 87:25

THE INTERVIEWEE: Becky Livas, née Perry, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was raised in Norfolk, Virginia, where she continues to spend her adult life. Attending local Hampton Roads area schools, including Jacox Elementary, Bowling Park Elementary School, Jacox Junior High, and Booker T. Washington High School, Ms. Livas has experienced segregated schools throughout her time as a student. Following high school, she attended Cedar Crest College and then transferred to Hampton Institute to finish her undergraduate degree. She then married and gave birth to three children before returning to work. Once she returned to work, she was hired at WTAR, becoming the first African-American woman reporter in the Hampton Roads region. She has continued down many career paths including singer, TV reporter, radio personality, teacher, insurance agent, and “band wife” with the Kirk Stuart Trio. After her retirement, she continues to sing cabaret in Hampton Roads and has taken up community work, sitting on the board of multiple community organizations and projects.

THE INTERVIEWER: Judiclaire Kinerney and Hannah Washington are students at Christopher Newport University and conducted this interview on behalf of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project. They are involved in the project through their participation in Dr. Laura Puaca’s class History 341: The Long Civil Rights Movement.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted through Christopher Newport’s virtual platform, Blackboard Collaborate. Becky Livas showed no signs of nervousness. Rather, she was open and honest from the beginning. She had an engaging and positive personality, which carried over into her expressions and responses. Throughout the interview, she was confident in her answers, as she recalled her experiences in Pennsylvania, Hampton Roads, and in her various careers. A recurring theme in her interview was education. Just as she had pride in being an African-American woman she too had pride in education. Her parents were educators, as was she, and her grandfather was a college graduate, so from an early age, education was a key component in her life. This led her to talk about what life was like at Cedar Crest College, in Allentown Pennsylvania, compared to Hampton Institute and the challenges she faced at both institutions.

Towards the end of the interview, she began elaborating more on her life as a housewife, news reporter, and cabaret-jazz musician. She discussed both the opportunities she enjoyed as well as the challenges she faced in those various fields.

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START OF INTERVIEW

Judiclaire Kinerney: This is Judiclaire Kinerney and my partner Hannah Washington. Today is October 14th, 2021. We'll be interviewing Mrs. Becky--. And can you pronounce your last name for us just so we make sure not to get it wrong?

Becky Livas: Live-as, Live-as.

JK: Live-as, perfect. And we are interviewing Mrs. Becky Livas. This interview is being carried out as a part of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project at Christopher Newport University.

Good Afternoon, Mrs. Livas, we are taking an approach which is called "Life History" and would like to begin if you were to give us a short synopsis of your life, anything notable you think we should know just to begin.

BL: Alright, short synopsis. I was born in Philadelphia and, at the time, my parents actually lived in Norfolk because they had come here because my father could get work here during the war. But my mother did not want me born in Norfolk. And she was from Philadelphia. She grew up in Philadelphia. But in Norfolk, they used to have signs in the yard that were very offensive to people and she did not want me to be born in a place where she felt offended all the time. My parents met at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina. My father was from

Thomasville, Georgia, my mother from Philadelphia. So you can see they kind of came together in the middle, and then they lived in North Carolina for a couple of years, for a few years, and then came to Hampton Roads when there was a need for labor during the war. And so, we lived in one of the projects in Norfolk that actually still exists. It's in Chesapeake now, I guess. Or south of Norfolk maybe is what it's called. But that place actually still exists. And what happened then is that people paid on a sliding scale in [the] so-called "projects," temporary housing, And so I was born in Philadelphia and the person who was the manager of Oak Leaf Park, it was called then—I think the other day I saw something and it's called Oak Leaf Gardens—but anyway, the manager's daughter was five years old and my parents did not have a telephone. Imagine that. Imagine not having one. Haha! But then the manager got the phone call, I guess from my grandparents in Philadelphia, that I was born. So then that little girl, that five-year-old little girl who is still alive, ran over and told my father that I was born. Then, at some point, I guess the job in Norfolk dissolved or something and my father went to Camden, New Jersey or—. You know, you live in Philadelphia, you can work in Camden. And so the RCA Victor Company in Camden, he and another gentleman were the first African Americans to work in a job other than as maintenance people in RCA Camden. My father majored in physics in college and was quite good in electricity and as a general handyman, a "fix-it," Mr. Fix-it. So we lived in Philadelphia then for a couple of years and then I recently found something that said that he was in a union up there but—. For some reason, I don't know why, they must have laid some people off and so then my parents moved back to Hampton Roads. And I don't—I'm trying to remember whether— yeah that's when we moved to Liberty Park. You see, if you were African American in Norfolk, and you didn't grow up in Norfolk, your roots weren't in Norfolk, then

your housing had to be the “temporary housing” that was built during the war. So we moved into another “project” called Liberty Park. Today many of my high school classmates grew up in Liberty Park too, so we still kind of laugh about the good old days in Liberty Park. Liberty Park, doctors, lawyers, Indian chiefs, teachers—everyone lived in Liberty Park who was not from Norfolk and paid on a sliding scale for your housing. One good thing about that is a statement about what has happened in African American history, because the educated were living among the not-educated, the blue-collar workers. And there was a whole different feeling at that time in history. Blue-collar workers looked up to their educated neighbors. They felt that their educated neighbors, they had gotten something. Getting a college education at that time was something that was looked up to. And so you had all of those different levels of education in the neighborhood and you had the different levels of needs, of helping each other. That was the thing is, we were all living in the same place. We were all neighbors and so that’s when we were really a village. That’s when it took a village to rear a child. And I say “rear” because my mother was a stickler for proper English. My mother spoke what she and my grandparents called the King’s English [laughter] because my parents grew up when Elizabeth’s father was King, and—. Or at least they saw more than that, but that was enough. Anyway, it was called the King’s English. “You rear children, you raise cattle.” And I’m sure, one of you is in Communications, so I hope there is somebody who is saying that in your communications classes, if you intend to be a journalist. “You rear children, you raise cattle.” I was very fortunate when I was working as a reporter that my editor, my news editor, was a person who really knew English and that felt so good that I rarely had something that he had to tear apart or whatever. I was really proud to know that English. Okay so I grew up, I went to elementary schools, public schools in the Norfolk

area. I went to Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania— the first college I went to—then I came back to Hampton University and then I married, had a couple of kids, and then I became the first African-American female reporter in Hampton Roads. It was at Norfolk’s Channel Three, which now is WTKR, but at that time was WTAR. I had tried to get, as soon as I finished college, I had tried to get a job in broadcasting but I was too white for the Black station and too Black for the white station. That’s the story of my generation in the late sixties. And so what happened to me was I saw Michelle Clark. And I don’t know if you know who Michelle Clark is. She was a CBS reporter and then she became a co-host of CBS—. Was it *CBS This Morning*? The morning program that they did. And then, unfortunately, she was killed in a plane accident. But when I saw Michelle Clark, I looked at her and I said, “I can do that too.” There was a lady who was a reporter on Channel Three who had this southern accent, this typical Hampton Roads accent, or what I call Tidewater accent, and of course she was working at Channel Three. We became friends but, still, I used to look at her and go, “Huh.” So then there was this other lady who had a program at one o’clock in the afternoon and I used to look there, stand there and look at her—you know, because I was a housewife—and I’d go, “Oh no, I am better than that.” I mean I was just—. [laughter] I was kind of nerdy but I was right. So as it turned out I started working at WTAR in August of 1972. And how far do you want me to go? Cause I want you to have a chance to ask questions.

JK: We have some individual questions based on some of the things you talked about so we can start from there. So we are looking at a life history as we’ve described so we’re going to start with some specific questions regarding your early childhood—your early life and your early

childhood. So I know you said your father worked. Did your mother work outside the home or was she a homemaker?

BL: My mother, actually, was always working in my life and I think this is true of my generation, or—. It's pretty true of Black women throughout the ages really. Well, maybe my grandmother, maybe my mother's mother, didn't work outside the home after she was married, but my grandparents were married in their thirties and so they had worked before that. But my grandmother, my other grandmother, was a college graduate—my father's mother. And she and my grandfather taught and carried on—. They ran this school with the church. My grandfather was an Episcopal minister, so once he got to Thomasville then he and my grandmother worked in the church school together. And it was the only school, there was no elementary school for African-American children in the 1920s when they got to Thomasville. And so this school was connected with the church, and so my grandparents had to raise funds from throughout the country in order for that to operate that school. My grandmother taught, and my other grandmother did teach in Sunday school but I don't think she worked, maybe, after she got married. Anyway, for women, yeah, I think it's traditional for African-American women to think of their grandmothers, great-grandmothers—everybody worked. It may be that my great-grandmothers did not work outside—. I know they did not work outside the home. But that was different. They were fortunate that my great grandfathers had enough, were able to provide for their families. So, my mother first taught—. When she first got out of St. Augustine's, she taught in Gastonia, North Carolina. She was a French and English major. And she loved the French. She and her French professor were friends for the rest of [his life], until he died. And he used to come visit us. So she worked not only as a French teacher, but also she took library

science classes and became a librarian. So the people who went to school with me actually know my mother as the school librarian. So she was the librarian at Booker T. Washington High School. And my father taught Physics, Math, some Chemistry at Booker T. Washington High School. So they were both educators. And I know that answered your question and more.

[laughter]. My children go “TMI!” [laughter]

JK: No! We are looking for any and all information you are willing to give. So that was very helpful. So it sounds like you didn’t spend a lot of your childhood in Pennsylvania. While you were there do you have any sort of memories of what race relations were like in Pennsylvania?

BL: Actually, we went—my mother and I especially—went every Christmas, Easter, and summer. My mother and I spent summers there. My father taught at American University during about twenty summers. So my mother and I went to Philadelphia, and stayed with my grandfather—my grandmother died when I was seven. But as far as race relations were concerned, people really did not talk that much about it. When my mother grew up in the South Philadelphia neighborhood that she grew up in, it was mostly Italian. And then when my grandfather grew up in South Philadelphia, he had to actually be able to speak Italian to get along. So South Philadelphia kind of changed from an Italian area to a mixed area to, I guess today, maybe it’s—. No, I can’t say it’s predominantly Black because it’s always been mixed but your neighborhoods, I mean, the people living immediately next door to you probably were African American, but people did not—. The generation before my generation was so hopeful that, rather than—. I mean they were angry about racism; however, they were always feeling like they could positively work beyond it. They were looking forward to the things they could do to get beyond it. And that’s why they got educated when they could, or they did whatever they could to make race relations

better. And it was really more in education, their fights were. But when you look at their generation you had the people who were right behind the generation that founded the NAACP and things like that. You know, it was my grandfather's generation where you had Booker T. Washington and what he did. So then in my grandparents' generation, they encouraged their kids to become college graduates. In my parents' generation, they became educated and there was—. The work to be done was to continue what their parents had started, as far as making sure that you educated other Blacks, that you shared your education with other Blacks. So the teaching was really important. And my father was brought up to believe that he was fortunate, and that he needed to share that good fortune with others, and so he and all of his siblings did that. They were either in education or social work. And the one, the baby of the family, became a Tuskegee Airman and stayed in the Air Force until he retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. Now he was very angry because he felt that he could have become a colonel had it not been for racism. But also our family was—. My father came from a background that was mixed for generations so that my grandfather's brother actually went to Newton, Massachusetts and passed. And that was no big deal at the time because people felt like, "Gee Whiz, if you can pass and get away with it, good for you!" because it meant that you could get a better job. So, yeah, that generation—my grandparent's generation, and my parent's generation—generally when you read about the migration, you'll read about people moving from the South and going North. With my parents though, they were kinda the exception because they wanted to be in Hampton Roads.

JK: Yeah. So after y'all moved to Hampton Roads, did you experience colorism? How did y'all experience it and how did y'all respond to it? You as a family unit.

BL: Okay, well colorism—. My mother basically looked white, so here's what she and some of my great friends, who are still friends from childhood—. In my parents' generation, it was pretty popular for a dark-skinned man to marry a light-skinned woman. That was the thing, okay? And so my mother and some of the friends would actually go downtown Norfolk, without the children, okay. And they could try on hats, because Black women couldn't try on hats. Black women were discouraged from trying on clothes or anything. So these ladies just went downtown and they got away with pretending they were not African American. I mean, because some light-skinned Black people look Greek, or Italian, or whatever. And so, in this area, we have, in Hampton Roads, Greek Cypriots, and some of those Greek Cypriots are browner than I am. When I first went on television -- Livas, by the way, is a Greek surname. You can find it in the Athens phone book but you can't—I used to look every time I went to New York on a fashion trip—couldn't find Livas. There wasn't one Livas in New York City. Now can you imagine that? But when I first went on television, people, some people, still had Black and white TVs. And, so they started inviting me to Greek activities, the Cypriot community here [laughter]. But yeah colorism, it's interesting that you use that term because a friend and I from high school were saying the other day that we're going have to sit down and talk about colorism, because colorism is something that Black people hide from. In other words, “No, we're not going to talk about that because we don't want to talk about how we treat each other differently.” You know, lighter-skinned Blacks thinking they are smarter than darker-skinned Blacks, darker-skinned Blacks thinking, “Hmm, why do they get all of the breaks and all of that kind of stuff?” I mean that's part of the history. And what I saw as a reporter—. I went to a national convention, American Women in Radio and Television Convention in Atlanta, in 1979, and this, by that

time—because I started in ‘72, was hired in ‘72—by ‘79 there were quite a number of young Black women who were in broadcasting. For the first time in broadcasting, majority broadcasting, for major network affiliates. And one of the girls there, said— she had us meet in her room, the Black, ones—and she said, “Watch out for the backlash, there’s a backlash beginning.” Now, what the backlash was, was that there were people complaining that those of us who were hired were not Black enough. But I think it came from two points of view. There were, I think white people who felt like we were, we proved ourselves, we did well. And then they said, “Oh no no no, we thought these people were going to fail in a couple of years.” But we didn’t fail. I mean this is the way—. This is just my personal way of seeing it. And then I think in the later seventies, because of not only journalism, but commercials—. TV commercials started using Black people. Sitcoms had Black people and everything. So I think that there was a backlash from both, from the whites who thought, “Oh no, Blacks can’t be equal.” And no matter how well we did, that meant, “Oh no, uh-uh, they just don’t do that well.” In other words, you’ve seen that just in the past few years. You have seen a revival of the feelings that people had in the sixties and seventies, which is very sad to me. And then there were Black people who did complain about, “Hey, there are not enough people who look like me.” I mean, “All, everybody you have looks, I don’t know, I guess mostly Hispanic or whatever.” Now we’ve gotten to the point where everyone is included. It’s so much better than it was. But yeah, colorism you hit on a subject that we really don’t like to talk about, but I’m glad you did because—. Have you been to the National African American Museum in the Smithsonian at all?

JK: Not yet

BL: Okay, alright, because you know they have an area where they show the brown bag comparison.. So they touch on it in there and I was glad-. My daughter caught it. I've never seen it, but she went at one time after my last time going there and she posted about the brown bag test. And because that's the way that some people were treated. That was how people determined how they treated African Americans: "which shade are you?" That's just an unfortunate reality that we've avoided talking about.

JK: Absolutely, and we'll touch on more of your experiences regarding colorism as we keep going through different parts of your life. But, in your childhood, did you notice or experience discrimination within public facilities? I know you said you and your mother specifically could be white-passing depending on the situation, so did you notice discrimination either against yourself or against others within these public facilities?

BL: My mother insisted when I was a child, if we were going anywhere, that I would go to the bathroom whether I had to go or not. And to this day [laughter], it still bothers me because I can't go out the door without going to the bathroom first. And the reason why she did that was because, if you went someplace, a public place, you saw the signs on the bathrooms: men, ladies, and colored. So, you know that-. She did not want me to feel that hurt of that. She didn't explain it to me, it took me a time to realize that. When we went to Philadelphia, of course, she still had me go before-. But it wasn't with that same urgency, with that same sense, with that same intensity, that I just had to go to the bathroom before I went someplace. Because of course when we went to Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, which is now a Macy's, it was just-. Philadelphia was much, much more relaxed. My mother was much more relaxed. She felt kind of tense in Hampton Roads. And it took me a while-in my retirement, as I have reflected on things, in just

the past couple of years as I've reflected on things—to understand the difference between the tenseness and the relaxed feeling.

Hannah Washington: Alright, so we basically went over your whole early life and your childhood. And so for the next bit, I know you already touched on your education with the colleges you went to and your high school experience. But just kind of like a quick overview of the schools that you actually went to starting at elementary school, and, were those schools also segregated or were you able to participate in integrated schools?

BL: Oh no, no, no, they were segregated when I went to elementary, all through school. Now, the Norfolk 17 would come in my, I think I was in tenth grade, but here it is. Went to Jacox Elementary School through fourth grade. Then they built Bowling Park Elementary School, which was near the house—my parents eventually built their first house—and Bowling Park Elementary was close to it. So then I went to Bowling Park from the last, the latter half of fourth grade through sixth grade. Then went back to Jacox, and Jacox became Junior High. That's what we called middle school back then. And so that was okay because my parents were teaching at Booker T., so I got a ride. I wanted to walk with some of the other kids, but I ended up a lot of times being dropped off. So Jacox Junior High School—. That was, for us, junior high school was seventh through ninth grades. And then high school was tenth through twelfth grades. For kids who went to Catholic school, they went to Booker T. in ninth grade because the Catholic school went from first to eighth grade. And my first friend that I ever had went to Catholic school, so that's how I know about that. In elementary school, I played the violin and I sang in the chorus. And in junior high school, I played cello, played in the orchestra. And then in high school, at Booker T. Washington High School, I did a whole lot of things, mostly academic. My parents

wanted me to be a nerd. They did not want me to feel that I was a pretty girl or anything like that. They kinda went like [inaudible sound] towards pretty girls. They didn't want me to be attractive to guys because they wanted me to focus on the academics. [sighs] So, anyhow-. But I was very active in academic things and I did sing. I sang. Oh, and you know when we were little too, my friends and I took dance lessons. We took ballet and tap and stuff like. We did those nice middle-class things, segregated. But our dance teacher. Ms. Caprio, she just died just a few years ago in her nineties. And it was so wonderful when I was able to follow up and find out that she was still alive and active. But I wonder what kind of flack she must have gotten when she told people she was going to go to the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, which was, at that time, was on, I think, what is called A Avenue in Norfolk. It was an old house, an old two-story house and the studio was upstairs. But we still had our-. What do you call the concerts, what do you call it, when the kids have the concert? You know, the dance recital.

JK: Recital.

BL: Yes, so that was it. Well, ask me something else if I didn't tell you enough.

HW: [laughter] Okay, so I guess like the second part of the question would be, since you did go to the segregated schools, could you tell there was like a visible difference with the conditions of your textbooks and the inside of the school, and the outside of the buildings as to white schools?

BL: Oh certainly. And of course at my age now, when I can still see the white schools are still standing and Booker T. was torn down and replaced with a new school when I was a reporter. And that just was heartbreaking for me to see that they were tearing down my school. And what they wanted to do was to rename it Washington rather than Booker T. Washington, so it just shows you the things about segregation: how we went through this period of—even though we got

integration in the schools—there was this thing of still not wanting white kids graduating from a school that was named after a Black man. But alumni from our school, as well as a lot of the Black population in Norfolk just fought that, “No, it should be Booker T. Washington High School,” which it still is today. And yes, conditions were different. My father was one of those people who fought to get the labs, the science labs, at Booker T. Washington, equipped as well as the white school labs. He actually had the guts to go and talk to people downtown. And we’re talking in the forties, fifties. We’re talking about a time when a lot of Blacks would back off because they knew the pushback was going to be strong. You could lose your job speaking up. But my father, I guess he just knew how to talk, how to handle situations. So he got the labs at Booker T. improved. And also when it came to textbooks, very often our textbooks were ones that were used—had been previously used in the white schools—and so therefore they would be behind. But today of course I look at it like, okay, the textbooks were wrong anyway. I mean all they taught [was] nothing but things about dead white men [laughter]. So I’m glad we are way past that. And our equipment, the desks, the things like that, we just kind of, I guess, accepted it because we, a lot of us, were aiming towards going to northern white colleges anyway. So we were looking beyond what we had at Booker T. and saying, “This is temporary. We’re going to go, we’re going to go someplace. This is going to get better.” You know that my generation was thinking in terms of, “We’re going to just go north to college and that will improve everything.” And it was my tenth grade, yes—. I have to think back. Yeah, the class in September of 1958, we went through massive resistance in Virginia. And one of the classes at one of the white high schools here actually—. There was this big newspaper article about the lost class of ‘59, because they were not going to open up the white schools and have a Black go there. And some Blacks

had already, I guess, gone through the courts, and the follow-up would be that these Blacks would be entering the, integrating the schools. So we also had what was called the Norfolk 17. Those were the Black students, the seventeen Black students that eventually went to the schools in this area. And one of those, she still is living in the area. Also, we called her a member of our class. But yes, we had that kind of resistance. Then what happened—. I don't know what happened to open schools because we were going to one of the churches near Scope, and having our classes. Our parents and our teachers were determined that we were not going to miss our education because we couldn't go to school. And I guess because, maybe, because we did that, because we were showing that, "Hey, you're not going to take our education away from us," maybe—. You know that's something I have to investigate, or you investigate it. Find out why did they open up the schools eventually. What made them do that? So that we didn't have a lost class of '59. And everybody went back to school.

HW: You honestly just touched on a lot of different questions that we had, but bringing in the whole, since your parents were educators and they valued education so much, with the *Brown* decision of 1954, how did that kind of impact your household in a sense that your parents were in favor of integration? And if, at some point, they may have encouraged you to be a part of that?

BL: My parents actually did not want me to be a part of that test group because they—. My mother, of course, went to white schools in Philadelphia, predominantly white schools in Philadelphia, and she knew the subtle racism that happens in integration. When my mother was growing up, the first couple of weeks of school, she would make new friends, and then, in a couple of weeks, some of the white girls would start whispering, "She's colored, you know. She's colored, you know." And so she knew that kind of subtle racism. And I don't think that—.

She didn't want me to be bothered with things like that. Of course, Southerners didn't become subtle, though. At the time I was growing up, they weren't subtle. And so I think she didn't want me to be a victim of the outright racism. She didn't want anybody calling me a "nigga," or anything like that, which is what they did to the kids who were in the Norfolk 17. I mean some of the stuff that happened with them they didn't reveal until just in the past twenty years. So, in that way, my parents were very protective. And when it comes to *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, the main thing that I think everyone in America who was Black at the time, and pro-education at the time, was thinking is that this would just make sure that we had equal opportunity to education. What no one realized at the time was that there would be ways and means of keeping things separate and unequal even though they pretended to integrate. But still, there are sneaky ways of getting around the right thing. So yeah, my parents were happy about the court decision because it signaled that we were moving forward. And of course everybody, I think everybody in my family in my parents' generation, you know, they were hopeful. They were always hopeful. They were always looking for hopeful signs that we would make progress. But the progress, what they didn't realize, is the subtle things people do to kill that progress.

HW: No, absolutely. You had touched on before how you had went to college in Pennsylvania, and then part way through you went to Hampton University, at the time Hampton Institute. Was there something that spurred you to make the transition?

BL: Oh yes. I went to Pennsylvania. To a school called Cedar Crest in Allentown, Pennsylvania. It was 500 white women and five women of color. [phone rang] Oh jeez, sorry. Sorry about that. [laughter] Anyway, 500 white women, five of color and it was all women. My mother wanted me to go to an all-women's college. And Pennsylvania, hey! You know, that was her home state.

Allentown is fifty-five miles north-northwest of Philadelphia and that just seemed wonderful at first. But I have always had male friends. I have always enjoyed the company of guys. My first friend that I mentioned to you a while back—my first friend was a guy. He was the one who went to Catholic school. And so I also, in like elementary school, if we were put in groups, I was generally put in a group with guys. You know, if it were a math or science group or something like that. So I really liked that. And then you didn't—. Instead of having like a good healthy friendship with guys and just hanging out with guys, what you had was this thing: dating. You had this desperation to have a date on the weekend to go to either Lehigh or Lafayette and go to a fraternity house and stuff like that. And that was what those girls did. Cedar Crest was made up of young ladies who were—and this is the way a professor described it to me later, after I had left there—it was middle class on their way up. I was born into, not moneywise, but otherwise of a more upper-class Black. In other words, I should have been, I should have gone to Wellesley or Bryn Mawr or some school where there were better-educated Blacks. I mean whites. I'm sorry. Old money. Somebody said, "You know, if you had been around old money that they would have treated you as an equal." But, you were around people who were first-generation with any money with any education. My great-grandfather was a college graduate. My great-grandfather went to Oberlin. And so I was going to schools with girls who were the first-generation, very often, going to college. Their fathers were, maybe, salesman and and did very well in sales but their parents weren't educated like mine. Anyway, I was very uncomfortable and I couldn't wait to get out of there. So, then I went to Hampton University. And what I understand today and can share is that when you go to an Historically Black College or University, you get care that you just can't get sometimes in other schools. In other words, you have people who take you as you are

and embrace you rather than expect you to do nothing but try to fit in. And one of the things that would happen to me is, when I straightened my hair and I did it in the dorm—. There were things I mean—. ‘Cause this is one of the things that I can’t ever forget. There were these hollers, “Ooh, ooh, what’s that smell? Oh, what is that?” Okay. And I was trying to straighten my hair to do what? Fit in? And all I got was that kind of backlash or that push back. And then I decided, “Okay, so I’ll wear an Afro.” [laughter]. And of course when I wore an Afro then, “Oh!” My hair looked “dirty.” It was—. You know, all of those things that people say. In other words, if you are Black get back whatever. You can’t do anything to be appreciated as equal. So when I went to Hampton, I was just more comfortable, but I will tell you this: the girls at Hampton called me, “Whitey.” [laughter]. And that was because of the way that I carried myself. You know, the way that I talk and the way I carry myself. But it didn’t hurt me the way that that subtle stuff at Cedar Crest hurt. It just really hurt. And it was only at our fiftieth reunion at Cedar Crest—because I did go back to reunions—and as I told somebody, “I would go back to reunions so that people could see that they did not break my spirit, that I succeeded anyway.” And at the fiftieth reunion there were a couple of people who, for the first time, realized how racist they were towards me when I was there. Does that answer your question? TMI [laughter]

HW: No, it was answered beautifully. I can only imagine what it must have felt like and so just hearing that from you, it really is inspirational. Just going back and to show your face and let them know this is what you tried to break but it wasn’t possible. So I have so much respect for you on that part. And so I guess like the last question for this section would be is: do you remember any of the Civil Rights demonstrations or protests that went on on Hampton’s campus, and were you at any point a part of those?

BL: [laughter] Well, there are things that we don't talk about. [laughter] No, here's what happened. I was so focused on academics when I got to Hampton because I didn't have the best grades at Cedar Crest. So I had to be focused academically. And when there was a demonstration at Hampton led by one of my best friends, I actually didn't participate. I mean I just kinda observed, and it would be years later at my fiftieth reunion at Hampton that I would find out some other things that happened and I went, "I'm glad I wasn't a part of that." [laughter]. But, there, they protested. But mainly, if I remember, this was not so much a civil rights demonstration as a demonstration of student rights on Hampton's campus. When it came to demonstrations, Civil Rights, I believed those had happened before I got there. There was a guy named Rodman who grew up in Portsmouth—he later became an Episcopal priest—and I know that he led a lot of demonstrations. But I'm not sure whether he went— did he go to Hampton or Howard? Anyhow, Hampton, we were supposed to be ladies and gentlemen. That was the funny part about going to Hampton. At Cedar Crest we wore Bermuda shorts and long socks, pants. It snowed at Cedar Crest. I mean, anyway—. So I get to Hampton and I'm used to dressing more casually [at Cedar Crest] and, at Hampton, I got in trouble because I wasn't wearing skirts all the time. And so you can see we were in a situation where we were ladies and gentlemen, and we really didn't do that much. But, I know that Hampton students did do some demonstrations. Yep, I got a B in one in an English class because I wore slacks, how 'bout that?

JK: Hmmm.

BL: Yes.

JK: So what year did you graduate from Hampton?

BL: Oh, don't ask that question. No. I was supposed to be in the class of '65, but I had 9 credits that I needed so I marched with the class of '66.

JK: Gotcha. And then after you graduated from Hampton, what was your next steps? Did you immediately go into a career? What was your next life?

BL: I was married. I got married in 1965, and so I was a housewife. And it's unfortunate. One of the things that I didn't realize is that companies had started recruiting at African-American colleges, at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. And I could have gotten something. I could have started a career someplace. But here's another thing: now, I got married, and I wasn't pregnant when I got married. But it meant nothing to anybody to say to me—because most of the people who were interviewing you were males—. What do you think they said? “Well, we can't hire you because you could get pregnant at any time.” That's what I heard. Yes. Yes, and they had—. I mean they actually came out and said that. So, then I went ahead and had my first child and then I—. Let's see, we moved to Norfolk and I had my second child and then—. And maybe it wasn't meant to be that I was (0:56:57.8). Had I gotten hired to do one of those other things that I had applied, for I don't think I ever would have been trying to get on television. So, it may be a lucky thing that I wasn't able to run up to New York and be trained to be whatever, some kind of executive or whatever, because I stayed in Hampton Roads and I was very active as a housewife. I was extremely active in civic affairs. When we moved into this house that I'm in now, I was the president of the Civic League, and I was only the second (:57:43:2) of the Civic League. And the community was mostly white. And so there I was. A Black woman president of the Civic League. Active in so many different things. On the Y Board and Women for Political Action, and Virginia Women's Caucus, the League of Women's voters, things like that. So, that's how I kept

busy with my two little girls, and I thought life was fine being a housewife, especially with the two little girls cause we just-. We had a good life. But, then there was that part of me because I had done-. I was a DJ at Hampton University, or Hampton Institute. I had been a jazz and classical music DJ, and I really enjoyed that. So, when I would see other people on television and I'm going, "I can do that, I can do that just as well." Thank goodness I went and did that. I got off my horn and put in that application and did the little demo tape. Yeah.

JK: So what was the hiring process like as you got involved in broadcasting? I know you said that you thought about it for years and all of that, but what actually got you into the business? What was that first step like?

BL: Oh, well the first thing was I had been looking at these people thinking that I could do as well as they. And I told you about Michelle Clark. The journalism school at Columbia University, there is a Michelle Clark School. And what happened was I just-. I did that tape. Well I, let's see, let's go back. I was the community affairs representative for [pause] American Association of University Women. I had to think about it. AAUW. I was the community affairs person. This is as a housewife. And at that time we were looking at-we're talking about 1970, '71-looking at an increase in drug problems. And I, my mother and I, were in that chapter. Most of the women were my mother's age. And I, along with a lady who would later become the Mayor of Virginia Beach for 25 years, Meyera E. Oberndorf, we were two young chicky-poops with all those old ladies. And there was another young woman as well. But anyway, I said to them when they wanted me to be the community area representative-over the summer I learned from reading and all of that about all of the drug problems and talked to different people-and I said, not over the summer, but in the spring, I said to them, "We need to have a drug seminar."

And I can hear this woman right now saying, “Ooh, we don’t need to do a drug seminar, we don’t have any drug problems,” and I said, “Oh yes, we do.” But you see, it was people my age who were having problems with the drugs. Jimi Hendrix. What happened was I ignored that lady and, over that summer, I just worked up a drug seminar. I talked to all the different people that I needed to talk to to set it up and I—. And one policeman explained to me, he said, “You know, when it was just, when I was just getting guys on Church Street—.” Church Street is the Black community Main Street, okay, like Granby Street is for whites, and was for whites. Church Street was where your Black businesses were. And so Lieutenant (Hurse? 1:02:33) said to me, “You know, when I was a young policeman, if we found somebody overdosed on Church Street it was no big deal.” But, what started happening was that there were young white kids who were getting into drug trouble, and I could see that because I was looking at life from a different angle and from a different age. So then I did the drug seminar. I organized it, had it in October, as a matter of fact, October 17, 1971. And I went on the show [of] the lady that I used to look at and scream at, “I can do that as well as she can,” with her real southern accent, her Tidewater accent. Anyway, went on her show and her question to me was, “Well, what makes you—.” Basically, she was asking me what inspired me to think that we needed a drug seminar. Well, it just so happened that about a week to two weeks before I went on her show Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died of drug overdoses, so that made my point. And that’s what I said, I said, “You just see it, look at the news. You see what’s happening,” and I said, “And there are things that you don’t see because they are being hidden, but they are actually happening.” And so I did the drug seminar and one of the cinematographers who was sent out from the newsroom, that I later became a part of, said to me, “You know, the way you speak and everything—,” because I was

running that seminar, “you wouldn’t be bad in news.” So, that was something that I just recently remembered that happened because a little boy drowned. We had moved into this house and a playmate of my daughter’s drowned in a swimming pool, and I called WTAR after—and this was after I had done that little audition tape—and I called them and I said, “You need to do something on pool safety because one of my neighbors died yesterday.” And the guy said to me, “Aww, wish you had called yesterday because it was news yesterday.” Later of course I would reflect on that as “if it bleeds it leads.” However, the next thing he said to me was, “You know, we were just talking about you the other day and listened to your tape, and we want to send you to Columbia Journalism School for a program they have for Blacks during the summer. So, they wanted to train me. Turns out Columbia turned me down because Columbia was actually an advocacy journalism school. You know what that is, right? Oh, well, they have a point of view; they do their news from a point of view. Like Fox News. So, the two guys who interviewed me—now this is 1971, no, by this time it’s ‘72—so I go up to Columbia for the interview. I make this very nice ladylike dress, because at that time I made all my clothes. I was dressed [in] what I thought was proper for an interview, and here come these two guys in jeans. Now in 1971, you didn’t see people in jeans that much, although I know on college campuses it’s gone on longer than it has in the rest of society. And they were interviewing me and they asked me two questions that I know I failed. One was, “Is there police brutality in your neighborhood or in your city?” and I said, “No.” And I was right, there was no police brutality, basically, or at least it wasn’t being talked about or anything. And if it was, it was a very small portion of the community. But of course, now I guess we could reflect and say, “Oh, it was probably happening only in the Black community on Church Street, and that’s why you didn’t know about it ‘cause

you were living in one of the first integrated communities.” And then they asked me a couple of other things and then one of them said to me, “Well I guess you’re a Cosmo girl, right?” Now, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* was read by women my age at that time. But, what they were saying—they were putting me in a category. They were categorizing me because I was too clean. I wasn’t angry. I was—. Or if I was angry, I wanted to do positive things about what I was angry. In other words, I didn’t like the idea that drugs were capturing too many young people, but I wanted to do something positive about it. You know, to make it known to other people and stuff like that. I wasn’t one to go out in the street and say, “We gotta do something ‘bout this drug problem.” I just—. That wasn’t the way that I did things, and so I think they categorized me as this sweet little housewife who’s not going to do anything. The fact that I had done the drug seminar did not impress them. Anyway, so I come back and the guys—one of them was a major reporter, the other one was my news director—and they interviewed me again. They sat down with me and they said, “You know what? We’re going to hire you anyway, but we’re going to train you. We’re going to do thirteen weeks of training you,” and that’s what they did. So, that’s how I started in the newsroom. One of the funny things was that very often they did not show me on air. You know how, today, you see every reporter. Every reporter does a stand-up now. You never not see a reporter doing a story. In those days, very often, you did a story and you did a tape and it went along with a film and that was it. And it was just, it was—. The longest would be two minutes. Generally, it was forty-five seconds to two minutes. So, very often, because I was new and I was female, I would get the story that could be dropped from the newscast ‘cause now the news goes on from—as a matter of fact, my daughter is on right now. The news goes on from like 4 o’clock to 6:30. The local news does. And then, at that time, it was 6 o’clock to 6:30. 15 minutes given to

sports. How 'bout that? 'Cause that's the way you sell cars. This has always been a money game, and so that's the reason sports got so much. So, anyway that was-. Let's see, what was the question? [laughter]

JK: No, you answered like three of my next questions, which is so nice. It's nice when it comes up naturally instead of us like-. You carried along with the story. That's one of our main things as historians is trying to get a story, and one of your main things as a newscaster, so it all goes. As you mentioned earlier you were the first Black female reporter in the region. Did you realize at the time that you were making history, or was it just something that happened seemingly naturally?

BL: Well, I felt like I was prepared. I felt like it was natural for me. The way that I had been brought up, having a mother who majored in French and English and spoke the "King's English." The way that they brought me up, I was well prepared. So, I did not feel the importance of making history, so much as I felt like I was doing something I was prepared for and that I was qualified for. That's the way I looked at it.

JK: Yeah, and then a little bit past being in the news, we read about your career as a singer. How did you get involved in that field?

BL: [laughter] Well, I actually married a second time and moved to Las Vegas with a bassist husband. And, in Las Vegas, I was hanging out with a lot of nationally known musicians and stuff like that. And I didn't know at the time though that I was being-. I tell people, "You never know what God is preparing you for." Now, I had always sung as a kid and everything. I was in the chorus. I was in the girl's glee club in high school. I would do that, but I was very shy. Extremely shy. And I hated-excuse me-getting up in front of audiences. So, after being in Vegas

though, and thinking—. I mean I started to realize that, “Hey, I should sing again. I should sing.” Plus, there was a musician in Hampton Roads when I had my TV show who tried his best to get me to sing. Philippe Fields is his name, rest his soul. And Philippe was a fabulous musician and he—I would sing on my show, on my TV show, if Philippe came on the show. But it would be at Christmas time. And so then, when I came back from Las Vegas, I had just been around these great musicians and I just—. At first I did real estate, though I didn’t actually—. And then I went on. I did overnight jazz on public broadcasting. You know, I was an overnight jazz DJ for a few years. But, it was during that time that I was doing overnight jazz, that a gentleman named Lynn Summerall came into the studio one night, because he was working on a special report. So he was in there late at night. And he said, “You know, I have always wanted to have an orchestra of my own.” And I said, “You know what, I’ve always wanted to be the girl who sings with the band.” And I will tell you that, when I was three years old, I used to sing myself to sleep pretending I was Ella Fitzgerald in front of a big orchestra [laughter]. So, yeah, it was—. The desire was always there. The love of it was always there, And so, six months after Lynn said that to me, we came up with—or he had already come up with—the Hotel Paradise Roof Garden Orchestra. A 1920s’ style jazz orchestra. So, a lot of the songs—. The songs that we did were written up to 1935, and that was it. But, a lot of those songs became jazz standards in the ‘40s and ‘50s. They were the things that Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald and Lena Horne and Ethel Waters gradually sang in, more of a jazz thing in the ‘40s and ‘50s. And, so I did that for a few years and then, after the Hotel Paradise, I guess we—. That was our first thing, was like about 10 years. But then I also went to cabaret camp. Now, at the Eugene O’Neill Center, in Connecticut, where they usually have playwrights most of the year—. But they also had, at that time, a cabaret

symposium. So, in 1997, I went to the Eugene O'Neill Center and became a Eugene O'Neill Cabaret Symposium Fellow. There were about 300 people who auditioned, and 33 of us made it, and I was one of them. And I was like, "Oh, oh!" So that-. And what it is is the Great American Songbook. So, you have people like Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, the things that they had done or have done. That was the kind of music. And most everyone-. I was the only Southern person because most people who do that kind of music, who do what really is cabaret, are in New York City. Or maybe they're in Hollywood. But if they're in Hollywood, it's for it's doing something else musical. But real cabaret, where you have one singer, one piano, maybe you have a bass, and maybe you have drums-that is what we did at the cabaret symposium, And the teachers that I had were, you wouldn't recognize the names because you're so young, but they were among the most respected of cabaret singers. So, then from that, even though I was still singing in the Hotel Paradise, I started forming my own small groups. So, then I formed a small group of a piano, bass, and drums. And the bass player and drummer still perform with me today when I have a gig. Of course, Covid took away a lot of opportunities, and the pianist that was playing with me died last November. But, basically, I've had those small groups. I've had a trio or a quartet or whatever for the past-actually, twenty years. Yeah. Yeah. So, that's why I'm a cabaret jazz singer. 'Cause in Hampton Roads, in the South, you don't use the word cabaret 'cause people just don't understand the Great American Songbook. So if you say jazz though, and then you say Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, then they understand.

JK: You just have to rephrase it just a little bit. So, this is our this is our last question for your life and then Hannah has a couple of overarching questions. We see that you have been involved in

an effort to preserve and share African-American history in the past couple years. In what ways have you sought to do this, and what do you think the importance of this work is?

BL: Oh my. Well, I was a teacher. I always was aware of African-American history. When I was a kid, my parents bought me books on “negro history” because that’s what we were then. Do you realize I was born “colored,” became a “negro,” and then became “Black,” and now I’m an “African American.” But I mean that that has been—. I’ve lived that long. And so I was always—. I mean my parents had publications coming to the house. Like the *Crisis Magazine* and other—. We had *Ebony Magazine*. We also had *Life* and *Post*. And it’s just that I was brought up to believe in history. And my father, of course, would tell me the history of his family. And, with his grandfather being a college graduate at a time when you just didn’t have so many college graduates, I mean, I was just always taught to feel a sense of pride in my family first, and then in African-American history. So it wasn’t—. I mean it felt natural to me. As a teacher, I very often just felt like if I could include something about African-American history when we were talking, in general, about something in history that it was good. Now, of course, that wasn’t always appreciated in the time period that I’ve taught even though it was in—. I started in what? 1998, I guess, and went to 2013. But because people just—. They wanted you to teach just what was in the books, and I’ve just not been able to do that. And, also, I just felt like every time that I was active in an organization in Hampton Roads as a young housewife, I was generally usually either the only Black or one of two or three Blacks. So, it was important to me that Black people be a part of, an integral part, of the history and the making of the history.

JK: Absolutely. Hannah. Sorry, go ahead.

HW: I think that kind of like answered what my last question was to you. And it was just like, what did the Civil Rights Movement mean to you as a whole? Just being Black, being a woman, just for you specifically in your own community and all the different careers that you've had. Or if you just want to add anything that you feel that we might have missed during this session. It's pretty much a kind of open-ended question.

BL: Wooo. Goodness. I don't think you guys missed anything. As far as the Civil Rights Movement is concerned, for my generation, remember that it wasn't just for Blacks. In other words, it was an opportunity for white women to also gain some power. And this is what has been acknowledged by people. I'm not saying this from me, but it has been acknowledged. And so the groups that I participated in—the League of Women Voters, the Virginia Women's Caucus, or was it the Women's Virginia Caucus? That was really—. We were really young angry women. Black and white, mostly white. Let's see, just about anything that I did was touched by the Civil Rights Movement. But it was because the Civil Rights Movement wasn't always in the street, it wasn't always demonstrations. It also had to be what can you do to point out to people the things that really need to be changed. Who can you talk to? What room can you sit in with somebody and explain, you know? And trust me, there were rooms that I sat in and opened my big mouth and sometimes got in trouble. As a matter of fact when I was on the Y Board, and this was the Y for all—I guess it was the Tidewater—it was called the Tidewater Y, the YWCA then and I was pointing out to some ladies—. We were having this casual lunch, but we were talking about our backgrounds and what we believed and all of that. And I said to the group, I said, “Well, you know, my father's grandfather's great-grandmother was from Madagascar. And she was supposedly a princess who was stolen. She and her brother were being sent to Europe to be

educated and their ship was pirated and they were brought”—now this I would eventually know, didn’t know then—“they were actually brought to Norfolk.” I have no idea [what happened to her brother], he disappeared in history, but I have the records to show where she lived and what happened to her and all of that. But, when I said that without explaining documentation, or anything like that it was actually a Black woman who said, “Oh you just sound like those white people who talk about their people coming to Plymouth Rock.” Imagine that. Imagine sitting in a room where you’re only two or three Blacks, you’re having this conversation, open conversation with white people at a time that we still were not as open as we are now, and it’s another Black person who attacks you on the pride that you have in your African history. Hmm. So, did that answer your question?

HW: Yes.

BL: [laughter] Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

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