

Effie Ashe
Interview Summary

Interviewee: Effie Ashe

Interviewers: Sharell Stewart and Laura Fluck

Interview date: October 20, 2012

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

THE INTERVIEWEE: Effie Ashe grew up in Henderson, North Carolina and experienced both segregated neighborhoods and schools. She moved with her family to Washington, D.C. during World War II and then to Newport News, Virginia, with her husband, Wilbert. Ashe related several stories of her children's experiences with racism and integration as well as her own memories of segregated public facilities. Ashe worked in civil service for thirty-two years before being elected to the Newport News School Board. In 2000, she became the first African-American woman to chair the board. She is still active in the community and, although she does not believe that racism is dead, she is hopeful for the future of diversity.

TRANSCRIPT—EFFIE ASHE

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Length: 1 audio file, MP3 format, approximately 75 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Sharell Stewart: I'm Sharell Stewart and this is my partner Laura Fluck. Today is October 20, 2012 and I am interviewing Mrs. Effie Ashe. This interview is taking place at the Downing Gross Cultural Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia. This interview is sponsored by Dr. Laura Puaca, director of the Hampton Roads Oral History Project and Professor of History at Christopher Newport University. Good morning, Mrs. Ashe.

Effie Ashe: Good morning.

SS: We are taking what is called a life history and would like to begin our questions with your childhood. Where and when were you born?

EA: I was born in Franklin County, North Carolina in 1931.

SS: Did you grow up in a segregated neighborhood?

EA: Did I? [laugh] Yes! I grew up in Henderson, North Carolina and what was known as colored people lived on one side of the tracks—and this was actually a true railroad track—and on the other side was generally the white population.

SS: Was this town officially or unofficially segregated?

EA: It was that way when I was born, so I have no idea how it became that way. There were some African-Americans, and please excuse me for using that term, but I like it,

who did live on the other side of the tracks, but they were basically as I recall permitted segments of Henderson. The African-Americans who lived on that side lived near the only elementary school for colored children. I can't remember the name of it at this point. I remember my brother and I had to walk from our neighborhood down and across the railroad tracks to get to the school. We had a West Indian principal at the school and he was very strict on time and children being on time for school, which is a good policy to learn to be on time wherever you are going. His name was Mr. Johnson. They had a fence up around the school and a bell on the gate. If you were late that gate was closed and you would have to ring the bell which would ring in Mr. Johnson's office and he would come down and let you in and he would paddle you for being late. And I did not know until I was almost grown that my father had had it very clear that nobody was to hit his children. [laugh] If you told him that they did something, let him know and he would decide the punishment. But I did not know that [at the time] so I grew up in fear that I would be late one day and finally that fear came true. My brother and I couldn't cross the railroad tracks because there was a train on it. My father had forbid us to do like many kids had done and gone under the tracks. So we had waited for the train and then ran all the way to school. When we got there of course the gate had been locked and instead of us ringing the bell we made a U-turn going back home because my father always said it was he or my mother that would be responsible for us being late. We were not to be punished for our being late. And is true, we couldn't be responsible for our being late, which is true because we couldn't go until our mother left. And we couldn't go through that train! So, we turned around and he couldn't catch us. When we got home my mom called my dad at work and explained to him what had happened and when my dad

approached Mr. Johnson at school he said “Well, I wasn’t going to hit them I was just going to let them in!” [laugh] But we didn’t even wait to talk to him!

SS: That leads into my next question: tell me about your family life. How many siblings do you have?

EA: Well, I had one brother who died in 1998 and that was the only sibling I had. After that I only had my husband. And within an eighteen month period—my husband was an only son with two sisters—he lost both of his sisters and my brother all inside an eighteen month period. We were married, would’ve been married sixty years in December 2011 but he passed away on August 28th of that year so we didn’t quite make it to our sixty year anniversary.

SS: How did your parents explain the reality of race relations to you and your brother?

EA: I don’t know. My mother was a very quiet spoken person and I probably took more after my father who was a little bit feisty. We had our own values system I guess and I really never concerned myself about being involved with white people, not then. It didn’t happen and the only time I saw them is when we went shopping downtown in Henderson—maybe five or six blocks of the downtown area. And I guess the thing that bothered me the most was—I’m not sure that I remember this as much as I have been reminded of this often—but it was at Christmastime, I was with my parents, my mother was shopping, and I got away from my mother somehow and I grabbed this lady’s hand and she looked down and realized that I was black and she shook her hand loose from me instead of trying to find my parents. That was the only direct negative effect that racism had on me at that time.

SS: So there were no other events that galvanized your community? Do you remember?

EA: No, I don't remember. We lived along just happily going away. And when I was nine years old, or twelve, twelve years old my parents moved to Washington D.C. during World War II. And we moved there my father worked for the Bureau of Engraving. He worked there printing money for many years and then we found out that the ink poisoned his skin, so he could no longer work with the ink presses. So he left there and he worked for () one of the () shops and he worked there and became the general manager before he retired. After moving to Washington, I think we found, I found, a different type of racism. African-Americans were not truly friendly to people of my [light-skinned] color and of course whites did not care to bother. So, when my children came along and the "I'm black and I'm proud" thing came about they were very concerned because they were singing it from high heaven, "I'm black and I'm proud!" And momma wasn't singing anything. And they wanted to know, "Momma, why isn't that you—aren't you black and proud?" And I said, "I'm proud but black and proud? No, I'm not." Some black people don't like me because of the color of my skin, which I have no control over, and some white people don't like me because I'm black. [laugh] So, then my children began to take on a different picture and they began to realize and even totally segregated schools they would segregate within the schools sometimes, as far as socialization.

SS: What was it like attending school before and after integration?

EA: There was no integration during my time, sweetie, remember I'm eighty-one years old. [laugh] So there was no integration during my time in school. I think integration took place in Washington D.C. maybe four years after I graduated from high school.

SS: How did integration affect your children?

EA: Well, my kids did just fine. When integration first took place in Newport News—which is where I am by now because when I married Wilbert, we moved a half a block from where he was born and built a house and that's where I still live. And he—my children had the same kind of life, basically, that I did and we had our own family value system. So, they grew up, they said they never knew that they were poor until they were grown. But I told them you really weren't poor because you had a family that loved you and that's more important: money can't buy that. So, they grew up knowing that when integration was taking place my oldest son was in the last graduating class from Carver High School which is now Carver Middle School. My youngest son was a freshman at Carver High School and they sent him over to Huntington Middle School. And it was difficult because his best friend lived down this end of town and he was assigned to, I think, stay at Carver that year. It was just that one year. And they told me my son could have been grandfathered, but he went over there and stayed that one year and, well, he was fine. And, you wouldn't believe it now, but everybody said he wasn't very sociable. He would sit on the steps at lunch time. I got a call one day from the school: "Mrs. Ashe we're concerned about your son. He sits on the steps at lunchtime by himself, he eats by himself and we don't know whether he's depressed or what." So, I said I doubt if he is, but I'll talk to him. So, when he came home and I asked him about it, he said, "Yeah, some of the kids take the money from the kids who are vulnerable and I'm not going to be a part of that group and I'm certainly not going to be part of a white group because they don't want me anyway." And so he said --. So, he finished that year well and went on to Ferguson. The one thing that did happen to him while he was there this was the one thing, the Kent State incident took place. You remember those kids wore those black

bands. He went to school one day with a black band on and a teacher told him to take that off. He told them that he had permission from his parents so he could wear it. And when he came home he had a straight A report with a D in math. So, I called the math teacher up and he said “Well, what do you want me to give him?” [I replied] “I don’t want you to *give* him anything. I want you to grade him fairly. He took it very personally to get a D in math.” He said “Well, that’s what he earned.” The next day he still had a D in math. () So, he went on through high school through Ferguson and he was inducted into the National Honor Society—another hitch. All the white children’s pictures showed up. () There were only two African-Americans that year that were inducted and that was my son and Robin Lett. That was fine but when he was finishing high school and he did not want to go to college [in the area]. We wanted him to go to Hampton [University] but that isn’t where he wanted to go. His brother graduated from Hampton also but he wanted to go to the University of Chicago. I could not understand that for a while. But his favorite counselor was a graduate of the University of Chicago and from that area. I said, “We can’t afford to send you to the University of Chicago.” He said, “I know, Momma with the National Merit Scholarship I will be able to make it.” And he did, so he was busy helping himself get to the University of Chicago. To make a long story short, he got there stayed there one year and then said, “Ma, I want to come back east!” I said, “Son, the only way you can come back east is that *you* fill out all the applications and you get enough money to compensate for what you were getting at the University of Chicago. So, he called me one day and said, “Ma, Georgetown University has admitted me and they’re going to give me X number of dollars,” which was much

more than he had gotten at the University of Chicago. So he came back and finished at Georgetown.

SS: Well, that was good!

EA: Yes, [laugh] but that D on his report card had caused questions at the University of Chicago. They wanted to know why. I told them on the phone that had happened because on the math portion on the national exam he had made 99th percentile. Nobody else in Newport News had done this so he redid it for someone else as soon as he had it. They wanted to know if he would go to summer school and take trigonometry and one other math (). He could make no less than a B and they would give him X number of dollars. I said, “No, you’re crazy. I’m not going to put my son through that,” but he said, “No, I can do it, momma, I can do it!” And he did it. He got an A and a B in the summer school program. Those were the kinds of things—Oh, and the *Daily Press*, with all the white kids, they would not put my son’s picture. They said they didn’t have a picture so I got mine. Eventually they gave me a picture that was so small it was way over in the middle of the page. So, I just blew it up at work and put it on the bulletin board. Those were the kinds of little things that I guess they would frustrate you for a little while, but in the long run you said there is something better in life than this. I think that in many cases they just made us stronger, because you realize that. My mother always told us we had to be twice as good as the other person and I never forgot that. I trained my children the same way. You’ve got to be better. I don’t care what it costs, you’ve got to be better, you’ve got to do a better job. I passed it down and I guess they’ve passed it down to their children.

SS: Great thing to pass down, that’s great!

EA: You know segregation or racism is not dead. It's still very much alive. And although we see young people going into school buildings, black and white together, if you walk inside of those school buildings and we'll say walk into a trigonometry class you may see one black there. The division comes after you get inside. If you go into an International Baccalaureate class and look at the kids you may see—well there may see more now—but you may see two or three African-Americans. You might see one Hispanic; you'll see quite a few Asians. So, racism is still very much alive. And it's everybody's fault. We recognize it, but we bury our heads in the sand instead of trying to make sure our children don't say, "Well, I can't do that because I'm black or I'm African-American." They have to understand that you don't allow anybody to tell you what you cannot do. You allow them only to tell you are going to do.

SS: That's a great thing to carry on. What was your first job?

EA: During the summer when I was home from college, I used to work for the census bureau in Suitland, Maryland. My first job after I was married was with Crown Savings Bank on 25th and Jefferson Avenue [in Newport News, Virginia.] I left that and went into civil service until I retired—that was for 32 years. I'm laughing because everybody thought that working for the federal government—segregation, racism? Plenty, plenty! I remember the first interview I had at Fort Eustis [a United States Army base in Newport News, Virginia.] I stood up to be interviewed and I waited and I waited and I waited and I finally got called for the job. What I did not realize is that they did not want me because I was African-American but personnel would not send them anyone else because I was the most qualified. So, I did get the job. I stayed in civil service and I stayed at

Fort Eustis for thirty-odd years. By the time I left I think everybody knew me because they said I was feisty.

SS: What made you decide to go into that field?

EA: What?

SS: What made you decide to go into the civil service?

EA: Money.

SS: Money.

EA: Because I worked at Hampton University for, I guess, about a year but we had two children and if I was going to work I needed to be able to add something to the bank.

And I couldn't add very much working for neither Hampton nor Crown Savings. So, I went over to Fort Eustis and that would buy () because half the money that I made there () was equivalent to the other places. I loved working at Hampton University and Crown Savings Bank.

SS: How did being the only minority in the workplace affect you?

EA: I got used to it. I remained—even until retirement I was usually the only African-American in my work place. And, fortunately, I didn't have a real problem with my co-workers. Everybody got used to me. They realized two things: I was not there to socialize. I would explain to people immediately I have friends and I have family and I was very happy with both. "We're both here to do the same thing, earn a living and do a good job." That was my spiel to anybody when I walked into a job so that nobody had to be concerned about my wanting to be with them or go home with them or wanting to socialize with them. It ended up that everybody wanted to do just that: socialize. They'd play cards at lunchtime and I had to learn to play bridge! "You play bridge, Effie!" I

played bridge and I played Pinochle or whatever. I enjoyed it, but when I went on a job I always had a stack of books or crossword puzzles so that on my lunch hour I could always be busy if everybody else was busy doing something else. I never barged in on anybody. I tried not to.

SS: Well, that's what we wanted to know, did you experience any hostile environments at work but I guess you were included. Did you notice any discrimination in public facilities?

EA: Yes. You mean here?

SS: Anywhere.

EA: Well, my husband and I were travelling to North Carolina. I remember him stopping—I don't remember why he stopped—but it must have been to get gas or something. Because they were going to let me go to the bathroom and when they told me where to go my husband followed me down there. He said, "No, that's not going to work." So, we went back and told them not to put any more gas in the car. He told them, "If you don't have anything better than this for my wife to use as a bathroom we can't do business with you." So, they thanked us and we paid them for the little bit of gas that had been pumped and we went on our merry way. But yes---. And I remember when I first married Wilbert he was stationed at Camp Pickett [an Army National Guard installation near Blackstone, Virginia.] I had a friend from Blackstone who was in college with me and she said, "Effie I have a neighbor named Ms. Kee who rents rooms to military families, I'll call her." So, after Christmas my husband only had until May because I did not wish to be married to a military person and have children. I didn't think I wanted to raise my children all across the country. Looking back it could have been a great thing

but—no. My husband had promised me he would not reenlist after he was out in June. To make a long story short I did go up to Camp Pickett to live. When I was leaving here going to Camp, to Blackstone, I was on a Greyhound bus and I had checked things in Richmond. They had black and white [bus areas] and I was the only person in the black bus area because my husband was meeting me in Blackstone. A [white] man was following me around so I went outside. () The bus came and I got on the bus and he got on the bus. And oh, getting on the bus—and I don't know where these people came from because they weren't in the bus station with me—but we in the door in two lines. A black lady had gone on in front of me and there was a black gentleman there. And just as I stepped up on the bus he [the white man] grabbed me on the back of my collar and said, "You don't walk in front of me. Who do you think you are?" That was the only bus out there. The bus driver said, "You're not riding this bus at all." The man said, "Oh, yes I am, my wife is on there." She said, "Yes, he is because I'm on here." [The driver] told her to get off "because he's not riding this bus." I was scared to death. So the next time my husband decided to go I said either meet me in Richmond or come down here and get me. [laugh] But you ran into those kinds of things of little things. I was so frustrated by the time I got to Blackstone. We lived—he house was at the top of a hill--you'd have to know something about Blackstone. I was much younger then. I couldn't even slide uphill now. There were people who were on the local bus having their sips of drinks. The house-maids had gotten off talking about what they did at Mrs. So-and-so's house. I'm not talking about nice things—ugly things that they did. I was just so frustrated when I saw that hill. I pulled the cord and got off and I took my little piece of luggage and dragged it up that hill to Mrs. Kee's house. Then my husband called the house and

she said, “Mrs. Ashe is here,” and I said “I’m so sorry, I just got off the first place I could to get away.” And Blackstone was probably the most racial place I have ever been in my life.

SS: But since your such a light-skinned complexion had you ever thought of riding with the white people on the bus?

EA: No, I never thought about doing that because my father made it quite clear that you were whatever you were. His mother was white. She came from Kentucky, I believe. All of them were fairer than I am. My brother was fair. So no, that was not an option in our family. You had to be proud of your heritage. My father was African, Indian, and white and he registered both of them—all three of them.

SS: Were you active in church or other community groups?

EA: Growing up, yes and I was very blessed to have a father-in-law who was politically motivated. When Wilbert married me and brought me here (), I just loved my father-in-law. He did not drive; I remember that, so when he got ready to go something—and my mother-in-law did not enjoy the banquets and the hoopla. She would say, “Effie, take [father-in-law’s name] to the banquets.” It got to a point where it was just my father-in-law and I. I was always driving him to banquets and to socials. That was how I got involved with the letters when they were going to take Jefferson Park, our community, and turn it into a rental apartment area, level it. I wrote to the Department of Housing in Washington and they came down and did tours. And I got—I began to enjoy seeing how politics worked and how things could be if you just involved yourself and asked for something. That is how I got involved with that. And yes, I’ve been a member—well I left my church in Washington, D.C. and married Wilbert and moved to his church in

Jefferson Park. I can remember as a little girl the first poem that I said. My mother had me in the Shirley Temple curls because that was the going thing in those days, Shirley Temple. So my mother would wake up Sunday morning and put those curls in my head. She would put all these beautiful dresses on me trying to make a lady out of me. [laugh] And I still remember when I stepped up on the stage my heart went pitter-pat. “Whose little girl is that? Effie Carol is my name. Henderson is my station. Heaven is my native home, but God is my salvation.” Everybody was applauding and I just thought it was the greatest thing in the world. [laugh]

SS: So you loved the spotlight from early on!

EA: Oh, yes! [laugh]

SS: Can you tell us about the community groups in which you are involved?

EA: I am still active with the advisory board for *People to People*. I’ve been a member for many years, I don’t know how many years now. I am still active with OHA [Office of Human Affairs]—I’m not a board member. I’m a--..

SS: Inactive?

EA: we’ll say honorary board member for want of a better term right now. I still attend the meetings most of the time.

SS: What made you run for school board president?

EA: Well, I ran for school board. You don’t have to run to be president. I ran for school board because Flora Crittenden asked me to run. We’d been friends for years and neighbors. I would tell everybody that I wasn’t running for anything. I just wasn’t going to do that. Flora was in Richmond, a delegate for Virginia. She called the house one night—we had company—and she said, “Why is it that you won’t run for school board?”

I said that I promised my husband that I would never run for any political office. Everything I did was on a strictly volunteer basis. She said, "That's the only reason you have for not running? And I said, "Yes." She asked, "Is Wilbert there? Let me speak to him." So I put him on the phone and went back to entertaining our guests. He hung up and he came back in and all of us sat there talking. We went to bed and went to sleep and woke up the next morning. We were sitting there having breakfast and he said, "Effie, why is it that you won't run for school board? Everybody seems to want you to run for school board." I said, "Well, I promised you I would never run for any political office." He looked at me and he said, "Is that the only reason?" I said "Yes, that was my promise." He said, "Well, that's not good enough because I want you to run for school board." So we got up from the table and off we went over town to City Hall and I got the paperwork and filed to run. That was what Flora had wanted with him—to let him know that's why I wasn't running. I was out there running with mostly young people like you. I thought it was fun and funny at the same time. After a while I got into it and began to enjoy it. I looked forward to it. I enjoyed being a member of the school board. That was how it began. And I think I was there—I stayed on the school board for twelve years. I was vice-chairman once with Betty Ann Davis when she was chairperson. And I was vice-chairman the next two years with Mary Oder when she was chairman. Mary Oder and I were good friends. She and my son were inducted into the National Honor Society together. I told Mary that if Betty Ann wanted to stay on one more year than she [Mary] could go ahead of me and be chairman.

SS: You have been described by school board members as colorblind. Did your experiences during the civil rights movement hinder or facilitate your ability to look past a person's race?

EA: I guess age has been helpful for me. I am in a sense, don't misunderstand me. I know when I see a white person and I know when I see a black person. I'm not so sure that I am colorblind so much as I am character-oriented. And after sitting and talking with someone for a little while, people are people and either they have good character and good values or they don't and this is how I judge people, never by the color of their skin. I've seen some black people I didn't want to be with. I have some in my family I didn't want to bother with. So, it has nothing to do with the color of their skin and does have everything to do with character and values.

SS: Were you involved in any civil rights protests?

EA: No.

SS: No. How did your school experience differ from that of those students you helped as a member of the school board?

EA: [pause] Well, during my time—I'm just trying to remember that. Seventy-some years is a long time. But, I have a great deal of concern for youngsters who have never had anyone to love, to nurture them and who have been made to understand that they are poor and that they are almost undeserving. That concerns me because I think a couple of schools I have gone to talk to young people where they were predominately African-American, up in the Sedgefield [Elementary School] area for instance. I would say to them because they will tell you, they've heard it so long, they'll say "I'm poor." Some of them have said, "I'll never amount to anything." They said all these negatives. So, I said

to a group once, “Why do you think you’re poor?” They said they lived in whatever that little area is near Sedgefield. They hear shootings and this and that all the time. So I asked, “Have you ever been to an outdoor toilet?” [They replied] “No, ma’am.” I said, “You’ve never been to an outdoor toilet where have to bring the water in a pail and bathe in the middle of the floor?” [They replied] “No, ma’am!” I said, “I did. I never heard the gunshots or that kind of thing.” I remember the first bathroom we had. My daddy had it built on the back porch. And I remember it had a chain like a light and you’d pull this chain and it would flush the stool. [laugh] And they couldn’t understand what I wanted them to understand is that it’s not what you’re going through, it’s what you get through and when you get through it be sure that you get through it knowing that you can be better and you can get through it in a decent manner. They were really surprised. One kid looked at me and he said, “You are older than my grandmother!” [laugh] I said, “Yes, I probably am.” And they have to be taught even though they live in these conditions— there was a woman on the news yesterday talking about shoes too small for her—those are things that you learn by someone encouraging you that you can do better than what your circumstances are.

SS: And I see that you were a commencement speaker at Heritage High School [in Newport News, Virginia] in 1998.

EA: Yeah.

SS: And you were encouraging them to make the world a better place? That’s always the message. How has participation in the PTA [Parent Teacher Association] changed since African-Americans were integrated into the program?

EA: Well, um [pause] I don't know. When I was on the school board—and I've been off now since 2006 and you see my life membership [gestures to PTA pin on her lapel.] I think that many times at first blacks did not participate, or did not feel welcome to participate. I think they had to, I hope they got beyond that and realized it was their PTA as much as it was anybody else's PTA. If their children were going to be there, they needed to be there to be sure that the best was being offered not only to their children but to every child in the school. And just as I told them when I went on the school board, "I'm not here to represent anybody in particular, but every child. Every child deserves a decent education. Every child deserves the opportunity to learn. And every child deserves a teacher who's willing to teach that child regardless of the pigmentation of their skin.

SS: How severe are the differences between your school experiences and that of your grandchildren?

EA: My grandchildren are grown now. [laugh]

SS: [laugh] Oh! Did they have any experiences similar to the ones you went through?

EA: I don't think so. I do remember—my grandchildren went to school in Hampton [Virginia.] I remember my oldest grandson—my baby—and I remember the teacher saying that she could keep him after school. During that time my mother was alive and we had someone with her 24/7. So when I went to pick him up, if my husband was not at home, I had to get someone to come in and stay for that period of time, unless the care provider—sometimes the care provider could change their time. I didn't have the time to sit around and wait. So then one day the teacher said he didn't finish his work and so he had to stay after school. And so I said OK and I explained to her what the situation was.

And I said but either me or my husband would return but I've got to go (). And I said but from now on if he has to stay after school please call me and I won't come until it's time to pick him up. And so as soon as I left almost he finished his work. I said, "Why couldn't you finish that when everybody else was in class?" He looked at me and he said, "I couldn't see it." [I replied] "What do you mean you couldn't see it?" He was tall, he was sitting in the back and I guess they were seated by height. So, I said, "Do you need glasses?" [He replied] "I don't know." I went to the teacher and I told her what our conversation had been and she said they had eye exams. I asked what kind of exams. Somebody came to the school. So I said OK, I would tell his parents to go get him an eye exam. And so they did it and he did need glasses. So I went back to school another day () and I walked in and she said, "Oh, you can have a seat, Brandon is going to have to stay and do work." And I said, "Excuse me" and I'm walking behind her and she's just ignoring me completely. And my antennas had gone completely up because I do not like to be ignored. And when she-- I got almost to her and I was going to reach out—and I knew that I was not supposed to do that so I took my hand back and I came back and most of the kids went out of the room. I said, "Brandon, get your coat, let's go." We stopped by the principal's office and I told him what had happened. I was so angry and I said I'm not coming back here because I do not want to go to jail. So I got home and the phone just rang and rang and rang and rang. I didn't even want to talk to her, I just knew in my head it was her. I finally talked to her because she just called and called me back and she said she hadn't heard me. She said, "Why didn't you touch me?" I said, "I was about to but I decided that was not the right thing to do." So, she apologized. Those were the differences. Back in my day I think all the --. Back in my day when I was in

elementary school we lived directly across the street from a house where nothing but schoolteachers—single schoolteachers. They were just beginning to allow people to get married and teach. If you were married and you got pregnant you could not come to the classroom.

SS: I never knew that.

EA: So there were distinct differences in my childhood and their childhood and I guess with childhood now. I'm just waiting for my grandchildren to have children.

SS: Exciting! In what way do you believe *People to People* has helped to ease racial tensions in Hampton Roads?

EA: Well, each quarter we have something that deals with racial—I would rather say intelligence. Because it's amazing what people think until they get to know each other. So I think that when you are allowed to come together and say what's on your heart—and sometimes what's on somebody's heart goes against your grain or my grain but that's where you're supposed to get rid of it. And it's kind of like having the family around the table and you say, "I didn't like what Effie said today." So I said I'm sorry. And after you think about it and after a while you say well, Effie said exactly what she felt. Then you either prove that to be true or you decide well maybe she's right. So I think that *People to People* has brought a lot of people, a lot of people in Newport News, together. I watch the meetings grow and things that people are interested in seem to grow. I think that there's more to be done. We've started working with a group out of Virginia () since I was honored to be—honored as a member a few years ago. And they have these workshops and kids from the high schools get to go and sit through the sessions and to work with each other and sleep with each other. And then they come back and they're so

hopped up that they're passing it on to their fellow classmates. And so I think it's doing a lot of good because not only are we working with people my age and adults but we're working with people, with young people, where it all should begin in the beginning. Because probably only in America is there such a thing as racial tensions. There are social tensions and religions tensions but we are probably one of the few groups that have racial tensions. And I laugh because they say Barack Obama is an African-American and I say he truly is! His dad was African and his mom was white. I say so he is truly an African-American. () It's the character and the values that make the difference.

SS: How did the Wilbert & Effie Ashe Manor Apartments come to be named after you and your late husband?

EA: Your guess is as good as mine! [laugh] It's truly humbling, first of all, and I think that there must have been someone in the Housing Authority who thought that we had done something—I don't know. I've known so many people who have done so many things that I have never and I'd say have done them better than we have done them. I don't know. I just am grateful and honored and humbled by the idea.

SS: What do you view as the most important accomplishment of the civil rights movement?

EA: I guess the thing that I find most accomplished was that a person to be able to go and live where he or she wants to, eat (), sleep where he or she wishes to sleep. You're probably surprised that I didn't say be educated where he or she wants to, but you can be educated anywhere if you have the will, brains, and the desire. I think that civil rights brought about an opportunity that I didn't have to be exposed that filthy bathroom that nobody had probably ever cleaned before. I can go to a hotel and say I'm tired and check

into a hotel and sleep comfortably instead of having to go to a park and park my car and not be safe and sleep in that car because there was no place where I had permission to sleep. So those are the kinds of things I think, and as those things have taken place I think you will find that we have gotten to know each other better and like myself instead of looking at the color of a person's skin you take a few minutes to talk with them and you find out that their values are the same as yours and their love for humanity is the same as yours.

SS: Do you think the civil rights movement is over?

EA: No, still going.

SS: Still going, always a fight. What do you regard as the unfinished legacies of the movement?

EA: [pause] The unfinished legacy [pause] I guess the thing that made me say that it's not over—I think the thing that really bothered me the most was that I was happy to see Barack Obama elected president of the United States but when I found out that a group of senators and congressmen had gotten together while he was celebrating his victory, they had gotten together and decided that they would not support anything he was going to put on the table even if it was good for the country. That was scary. That is very scary and that tells me that we still have a lot of work to do.

SS: What are the most pressing problems facing African-Americans today?

EA: [pause] The most pressing thing that I can think of at this point in time is that African-Americans have to go back to their heritage. They have to understand that family values are far more important than illegitimacy and drug addictions and that kind of thing. They cannot be ruled by tests. () drug tests. They've got to be ruled by the fact

that every child that they are responsible for bringing into this world deserves the opportunity to be treated and valued as a human being and to be loved and to understand that where they came from, why they're here, and the fact that they are important. There is no such thing as an accidental child. God is the only person that can make a child and that child is not an accident if God allows it to come into this world.

SS: What do you consider to be your greatest contribution to the advancement of the African-American community in Hampton Roads?

EA: [pause] I just don't know that I have made that great of a contribution to the community. I feel that if anything has come out of my existence it would be that people have learned that I am not only willing to listen but I'm willing to contribute whatever it is that I might have to offer at that particular time and that I value their experiences as much as I hope they value and respect mine.

SS: Well, have you ever Googled Effie Ashe and see all the great and wonderful things--

EA: No.

SS: No? Well, we appreciate your service. Is there anything else you would like to say?

EA: I would just like to say that whatever happens in Newport News that I think it's one of the greatest places that anyone could want to live. I think that we are struggling but we're working on one of the greatest educational systems. And I hope that anything that I have added will not be in vain—that we will continue to work toward a greater educational system in the city.

SS: Well, thank you very much!

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