

## **BERTHA JOHNSON**

### **Interview Summary**

Interviewee: Bertha Johnson

Interviewers: Samantha Cain and Rachel Marsh

Interview Date: Saturday, October 13, 2012

Location: Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia

**THE INTERVIEWEE:** Bertha Johnson was born November 14, 1946, in Newport News, Virginia. She is the daughter of the late John Mathews Hawkins and Mary Alice Minor. Johnson is one of seven children (four boys and three girls). Johnson attended segregated public schools such as Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, Booker T. Washington, and finally Huntington High School. While attending grade school, Johnson picked up a love for reading and playing softball. She later went on to pursue her education in nursing at the Dixie Hospital School of Practical Nursing and would she further her studies at Hampton University and Virginia Commonwealth University. While studying as a nurse, Johnson rarely saw discrimination, but says it was present. She worked for several years as a nurse. She enjoyed her job. She had a strong bond with her patients, other nurses, and doctors. Johnson was married for twenty-two years. From their union they were blessed with one daughter, of whom she is very proud. Mrs. Johnson still resides in Newport News, Virginia.

**THE INTERVIEWER:** Samantha Cain is an undergraduate student at Christopher Newport University. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Biology with a minor in Philosophy and Religious Studies.

**THE INTERVIEWER:** Rachel Marsh is an undergraduate student in the Department of History at Christopher Newport University. She is pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in History and a Master's Degree in Elementary Education.

**CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW:** The interview consisted of all aspects of Johnson's life as she lived throughout a segregated time in history. Although Johnson was born in a time of segregation, she did not let that hold her back from obtaining her goals. Johnson emphasizes how much she enjoyed nursing and how important her family is to her. She reflects on what life was like in Newport News, Virginia.

**TRANSCRIPT—Bertha Johnson**

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Length: 1 audio file, Wave Sound (.wav) format; approximately 108 minutes

**START OF RECORDING**

Samantha Cain: Our first question for you today is when and where were you born?

Bertha Johnson: I was born on Taylor Avenue in downtown Newport News.

S.C.: What year? When is your birthday?

B.J.: November 14, 1946.

Rachel Marsh: What were your parents' names?

B.J.: John Mathews Hawkins and Mary Alice Minor.

R.M.: Ok, and what did they do for a living?

B.J.: My dad was a longshoreman and my mom did housework when she wasn't chasing the seven of us. [laughter]

S.C.: Do you have any siblings?

B.J.: Yes, I have four brothers and one sister.

S.C.: And, how old are they?

B.J.: The baby is 53. So they are 53, 55, 60, 63, 65, and 69. Well, 70 because my oldest brother just had a birthday last month, so he's 70.

R.M.: What schools did you attend? Middle school, high school, and elementary school.

B.J.: Elementary. There was no middle school back then. I went to Thomas Jefferson our first year in this area. Then I went to John Marshall and from there I went to Booker T. And from Booker T., I went to Huntington in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

R.M.: Were the schools segregated when you went?

B.J.: Totally.

S.C.: What was it like attending segregated schools?

B.J.: It was great! It was great because at the time you didn't know any better. You didn't know there was another school, actually, because the whole area here was black. So, all we saw was black. I mean, we saw white people every now and then but nobody lived in our neighborhood. So, I thought it was great. Schools were more black-oriented then than they are now. They don't even offer black history and we had those kind of classes when I was in school.

S.C.: Did you notice a difference between your school, which was predominately black, versus the white schools?

B.J.: Well, not in my time. During my brother's time, I noticed there was a big difference.

S.C.: What kind of differences? Can you name some?

B.J.: We couldn't hold hands walking down the hallway. I saw them laying in each other's arms in the hallway when my brother was in school. He went to Warwick. You know, no talking on telephones. We couldn't wear pants. We had to go to school dressed. And when somebody spoke, you listened. Girl, you didn't go to school to play, you did what you had to do.

R.M.: How did the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* affect you, if it did at all?

B.J.: It didn't. Schools didn't integrate until after I was out about five years. I had been out of school about five or six years when they integrated.

R.M.: Do you remember anything about the Norfolk 17, if you're aware of that at all?

B.J.: Yea, a little bit. I'm not really up to date on that. It's something you hear about and--.

R.M.: Right, so it didn't affect you at all when you were in school?

B.J.: No.

S.C.: Did you attend college?

B.J.: Yes, I went one semester at Hampton University and I went two years at VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University].

S.C.: What did you study?

B.J.: Nursing.

S.C.: You did the nursing program at Hampton?

B.J.: Yea, I didn't finish it though. It was a bit rough. [laughs]

S.C.: [laughs] I understand.

R.M.: Did you notice or experience any discrimination in public facilities and can you tell us more about that?

B.J.: Well, I remember one place we all used to like to go because it was--.

F. W. Woolworth, the five and ten cent store we used to call it, where you could get things in there cheaply. We could go in and buy whatever we wanted but we weren't allowed to sit at the counter and eat. We had to--. [phone rings] We went to the bowling alley. You could work at the bowling alley but you couldn't bowl. You know, that kind

of thing. You can't use this bathroom; you have to use that bathroom. This water fountain, that water fountain. They were all marked.

S.C.: What was your first job?

B.J.: I worked in the cafeteria at Riverside Hospital.

S.C. How did you get there? How did you start working there?

B.J.: My mom used to work for the man that ran the cafeteria there at the time. He gave me a job in my senior year in high school.

S.C.: How were you treated by your employees, the blacks versus the whites?

B.J.: Well, in nursing, it was about the same. Not much of a difference when you're putting your life in somebody's hands. You can't afford to make that big of a difference.

R.M.: Ok, and did you actually practice your nursing? Did you do a residency at a hospital?

B.J.: No, I didn't. I finished Dixie Hospital School of Practical Nursing, and I furthered my studies, like I said, at VCU and Hampton. But, I never finished.

R.M.: We were also told that you worked with the Veterans Administration.

B.J.: Yes, I--.

R. M.: When did you start working there?

B.J.: 1991.

R.M.: What kind of work did you do there?

B.J.: I worked at the nursing home and, eventually, I ended up in the dialysis station.

R.M.: How long did you work there?

B.J.: Not very long. I think I worked there for about a year and a half.

R.M.: What did you do after that?

B.J.: I went to private nursing. You know, through an agency. I would go into the homes and take care of the patients.

R.M.: What was your relationship like with the doctors?

B.J.: It was wonderful, because, back then doctors were willing to teach. Now they don't have time. You know, if they had to sew somebody up, you stand right there. And you might end up sewing them up yourself, because that's how great they were. They taught you everything that you needed to know in order to be a good nurse.

S.C.: What was your relationship like with the co-workers?

B.J.: Great!

S.C.: The other nurses?

B.J.: Yea, yea it was great!

S.C.: And, what about your patients?

B.J.: Well, you know patients. People are going to be people. Some were happy and some were not. If you did exactly what they wanted when they want, they were happy. If it took you a minute to get there, they were not so happy. But, basically I had great relationships with my patients. Matter of fact, they became too attached, you know.

R.M.: And, where were you living at the time when you were working? You said you grew up in the area. Did you live in this area your whole life?

B.J.: Well, I lived in this area until I was 23. Then, I moved to Newsome Park and from there I moved down town to, Aquavista down on 6<sup>th</sup> Street. By King Lincoln Park, those apartments. But basically, I've lived in Newport News all my life.

S.C.: Was there ever a time when a white person refused your care because of your race?

B.J.: Yes

S.C.: How did that make you feel?

B.J.: Didn't matter! I wouldn't want to take care of somebody that didn't want me there anyway because, that draws problems. Rather than having someone say I did this, I did that. It was easier to move on to someone that did want me to take care of them.

S.C.: Did they ever give you a reason explaining why they didn't want your care?

B.J.: Because I was black.

S.C.: Did they directly state that to you, or--?

B.J.: Yes, very much so.

R.M.: Did it happen a lot?

B.J.: Not a lot, no. But, throughout the forty-two years that I did nursing it may have happened four or five times.

S.C.: Was there ever a time a black person refused your care?

B.J.: Not that I can remember.

R.M.: When did you get married?

B.J.: I got married in March of 1970. I was 23.

R.M.: How did you and your husband meet?

B.J.: How did we meet? My next door neighbor introduced us.

R.M. and S.C.: Aww.

B.J.: Yup, and we were married for 22 years when he passed away. He died young. He was 46 years old when he died. I have been a widow for a long time.

S.C.: Do you have any children?

B.J.: One daughter who is now 45 years old.

R.M.: What does she do?

B.J.: She works for a community service board. She has a degree in nursing and a degree in gerontology.

S.C.: I know we talked about you getting your first job. Was there a reason behind you getting your first job? Did you have to support yourself going to school or did you have to help support your family or--?

B.J.: Well, basically it was for me to have spending money. We had seven kids in a family and they couldn't afford to just give us money to throw out or throw around. So, basically it was for that. Plus, it was my senior year in school and there were things I had to do. Pay dues, rings, yearbooks, and things like that. So, it helped a lot.

R.M.: When you weren't at work were you active in your church or any other community groups?

B.J.: Church, sometimes. Mostly, I was glad to get away from home. I had a party [laughs]. I hate to say it like that but it was. Well, you had to be there. When I was eighteen years old, I had to be in the yard by dark because I was still living at home with my mother. So, when finally I finished nursing school and got a job, I was out on my own. I was making up for lost time. I thought I was making up for lost time but--. Yes, I still went to church. I was a member. I grew up in Shalom Baptist Church, right down the street from here. On 24<sup>th</sup> Street, ten or eleven block.

S.C.: You had how many siblings?

B.J.: Four boys and three girls.

S.C.: Did you take a great deal in helping raise them too? As being one of the oldest?



B.J.: Yes, just the two baby boys. I had to spend a lot of time with them. Of course, I resented it at the time. Now that I look back, I really enjoyed it. They still follow me around today [laughs]. Still.

R.M.: What did you do to occupy your time? You said that you wanted to get away from home. What kind of things did you do?

B.J.: Back then, I played softball. I read a lot. I used to enjoy roller skating, bike riding, everything physical. I was a tom-boy so anything physical I was into.

R.M.: Do you remember your favorite book at the time? When you were growing up.

B.J.: Not now. [pause] I don't think I really remember. When I was in school my English teacher, Mr. Callaway, insisted that we learn poems. The only poem I ever learned completely was "If." But now don't ask me to recite it, [laughs] because I can't. But for years, it still stuck in my head, that poem "If". But, as far as reciting it now, it's gone. We're talking—how many years have I been out of school? Forty-eight years, so it's a long time.

S.C.: Do ya'll have class reunions and things now?

B.J.: Yes.

S.C.: Do you think it's strange or different going back to an all-black school now? Since the world has been integrated.

B.J.: No, we all love it, as a matter of fact. Because we started high school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, we were in high school five years. So that meant that me, my brother behind me, and my baby sister were all in Huntington at the same time. So whenever class reunions come up, we all go to the class reunion whether it was our class or not. We knew everybody in every class, all the way through.

S.C.: I went home yesterday and I was talking to an older lady. She was telling my cousin and I how going to school, college, and furthering your education was important. She was saying how she used to work as a maid cleaning and how she was always on her feet. She was telling us how kids now, we're not built for that. So, what do you think about that? Do you have any views on how we are different from your generation?

B.J.: Well for one thing, you didn't talk back. Whether you disagreed or agreed or whatever, you didn't talk back. Momma didn't have to hit you. She had that look that would knock you down. So you behaved and you never had an option. You got up in the morning and you went to school. You finished school for the day, then if you got some extra activities you were involved in, that's fine. But, your first priority was going to school. You didn't cut class. That was a no no. You didn't disrupt class because if the teacher had to call Momma, that was a big problem. My brothers are all over 6 feet tall. I can remember when my oldest brother was in high school. He was in his senior year in high school. Well, of course, he thought he was grown and he cut class and Momma caught him on the corner. When she walked up to him and collared him then I knew I was going to do the right thing. If she could do that to him then I could just imagine what she would have done to me had I done that. We didn't have a choice, you went to school. You went beyond high school. You went to trade school or to college. My mother only finished the seventh grade because her mother died when she was young. She was about thirteen. My dad finished the third grade. Education was a rule in my house.

S.C.: So that was something they really pushed for?

B.J.: Yes. By the time my daughter came along, she didn't have an option. All of my brothers and sisters had all gone to school. So, she knew without a doubt, that's what she

was going to do. You know, no arguing, no temper tantrums, no nothing. You just apply and get admitted into school and that's what you're going to do. That's what she did, thank God.

R.M.: When did you first become aware of the civil rights movement?

B.J.: All the time I was growing up. It was something I heard of but it wasn't something that was going on here. You heard about it on the news and, when you could get a paper, you heard about it in the paper. I think I was a young teenager when I started hearing about it.

R.M.: Were you involved in any protests?

B.J.: Yes.

R.M.: Could you tell us about any protest you may have participated in?

B.J.: Police brutality. It's a long story. The police were harassing a girl that came out of the movie theater so of course there were a lot of people around. We protested his treatment of her. It just grew into an outrageous thing. It ended up with downtown Newport News being burned down. The National Guard even sat at the foot of the bridge, 28<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge over town and the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge. You couldn't go across the bridges anymore, until things calmed down. But, we didn't have many civil rights protests here, per se. We had the Black United Congress, and that's about it.

Unfortunately, I'm an adventurer so I had to be there and learn firsthand what it was like.

S.C.: What kinds of things did you see during that protest?

B.J.: Lots and lots of prejudice. Not just white on black, but black on white also. There was prejudice everywhere. It was, like I said, mistreatment from both sides. I saw police turn those dogs on people. I saw black people beating on white people just because they

were white. It was terrible. Unfortunately, I was a nurse. When these things happened I got stuck at work, working overtime. All these people were coming into the emergency room. I had to stay there until we got it calmed down. It was awful.

S.C.: Did you really understand what the fight was about, or did you start to understand when you got older?

B.J.: I understood. I lived in an all-black neighborhood and went to all-black schools. I knew what it was about. But, at the time it didn't matter because I felt like I was getting a good education. The education that I got when I was in school more than prepared me for life afterwards. To me, it didn't matter. You talk about me getting second-hand books, but what was in those second-hand books I learned. So, it didn't matter to me whether they were second hand or not. As long as I got to read a book and to learn something--. I like to read. I don't read as much as I used to because of these [points to glasses] but, it was great. It was great. I still watch the History Channel and the Discovery Channel.

S.C.: Going to an all-black school and being from an all-black community, what was it like when you really got to interact with the white people?

B.J.: Actually, for me it was not different. They were just people that I had to interact with. If they wanted to interact I did. If they didn't, you go your way and I go mine. It wasn't like I forced my attentions or they forced their attentions on me. That didn't happen. It was a mutual thing so--.

S.C.: When you were riding the same bus or something like that, was it a "Yes ma'am, "No, ma'am" or things like that?

B.J.: I guess it would have been. I couldn't afford to ride the bus. Everywhere I went, I walked. I heard about people riding in the back of the bus. I don't know. I never rode on the bus until I was grown.

S.C.: Did you ever interact with them on the streets?

B.J.: The white people?

S.C.: Would you have to step to the side, or--?

B.J.: No, I was too mean. I mean, I probably was expected to do so but I didn't. My momma always taught me to speak so if I spoke and you didn't, it didn't matter. I would just smile and keep going.

R.M.: What do you view as the most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement? In general or focused on the area.

B.J.: Say that again.

R.M.: What do you think are most important accomplishments of the civil rights movement? Of integration or ending of discrimination.

B.J.: You know, there are two ways to look at that. There were positive things that came out of the civil rights movement. But, for me personally, I thought it was the worst thing possible to happen to my people because our kids had always been disciplined, strictly disciplined. You didn't talk back. But, once they saw how the other kids acted, then they picked up on that and they started doing things that we never heard of. We didn't think about cutting school. You better not. If you were twenty, you still went to school until you finished. Believe me, when I was in school there were kids in high school that didn't finish until they were twenty years old. But, they never gave up. Now they give up. Mostly, I think teachers now are basically not prepared for the way students are these

days. You want them to come to class and sit there like a mummy. That's not going to happen. When you have children you have lots of energy and they are going to release that energy. What do they do? They stop physical education in schools. So kids don't get a chance to burn off that energy any more and they act out in class. But, civil rights had its good points. It really did.

R.M.: What do you see as the positives coming out of it?

B.J.: Equality. You got equal jobs for equal pay, which was a bunch of crock because you know and I know that we don't make the same pay. Be it because I'm black or be it because I'm a woman. It's just not fair, but at least we got a chance to participate. Had it been me, I could have stayed out of the work force forever. You know, because women just want to be a man and do a man's job and physical labor. Our bodies weren't meant for that. But, because of equal rights movement we got all those opportunities. Now by the time we're forty, we're broken down because we're doing a man's job and a women's job too. Civil rights had its good points, especially as far as black people moving ahead, and being productive in society.

S.C.: Growing up as a black woman, what were you taught that your role was?

B.J.: To be the best. Whatever I choose to do, I had to be the best. No option. You do your best and you can't ask for better. So, I had to do my best.

R.M.: Do you remember anything about Martin Luther Kings, "I Have a Dream" speech?

Do you remember anything about that?

B.J.: Yes.

R.M.: What do you remember?

B.J.: All of us gathering to listen, be it in person or radio or TV. The nation listened to what he had to say. That was a powerful speech that goes on today. It will last forever. It had meaning behind it.

S.C.: What do you think that speech impacted? What did you see change after that speech?

B.J.: Honestly, nothing. Black people and white people have always had dreams. That speech may have made some people pursue their dreams more than they had in the past. But, basically the country hasn't changed. I'm black, I'm here. You're white, you're here. Regardless. I can have five times more education than you but I'm still always going to be here. I don't know if you find that to be true but I definitely find that to be true. I've got to work twice as hard and do twice as much as a white person with the same amount of education and experience. She's going to get that job before I get that job. So, did the speech change that? No, but it did make a few changes as far as being able to apply for these jobs. One time you couldn't even apply. They see you coming and it was a no. At least now we have the opportunity to compete for these jobs.

S.C.: So it didn't change anything in the nation. But, if he was speaking directly to you what stood out for you?

B.J.: What stood out for me? Something that my mother taught me when I was a child, "I am who I am and I am proud of who I am." So, I'm only going to put forth the best side of me at all times. The bad side of me I lock in the closet and leave it there. I don't even go talk to her because there is just a certain level that I'm going to be at all of the time. It was hard being black in some respects. Maybe my brain got twisted but color for me didn't play that big an issue. Maybe it was because of the field I went into. I was a nurse.

You see black nurses all over the place. You always have. So, it didn't play that big of a role. But, what it did do was make me understand what my parents had been through during the Great Depression. And then they were black. So, they didn't really get the jobs that made the money and you have seven children that you had to feed, clothe, and educate. I imagine that it was horrible for them. It never dawned on me how much they had endured until I was grown. When I sit down to think about it I say, "Oh God, they survived and so did we." They had to be awesome to get through it all.

R.M.: Did they ever tell you any stories about how hard it was to grow up in their time?

B.J.: Well, my mother's mother died when she was thirteen. No siblings. So she was basically on her own from the time she was thirteen years old. She got married at age fifteen so she had to work hard. It was her determination that her children would not have to do the same kinds of jobs that she had to do to survive. We were blessed not to have to. But to sit down and really talk about the adversities that they had to go through, she never did. It was always something positive. She never talked about the negatives. I guess that's why we didn't really dwell on the negative parts. We always saw the positive parts.

R.M.: What do you regard as the unfinished legacies of the civil rights movement? Any unfinished business that it didn't take care of?

B.J.: There is unfinished business but I don't know if the movement will ever take care of it. There is never ever, in my opinion, going to be equality among the races. I don't think the movement could have done anything about that.

R.M.: What do you think are the most pressing problems facing African Americans is today?



B.J.: The most pressing issue at this point is to re-elect Obama to the presidency. Hopefully from there the nation is going to wake up and say, “We got to start pulling together.” This “separate but equal” thing is just not working. It’s just not working. It’s not going to work as long as you have a rich man with five billion dollars paying two dollars’ worth of taxes. I’m making thirteen thousand dollars and most of that’s going to taxes. You have people in this country who make all of this money and they’re not putting anything back into the country. When they got tired of paying salaries, what did they do? They outsource their jobs to another country where they can pay \$1.50 for six months of work when here they had to pay money. People in the United States are used to making money. It takes money to live in this country. So, until the rich give back as much as they have taken out, there is always going to be inequality.

R.M.: So you still feel that today, the society is still separate but equal?

B.J.: Not in terms of race. In terms of money, yes.

S.C.: Can you just share with us a general story? Something you think we should really know about you growing up and not interacting with the white community but them still being a part of your life.

B.J.: When I first interacted with white people, I was well into my teens going to nursing school. Because we were in nursing school, we were all an equal class. Outside of nursing school there was no interaction. I’d come back to my hood and they would go back to theirs so there was no interaction. But at the time I grew up, we had communities. On a Friday night, we knew where every child and every parent is going to be. This time of year is football season and they were not going anywhere until they went to that football game. Then, after the football game Momma would come home with the kids.

Or, Momma and Daddy go out or whatever. It was all community. They all stuck there, for the kids. We had sorry poppas and mommas then like we do now but it was a community effort. If Momma wasn't around and you misbehaved-- don't ask me how it happened without telephones. But before my mother got home she knew what we had done. I'm still trying to understand that. [laughter] How is this possible? She hadn't left home. How could she have gotten the message? The community had the right to discipline. If you were wrong, you got disciplined. I can remember one of my neighbors. Momma had said, "Don't leave the yard." Of course, I left the yard so the lady told Momma that I had left the yard. I said, "But I didn't leave." "Oh, so you calling Miss soon-so a liar?" Needless to say, that was the worst whipping I had gotten in a long, long time. Basically I had called her a liar and that wasn't allowed. You behaved and the whole town had permission to correct you if you were wrong. Kids don't have that anymore. They'll stand up and cuss me out like I'm nobody. We had respect for each other and other people. Now, they have respect for nobody, not even themselves. If they did they wouldn't act the way they act. I'd be ashamed to be a momma nowadays. I really would. I'd probably be in jail too. I believe in spanking. One time I talk, two times I talk, but three times it's time for me to stop talking. My voice is wearing out now. It's time for my hand to get into some action. That wrist action every now and then, with that butt. As my grandson used to tell my daughter, "Grandma fights." I used to beat him up for being a bad boy. He was a typical little boy but good gracious almighty. He finally changed. He's fifteen now.

S.C.: What you were just saying reminds me of the old saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Where do you think you would be if you didn’t have that support of your community? Or, you didn’t have that “village” per se.

B.J.: I probably would be the same simply because I know my mother loved me but she didn’t play. She made a believer out of me. I did what she said or else suffered the consequences. When you’re only 117 pounds, you can’t afford to suffer so many consequences with the switches and the belts. I learned early that all I had to do was behave. Basically, if I did what Momma said, I was going to be alright. Now don’t get me wrong, I didn’t do everything she said because I was a mischievous child. She said, “Don’t leave the yard.” Well, I would go in the back--. In the yard you had a tree and a coal bin and you could go from tree to coal bin, tree to coal bin and go all the way down the other end of the block. That way the neighbors couldn’t see you and they couldn’t tell. Then they come back and say well so-and-so was down there fighting. “Oh no, I haven’t been out of the back yard, Momma.” Sometimes you got caught, sometimes you didn’t. To go out and steal--. You didn’t steal. You didn’t lie. You only fought when it was necessary. You just didn’t go out and pick a fight, shoot, kill, or maim. You didn’t do things like that because there was discipline. You didn’t want the kind of discipline that parents dished out back then. The worst thing to happen to children today is that the court stepped into the home. They have no business telling you--. If you’re going to abuse a child, yes, the court has the right to intervene. But, don’t tell me I can’t spank my three year old if he’s wrong. Don’t tell me that. I don’t want to hear it. Take him home with you and you raise him your way because, when he comes in my house, I’m going to raise him my way. I’m not going to do anything to hurt him. I’m going to teach him the right

way as far as I know it, and you need to shut up and leave me alone. The courts have too much--. They are into everything besides what they are supposed to be into. So, life is great.

R.M.: What's your favorite childhood memory that you have growing up?

B.J.: Taking over my brother's fights. [laughs] He was two years younger than me and I didn't let anybody bother him. If he got in a fight and I was around, I would dive right in the middle and just beat them up. I was a tomboy. I have a whole lot of great memories. As far as I know, I had a wonderful childhood. I never realized I was poor until I was grown. We always ate. We had heat in the house. We might have had to put an extra blanket on the bed at night after the fire died down but--. I had decent clothes to wear. It never dawned on me that I was poor until I was well into my twenties. Then I realized I was poor, and it was really a shock, believe it or not. How could someone live and not know that they were poor? Very easily. When you have all the necessities, then you don't know you are poor. I enjoyed growing up. I really had a ball. I ran track. I played softball and football when my momma wasn't around. Basketball, ping-pong, the whole nine yards. I was athletic so I enjoyed every minute of it. I love to dance. I'd iron clothes, "Will you keep your tail still and iron them clothe?." I'd be bopping ironing clothes [laughter]. She'd be yelling telling me to calm down.

S.C.: What kind of music did ya'll have then?

B.J.: Chuck Berry, Martha Reed and the Vandellas, the Supremes, the Four Tops, Marvin Gaye, Gladys Knight, just music. All kinds of music.

S.C.: What do you think the music said to your community?

B.J.: Music then spoke about love and understanding.

S.C.: Do you think that pertained to the people of your time?

B.J.: Yes. A lot of the music was really ahead of its time. It saw all of the problems down the road. Like Marvin Gaye and Donny Hathaway. They always sang about what they saw coming. I don't listen to music from this era. I don't see the logic in it. I still listen to my old Frankie Beverly and Maze, Sade and all that old stuff.

S.C.: As far as that, I know that during this time some black people were afraid to voice their opinion on a lot of things. So, do you think the way--. You said music was ahead of its time so do you think that was an expression? People saw the problems but music was the only way they could really say it?

B.J.: Yes, I do. Yes, I do, definitely. Everybody listened to the music and they got the message. It doesn't matter how the message gets across as long as it gets across.

S.C.: I would say that, that was an undercover way of expressing it. So do you think that--. What other ways did you express things, so that you might not have to deal with consequences for it?

B.J.: Well, by that time people were really outspoken and just said it. If you were on your job, it might have caused consequences. In everyday life, there were no consequences to whatever you had to say, not for me. I have to be specific to me because I don't know who else suffered because of what they said. I can remember my brother telling me that he—he is two years younger than me—that he was subjected to discrimination. He had a part-time job in a bowling alley. All he could do was stay behind the scene and set the pins up when they were knocked down. But he couldn't come out. He couldn't bowl. The only time he and my cousin—they were the same age---the only time they could bowl was after the bowling alley had closed down for the night. Then they could bowl but

other than that--. At the time, I didn't know this was going on. That just goes to show you that you take one road in life and I take another. What you endure, I have no idea until we talk about it now. But then again—my brothers—it didn't have a profound effect on them either. The two baby boys played football. They finished school. They went off to Florida A&M and finished that program. Then they went off. One played pro football and the other one went to Wilkins, South Carolina. Each road took a different turn and they can't remember having been discriminated against, which, I find hard to believe, but that's their say.

S.C.: When you talk about the community, I hear you talk more about the women. What was the father's role in the community or with you and the other men in the community? Where were they?

B.J: They were there at the football game and then they were not. They were gone. My daddy liked to party. He got up at 4 o'clock in the morning to go to work at the longshore and, when he got off of work, he would stop by the Elk's home and hang out with the fellas. By the time he got home sometimes, we were just about ready to go to bed. Or, if we had done something wrong, Momma said, "I'm going to tell your daddy when he gets home." We knew not to go to sleep. But my daddy never smacked me in his life. He lived to be 74 years old. I was in my fifties when he passed. He never smacked me. Momma would use him with the boys but she could handle me. She could handle the problems with me and my sisters. She's about my height. She was a little bit bigger than I am. But she was no joke [laughter]. Daddy went to work and he didn't have much to do with the discipline in the household unless the boys acted up. I've seen him get to them and I knew that wouldn't happen to me. I learn easily. As far as punishment is concerned, I

knew I didn't like whippings so I behaved myself, except when my daddy bought the carton. You know that orange drink that came in the carton? He used to buy that and he wouldn't let us have it. We couldn't drink it. So, of course my two baby brothers took the straw and you rub it around and around and it makes a hole. You push it down in there and you drink as much as you want. Then, when you pull it out, the hole seals up. Well, daddy said somebody was stealing his juice. Momma wanted to know how in the heck somebody can steal juice out of a carton that hadn't been opened. He never did figure it out. Momma never figured it out. So, after we were grown and we got to talking about what used to be, we would tell her these things and she would just laugh and laugh and she would say, "Y'all are something else." We had good times. There was strife going on in the world but it basically didn't touch us to the extent that it did in the south or for that matter in the north. It touched us but not to that extent.

S.C: What would you say is one good life lesson that you really got from your dad, as he was the man in your life?

B.J: Love. I know my dad loved me and he showed that. So of course I looked for that when I found my husband. If you don't love me like my daddy loved me, then I don't need you in my life. That was the best lesson I feel like he could have taught me.

[break in recording]

R.M: So you mentioned--. Back to where you growing up in a black community, did you have any white friends growing up?

B.J: No, none in the community. We were restricted as to how far we could go from home. We stayed on 27<sup>th</sup> Street, 800<sup>th</sup> block. The pool came up to Wickham Avenue and we would cross the block to 28<sup>th</sup> Street. We had the pool and the recreation center. That

was our limit going that way towards Chester Avenue. We would go two blocks and call it quits and come back. The other way we'd go was down to Marshall Avenue. You were restricted as to how far you could go from home, so everybody that you knew lived within that territory. No venturing out. None of that. I know where you are at all times. You didn't wander all over town. You weren't hanging out everywhere. Most of the time, you were at the rec or in the pool.

S.C: I know you said you didn't get exposed to the white community until you were in your teens and early twenties. But, when you first got to see how their homes were structured and things like that, what were some comparisons you really noticed?

B.J.: The comparison was that my momma would have killed me, because the kids did what they wanted to do and said what they wanted to say. My momma would have knocked me out cold. You know you don't talk back. You shut up. Back then we used to roll our eyes. I always got slapped upside the head for rolling my eyes. That's something I used to do and I don't know why. I just did. I guess it my way of expressing myself which wasn't very good at all because I used to get knocked out for it. It wasn't a good picture to see. It's not how I would want my child to be raised. If I'm telling you to do something, don't be talking over top of me while I'm talking. Just shut up and listen. I found that, back then, white kids were very, very unruly. Our kids were disciplined. Now it's turned around. It's totally turned around. I'm glad I don't have to be a momma in this day in age. I wouldn't fare well. That was the biggest thing I saw.

R.M: What kind of advice would you give today's generation?

B.J: If you're going to have children, make sure you have time to raise those children. I understand we all have to go to work but there can be discipline. You have to set down



rules and regulations from the time a child starts to walk. You can't wait until he's six or seven years old and start to discipline. Their personalities are always forming. He's going to do what he wants to do. You have to start with them young. Training them to do what they're supposed to do. If you drop a toy on the floor, pick it up and put it in the box. Two strikes, you're out. I'm not going to ask you anymore. That usually gets them. You don't have to abuse a child to discipline. If you start disciplining early enough, you don't even have to touch them. Just say something and he's going to get exactly what you say because he knows the consequences if he doesn't. He's not going to forget that. Parents, if you're going to have children, you have to be ready financially and emotionally. You have to be willing to give up a lot for this child. You want them to be in activities? Okay. If you want to go to a party, who's going to take him to his afterschool activity? You have to be willing to give up part of your life for the child.

S.C: Do you think today's generation understands what y'all really had to go through? The struggle that you all had to face to get us where we are today.

B.J: I don't think they understand. I don't think they sit down long enough to read about it or listen about it. The first thing they say is, "Oh, I don't want to hear that," so they don't really know. I don't think they really understand what it was that the generations before them had to go through. There is no way in the world that they could understand and turn out the way they are. They're a bunch of thugs and I don't get it. I can't really put the blame all on them. We have children being raised by children. Thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen year olds are having babies. They haven't had a chance to have a teenage life, so that's what they're looking for once they have a baby. They don't have the time to

spend with the child because they're trying to get back what they lost. So, the child is all on its own.

S.C: Where do you think the generations dropped the ball from allowing us to appreciate what they really did, so we wouldn't have to live this life?

B.J: I think that we dropped the ball when we stopped emphasizing what we went through, whether they want to hear it or not. It is something that should have been said over and over and over. Somewhere it would have stuck in the back of their mind. My daughter understood that. Her daughter, I'm not so sure. She understands part, but not all because she hasn't seen it. Kids now--. If they don't see it, it didn't happen. They told me, "I didn't see you go through no school." Okay, that doesn't mean I didn't go because you didn't see me. By the time you came along, I was too old for school. I was working. With them, it's more of, "If I see it, it happened. If I don't, I don't worry about it." I don't know if they'll ever turn around or what we could do to help them turn around. I'm not sure. They don't listen. They don't want to hear about hard times. All they want to hear is, "I want a \$200 pair of sneakers" and not that you need a job to make the money to buy those sneakers. They don't want to hear that part. They don't care how you get them. If need be, they'll go steal them. I blame the parents too. If your child walked in the door with an iPod that you didn't buy and he doesn't have a job, why would you let him keep that iPod in your house? You know it's not his. He couldn't buy it. And, if he had the money to buy it, where did he get it from? They don't question children anymore. It's like they are afraid to question their behavior or what they're doing when they're not at home. Maybe they just don't want to know. I just don't understand how you can have a child in your house and not know what's going on in his life. He could be in his room

with his door closed building bombs on the computer. Come on now. Where are you when this kid is on the computer like that? Don't you put any restrictions on there? Not that they can't figure out how to take them off. But, at least you could go through the motions of putting them on anyways. And, you have pornography. Why is my thirteen year old daughter talking to a man that I don't know on the computer and on the telephone in the house? Parents just don't get involved. It's like they're afraid to ask a question or get involved in the child's life. I was reading the paper this morning about this thirteen year old with this twenty-four year old man who had met her on the computer. They finally talked on the phone and she met him. Well, he made her sign a paper and she was prostituting herself for him. He made a video of her having sex with another man. Where is momma? Finally, she told the police what had happened. They arrested him, but her life is ruined. You have degenerates. Only a degenerate would want to do something like that to a thirteen year old child. Where was momma or daddy? I won't put it all on momma. Where were momma and daddy when their thirteen year old is out there doing something like that? I don't get it. Parents are just not parents anymore. Kids parent themselves as far as I can see.

R.M: Going back to growing up here in Newport News, did you ever travel anywhere else and see the differences between other parts of Virginia, or the country?

B.J: We used to take the train and go to Richmond to the capitol. We always got put off in the grass but we went anyways. We'd pack a lunch and ride the train to Richmond and the place where they used to have the tuberculosis hospital, Valley Forge or something like that. We used to catch the train out there because my cousin's husband had TB and we used to go up there on the train to visit. But, other than that no traveling until I

finished my junior year in high school. Bless my momma's heart, she sent me and my brother to New York. It was the worst thing she could have done for me and for her. She was proud to be able to send her two kids to New York for the summer. But it was the worst trip I ever had.

R.M: What happened?

B.J: It was just dirty and people were everywhere. There were bars on windows and, at night, the town never slept. I wasn't used to that. To me, it was a horrible experience. I don't think I've been back to New York since.

S.C: Did y'all have family there?

B.J: Yes, we had family there. That's who we were with but that didn't make a difference. I didn't like it. They loved it up there. They never came back here to live. But, I never went back to New York either.

S.C: Can you tell us the basics of your life? Your house, what did it look like? Going to the grocery store, what was that like? Going to town, different things like that.

B.J: Well, when we were younger we used to walk. We had a wagon and we used to walk across the bridge to the bakery to get day old bread and we'd walk back. We walked to the grocery store because it was right there on 20<sup>th</sup> Street where the manor was. We would walk from 27<sup>th</sup> Street to the grocery store and back home. On Christmas Eve we'd go down and get our Christmas tree and we'd always put it up on Christmas Eve. The other grocery stores were on Hampton Avenue and Jefferson but the supermarket was down here. So, basically, wherever we went we walked. This town was nothing like the size it is now. I think you could go to north Newport News and that was about the limit. I mean Newport News still extended but it was trees. It was overgrown until they started

developing. We went uptown to Grant's Department Store to get things like socks and everyday things. There were shoe stores and clothing stores. As I got older I loved going into town because they had all these wonderful stores like Sears, Grants, shoe stores, Thalhimers, and all those kinds of places. It was wonderful. But there was no such thing as driving across town or taking the bus. You walked where you had to go. You stayed in shape because you had to walk in order to get there. I had a ball. I got my first job. I went to work in June 1967. I thought I was rich [laughs]. My brother at the time was going to Norfolk State so I helped to buy him clothes. I helped out at home because, by that time, there were still four at home. I was gone. My salary was the main salary in the household at the time. It never dawned on me not to do what I did. I got paid on payday. I remember when I was growing up we always had to paint the outside of the house. It was a two-story house and we'd be up on ladders painting. The first thing I did when I got a job was to put aluminum siding on the house outside and I put wood paneling on the inside walls so I wouldn't have to paint in or out. It was wonderful. I had a ball. That meant that, once I went to work, my sisters and brother under me didn't have to do those things I had to do when I was growing up. They don't know anything about painting the house. They don't know about painting the walls, buffing hard wood floors, or putting paste wax on the floor. Or swinging the little brother around, polishing with the wax. Everything was a game with my mother. She taught us to do things and made it fun. We had to wax the floors and buff them. But it was fun the way she taught us to do it. To wash clothes out on a real washing machine was fun. She would pour water in, rinse, pour water, then rinse, run them through the ring, then hang on the line. It was fun in the summer. But in the winter, it was cold. The clothes would freeze before you got them on the line. It was

what you did at the time. You did it and you didn't complain. Anything you enjoy doing you're not going to complain about anyways. We really enjoyed doing it. Like I said, she made a game out of everything. We knew every card game there ever was to play: Pinochle, Deuces, Pitter-pat, Tonk, Spades, and Risk. You had to do something to keep all those little heads around still and quiet.

S.C: I know prices now on things are ridiculous. What were the prices on things back then?

B.J: A loaf of bread was \$.10 [laughter]. A sixteen ounce soda in the bottle was something like a nickel. The bottles were glass and you could turn them back in and get a deposit back on the bottle. Meat, depending on what it was, might be \$.15-.20 a pound. Now you're not going to find anything \$.10 a pound, not even onions. Everything was cheap, money-wise. But, because nobody had any money, it was still expensive. I can remember I hated day-old bread but I didn't have money to buy fresh bread. What's left? I got day-old bread. The first time I did that I think I hurt my mother's feelings because she was doing the best she could and I complained. Needless to say, I never complained again. It was either you eat it or you don't eat anything. Chickens, I don't even know--. It was a long time before we even got a chicken out of a store because she bought these little baby chicks for Easter. Tell me why I didn't know that she was killing my chickens. We raised our chicks and after a while they'd be gone and we'd be eating chicken. When you're a kid, you're not really putting the two together until one day, my brother said he wasn't going to eat any more chicken. She cleaned the chicken, washed it, cooked it, and he threw it in the trash. Needless to say, she made him go in there, get it, and eat it. I found out that we were growing our own chickens. The only thing I can remember

Momma getting from the store was something like chicken feet that she used to mix with rice and onions. It was all bone, the chicken foot. Do you know what chicken foot looks like? You got a whole lot of them for less than \$.10 cents. A whole bunch, you know. Everything was cheap. The bologna wasn't pre sliced like it is now. You got a roll and it was sliced up. What else? The exact prices I don't remember that much anymore. But I know that if I paid today with the money I get, I'd be rich during those times back then. I'd be totally rich.

S.C: Did your mom make your clothes and stuff like that?

B.J: No, she used to sew but she didn't make our clothes. No, she always bought them. She taught me how to sew. So, when I finished nursing school I used to make all my uniforms because I didn't want to buy mine.

S.C: During that time was there a certain way you, your brothers, and sisters dressed versus some of the white people y'all saw?

B.J: No, because guess what? A lot of my clothes came from the same white people. I'm dressing the same way basically because I'm getting clothes from their mommas. There was no difference in the dress.

S.C: So if your mom went to work she would bring hand-me-downs to you guys?

B.J: Yes, but they didn't look like hand-me-downs. Most of them looked like practically new. My momma worked for really nice people. Mrs. Breeze, I'll never forget her. She stayed on Manor in Hampton. She didn't have any children. All of us were at home so she and her husband were always buying something for us so that Momma could work. They knew she had to work for us so they were helping out. So like I said, I never met

mean white people back then. I ran across them later on in life. They were real nice to her and they were real nice to us.

R.M: You said that you were very outspoken as a young woman.

B.J: Oh, I was.

R.M: Were you ever reprimanded by a white person for being outspoken? Did they ever yell at you?

B.J: No.

R.M: No?

B.J: No.

S.C: What do you think made you the strong outspoken black woman that you are?

B.J: Partially, my mother had a lot to do with it. Like I said, she taught me to be me. She always told me that I had the biggest mouth of every child she ever had. It was always something with me, "Shut up or be quiet, Bertha." Never was I going to be quiet until I finished what I had to say. She'd pop me in the mouth. I said, "You know, Momma, by the time I am grown, my lip is going to be down to my knees." Then, I'd get popped again. I didn't know when to quit. I had to get my point across and she knew that. Most of the time she allowed me to be me until sometimes, when you get away with so much, you kind of overstep the boundaries. When I overstepped the boundaries she corrected that. She basically let me be me. That was by saying what I had to say because I had a big mouth. Always have.[interruption]

S.C: Have you ever thought about telling your story?

B.J: Well, not so much my story. When I was growing up there were always sayings that my mother said. Like, "You make your bed hard, you lay in it." Things like that. I did



think about putting those clichés down on paper .And I'm sure that not just my mother but a lot of mothers used those same clichés. It was beyond me but when I was young, I used to try to figure them out. Okay, my momma stays here. When I go over there, I find this lady says the same thing my momma says. How did she know what my momma was saying? How did my momma know what she's saying? They're both saying the same thing. I couldn't figure it out and I still can't figure it out. Sometimes now you hear somebody on the east coast come up with a phrase and next thing you know it's over on the west coast. So are all our brains tuned to the same channel? What is it? Then, you didn't have the kind of communication that you have now. We all were thinking on the same level. Those clichés, there were a million of them. I did sit down one time and start to write them all down. I got sidetracked. I started working with the senior citizens down where I live and I never got back to it.

S.C: Can you tell us a couple and what they meant to you, or meant to her [Mrs. Johnson's mother] even?

B.J: Well, as far as people not wanting to work. It was, "John ain't going to work in a pie shop tasting pies." If you can't work at the pie shop tasting pies, what can you do?

Absolutely nothing. You don't want to do anything. Let me see. [pause] I'm not going to say that one. I said the one about, "If you make your bed hard you're going to lay in it." Good gracious, as many as she had--. I knew them but they just don't come to mind now. They don't. My mind just went blank. I can't remember now.

S.C: You want to tell us the one you didn't want to say? That one gave her a little smile so you know it's interesting [laughter].

B.J: Not really. It was concerning somebody who was just plain stupid, who doesn't have any sense. She would say, "Sam ain't got sense enough to pour piss out a boot with the directions on the bottom saying upside down." [laughter] Things like that she would always come up with it. My brothers and sisters and I, as we got older and started hanging out together more often--. When you go off to all corners of the world, you come back together. We would sit down for hours at a time and talk about things like that.

[interruption from outside noise]

S.C: They're doing a play.

B.J: Oh. How often do they have plays around here?

S.C. & R.M: Not sure.

B.J: This used to be a school, Walter Reid.

S.C: That's the one you said your brother went to?

B.J: Yes, my baby brother went to school here.

S.C: Was it segregated?

B.J: Yeah.

R.M: Were most schools around here segregated?

B.J: Yeah, all of them were. Schools weren't integrated until 1971, I believe.

R.M: Did you have any childhood friends that you kept in contact with as you were growing up or were you more close with your siblings?

B.J: Well both. I have one girlfriend, she and I went through high school together. She finished nursing school ahead of me and she left town. She finally came back and it was like she never left. She's my best friend today, Ethel. The girl that I grew up across the street from, her mother was my godmother. She's in New Haven, Connecticut. We talk to

each other all the time. But, basically it's just those two. They've always been there and they always will. My daughter tells me all the time, "Momma, I wish I had me some friends like that." I say, "Well, friends like that happen. You can't make them. You can't force a relationship. Either it's going to be or it's not." As a matter of fact, when I leave here I'm going to see my girlfriend. I haven't seen her.

R.M: Do you have any funny stories with your best friend growing up or did you guys do any fun things? Any good memories with her?

S.C: Any insiders? Inside jokes?

B.J: No. Just that my best friend, Lynn--. Like I said, she grew up across the street from me. She and I used to play softball together and her sister was a little older than us. She was, what do you call it? A Miss Priss. We were tomboys. So we would beat her up. I asked Lynn, "Why did you have me beat up your sister?" She said, "Because she got on my nerves." But that's the kind of friendship we had. Her mother died when we were seniors in high school and after that she moved to Connecticut. We've always stayed in touch. That's about it.

S.C: When your younger brother was coming along, schools were integrated then, right?

B.J: Yeah.

S.C: Did you ever come back to see the differences in the way it was when he was going to school versus when you were going?

B.J: Didn't like it. To me they had no discipline in the school. I went up to the school one day. My mother asked me to go up there to do something, I can't remember what it was now. When I walked in the door, he was laying on the floor with a girl laying her head on his shoulder. They were all stretched out on the floor like they were on a bed somewhere.

There were kids walking down the hall, kissing in the hallway, holding hands. They had telephone booths in the hall. They were talking on telephones. How are you going to learn anything? That was shocking for me. I went home and told Momma. She said, "Well, things change, things changed." Thank God I didn't have to go through that. When I went to school, it was strict. You went to school to learn. There was no funny business. If Ms. Scales caught you holding hands you had to go to the office and we did not want to go to the office. You did not get caught in the hallway after the bell rings. You could bet you could stand at one end of Huntington and look to the other and you wouldn't see anybody in the hallway. Now, they stay in the hallway. I went to visit my granddaughter at Heritage when she was in school, and somebody is always wandering in the hallway. Come on, don't you have a class you're supposed to be in? You have security guards. Why? Kids are nuts. They get an education, but it's the wrong kind. They don't get any book learning. It's all street learning, which can't benefit you at all. I don't give up. Talking doesn't go through. Repetitive talk, it's far more than red tape. "Oh, Grandma, I got this." "You got what?" "Grandma, I'm not stupid." I say, "Hello, neither am I. You know more in twenty years than I know in sixty-five?" "But Grandma, things have changed." I said, "That's the problem." I told you I'm a fighter. She's going to say how smart she is. She knows I'm going to swing at her. So she's going to take off before I catch her like I used to. Kids. What was the question, I forgot the question.

S.C: What are the things you saw different from your brother's time when the schools were integrated?

R.M: Did you like the integration? Or, what did your brother view the integration as?

B.J: You know, I never heard him talk about it. But I do know that they had a lot of white friends. White kids would come to our house all the time. It wasn't like it was a bad thing. They got along together. I don't ever remember them getting in trouble because of a white or a black thing going on. They seemed to work it out.

S.C: Sports seemed like a thing that the community really got together to do. So, during the time after integration how did the turnout at the sporting events change? Did blacks go against whites? Was it still segregated in the seats just because blacks didn't want to be around whites or how was it then?

B.J: I don't recall it being segregated. You sat where you wanted to sit. If my brothers went to Warwick, and Warwick was playing Ferguson, I sat on the Warwick side because I was cheering for them. Now, Ferguson remained mostly white. Warwick was mostly black but they were integrated because my daughter went to Ferguson. They were more into academics then they were at Warwick.

S.C: What kinds of things did y'all learn in school? Did you more learn life lessons and black history? Or, did you learn basic stuff like U.S. government and things that we learn today?

B.J: Well when I was in high school, we started high school in eighth grade. It was eighth through twelfth grades. We had home economics. They taught you how to cook. They had shop for the fellas. That taught them how to make things, like carpentry and things like that. We had auto mechanics which taught them how to repair cars. We had black history and it was black history to the extent that black people invented things too. Like refrigeration and the coupling joint that hooks chains together, a sort of machine. Things that basically are ingrained in civilization but because they were black it was not

attributed to them. It was attributed to the white man because he was the only one who could get a patent. He was the only one who could market it. School then prepared you for life after school. Okay, everybody is not college material. You got a lesson in other things that you could go into. You could go into a field like carpentry, auto mechanics, laying bricks, or whatever. If you weren't prepared to go to college, you were prepared to be productive in society when you came out of school. Today, I don't know what they're being prepared for. You didn't pass along just to move ahead in a grade. You had to do the work or you stayed there until you did. You know they went back now and took away all the games we won by men who were too old to play. They were too old. They were nineteen, twenty years old. The one boy I know was twenty-one years old when he graduated from high school, but he didn't give up. Back then kids didn't torment you because you were old going to school. They didn't torment you. You felt comfortable staying there until you accomplished what you wanted to accomplish. I can't imagine that right now. They would make fun of him so bad, it'd make him want to quit. You're a senior in high school and you're still trying to learn how to read. Hey, that's commitment. Today they look at it as being stupid. "He will never learn, he's just stupid." So what's your problem? You dropped out. You want dumb? That was dumb of him staying in there trying to learn? At least he was accomplishing something. You haven't accomplished anything.

S.C: Is there anything else you'd really want to contribute? If we just put this on the document and said "Ms. Bertha Johnson, just sum it up". What do you really want to say? One last thing.

B.J: I was born and raised in downtown Newport News where fruit trees grew down the street. You walked down the street and you got apple trees, pear trees, grape arbors, those kinds of things. People looked out for each other. There's no such thing as Sally over here is hungry, because she's going to eat. If I ate, she was going to eat. We were a community of people that loved each other and looked out for each other. I had a wonderful time growing up in this city. But it was a totally different city than it is now. It was wonderful being a child in this city. When I finally left home, I would tell everybody, "Oh you got to go back to the Big Newport because that's my town." I was proud of it. Then I came back--. I was gone for 5 years, after my husband died. I just needed to get away. I came back and it's just totally not the same and it could be. It very well could be. I love this town. I still love this town.

R.M: How is it different, what kinds of differences did you notice when you came back?

B.J: Crime. The crime rate has sky rocketed. I grew up on these streets and I could walk the street at three o'clock in the morning if I went to a party and got out at three. I felt secure walking home. If anybody saw me on the street, they were going to help me rather than hurt me. There was no black on black crime in this hood then. If you came from somewhere else and started to create a problem here, then you had to go. You got an old whipping and you got sent back to where you came from. You didn't shoot anybody or kill anybody. We didn't have to deal with things like that. It was just wonderful. You didn't lock doors. I remember sleeping with the front door unlocked and all the windows raised. They had screens in them that slide and open up and put the window down on them, but that was all. They were easy to get into but, no one was breaking into your house. Nobody was robbing you. That's not to say there were not drugs around. There

were drugs, but they were undercover. Nobody wanted you to know they were doing drugs, so it was kept secret. When you finally found out, you were shocked. "I know him, I didn't know he did drugs," so it was. Not to say that was a good thing. If he was using drugs it was bad, but at least he had enough respect for himself and other people around him not to broadcast it. This is not a joke. Now, I don't know what they call it. It was pride. There was pride in being who you were back then. That's not the case anymore.

S.C: Before we ask the last question. Where did you go after your husband died? When you said you have to get away, where did you move to?

B.J: I moved to Charleston, South Carolina.

S.C: Did you notice a difference in the people?

B.J: Yes.

S.C: What was one of the differences?

B.J: I'm used to looking in your face when I talk to you. They're not. I noticed that when they talk they bow their head. They won't look a white man in the face to talk to them. I'm not used to that. My mother taught me manners. If I was talking to someone older than me, I would say "Yes ma'am or yes, sir," "Thank you or no thank you." I felt like they did it because they felt like they had to, not because it was the proper thing to do. It was something they were used to doing and they just hadn't gotten out of the habit of not doing it. It wasn't going to work, so I left. Don't get me wrong I loved it down there but I didn't like their subservient attitude. I am not a servant anymore. I am a productive member of this society and that's how you're going to treat me. "Oh, you're going to get in trouble." "Well I'm in trouble anyways." I was born black. I'm in trouble. I found a lot of that when I staying down there. Their language took me a while to understand. They



talk in what you call “geechie.” I could never explain it to you in a hundred years. It’s like they talk backwards. Like if I say, “I’m going to put the patient to bed.” They’re going to say, “I just downed the patient.” You did what? It sounds like you knocked them down or something, not like you put them in the bed. That took a lot of getting used to, the way they talked. It was foreign to me. I loved it down south. Hearing the horror stories when I was growing up of what was happening in the south, I never thought I would go south. I wouldn’t put up with it. But when I did go south, I loved it. I loved it. If it hadn’t of been for my daughter, I would have stayed. She was here and she wanted me here so I came back home. Two months later she got married. So, why am I here? “You have a husband, you don’t need me.” But, she said she did so I stayed. Bless her heart.

R.M: Our last question is: do you have any recommendations for other people who we might interview for the project? Do you have any friends or know anyone in the community that would be willing to share their story like you did?

B.J: Not right now. I sure don’t. I can’t think of anybody who would be willing to do that.

R.M: Well, we thank you so much for taking your time.

B.J: Thank y’all for listening.

S.C: It was good stuff.

R.M: Yes, it was. Thank you!