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Interview Date: August 13, 2010

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
African American History

Interviewee: Michelle Anita Swain Barnes

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Place:

Interviewer: Ezell Wilson

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Michelle Anita Swain Barnes discusses in this interview her activism while a student at the University of Houston, and major events that occurred in the civil rights movement during her tenure. She also outlines her community work in the Third Ward.

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EW: OK. Tell me your full name?

AB: My name is Michelle Anita Swain Barnes.

EW: And tell me when and where you were born?

AB: I was born June 5th 1948 in Austin, Texas.

EW: And much like everyone else that I've interviewed so far in this series of interviews people were born somewhere else other than Houston or made an impact on Houston. So how did you come to be in Houston?

AB: I've lived in Houston since I was about 4 years old. Our family came to Houston; our immediate family came to Houston, because this was the place where my dad, August N. Swain, had his first professional job as a Social Worker in the 50's.

EW: When you came to Houston, where did your family settle? Which part of the city did they settle in?

AB: Our family moved probably through referrals and suggestions from extended family immediately into 3rd Ward. We lived on Alabama, 3206. The house still stands today.

EW: So, coming to Houston and growing up in the 3rd Ward, you grew up during the era that's coming up towards the end of the segregation era and this was the time with civil rights struggles so growing up in the 3rd Ward in Houston, as you did, you have the recollections that are what was like to live during the time of segregation and during the time of civil rights?

AB: I do have recollections of what it was like to live in Houston during segregation. I remember going to the Weingarten store on Alameda with my family. It was a weekly

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ritual that we did as a family, just going grocery shopping together and Daddy would buy us, my brother and myself, 5th Avenue or whatever kind of candy we wanted as a treat and there was a what I now know was a demonstration going on in that store at the lunch counter which was the point of sale of those candy treats. So it was our destination as children, my brother, myself and so we passed the counter, saw all of the people milling around, all of the excitement was very different than it usually was on a weekly basis. I also remember, just traveling in the state and out of the state east by car and Daddy having some emotional feedback because he was inconvenienced and our family was inconvenienced for not being able to stop at a restroom or stop at a restaurant during the travel. There was also an incident I remember vividly going to a baseball game and something must have happened prior to the game, maybe during that day, maybe during that week, and my father's reaction after saying the Pledge of Allegiance was "... but us," justice for all and his response was or punctuation was "but for us." So I knew that those were significant, symbolic times. Those were memories that were symbolic for me, which I'm still connecting dots to now.

EW: OK. That'll work.

AB: And to add to that a little bit. There must have been, though I must have lived a very sheltered life, I knew that there was a difference because of segregation, because of the significance that was put on going to the University of Houston, going to by scholarships, to schools on the Eastern Seaboard and the Scholarships were not only academically based but they were racially based.

EW: When I mentioned the University of Houston which is where you attended, how did you come to attend the University of Houston and why U of H in particular?

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AB: I was a good student in high school. I think I was an excellent student but according to my grades, I was a good student. By the end of my high school experience, I had scholarships to go to various universities and colleges across the country but I chose to go to the University of Houston because in addition to my professional aspirations, it was important to me to be socially balanced and to be married by the time I left college. So it didn't make sense, practically speaking, to spend a lot of money traveling back and forth where my goals could be satisfied by going to a good school closer in. My mother used to say that it didn't really matter what university or college you attended, it's what you brought to the situation. I believed that.

EW: Now were your parents of a strong influence on you in terms of your education or aspirations?

AB: My parents were a strong influence on me because I knew by their orientation that I was going to go to college. I wasn't oriented by them, though, what specifically to do. I was free to do what I wanted to do. So in addition to being a good wife, a good mother, I was going to be a good professional whatever I ended up being. Probably an educator, and that's what I've become.

EW: So, when you attended the University of Houston, the university life tends to ingrain a lot of different experiences to young people just in general. How did attending the University of Houston impact your life, coming up to campus at the young age that you did. What was the impact on you?

AB: The biggest impact that the University of Houston provided was an introduction to and an orientation by students who were more conscience than I was, students from all over the country. African American students who were there for whatever reasons, they

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were there, but there was created at the University of Houston a nexus for me that brought so many wonderful experiences right to my door ... literally!

EW: And with these students that you were meeting up with on campus in the time period that you attended U of H there was a strong push for a number of things for African American students including an African American studies program. Were you involved at all in any of these activities such as or exist such as AABL or COBRR or involved with the push back for African studies program?

AB: While at the University of Houston, almost immediately as a freshman, I was introduced to wonderful individuals who were fired up firey, conscious, ready to change the world. And I, by contrast, realized that I was willing to live in the world. I didn't realize that the world needed changing. Back to that sheltered existence again. But students like Lynn Eusan, with whom I shared the first week of orientation in the dorm, though I didn't live in the dorm during the school year, I lived just a few blocks from the University of Houston, and stayed at home the whole time, after orientation. Gene Lock, Omawale Lithuli, I met students who were also from Houston that I might not have otherwise met because of the activities that were catalyzed at the University of Houston through AABL, COBRR, and ultimately the work of creating the African American Studies Program on campus. But there were some other kinds of activities like starting the chartering of the fraternities and sororities on campus, historically black fraternities and sororities that were nonexistent at the University of Houston in the 60's. So both Lynn and I, Binea Dimby, with whom I had gone to Yates, did our parts to establish AKA and Deltas on campus. Lynn became a Delta. I never went through the process on

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line but it was important that those opportunities be established for the generations to come, if they so choose to participate.

EW: So during this era, what was because African Americans students were making demands and not just for African American studies program but as you just mentioned chartering the fraternities at school organizations and that sort of thing. What was the relationship between African American students on campus and campus government as it were with the faculty?

AB: Well, of course in order to be effective on campus as student organizations, we had to have a relationship with the faculty person as sponsor. So we went through that process and always found someone who was willing to sign that dotted line as our sponsor. But we were always pushing, as students, to do more, to receive more, to benefit and establish the presence of African American students on the campus.

EW: Uh huh. So I'd like to ask you a little bit then about Lynn Eusan who you came to meet during the time at U of H and some of the other influence that you have spoken about at length and Lynn of course has a park named after her there at U of H. What is your experience with Lynn Eusan?

AB: Lynn was a wonderful, delightful, funny, but committed individual, so much energy, so much light. Lynn was curious, couldn't stay still and was always talking and always initiating things from the very first moment that I met her. She went on to become home coming queen at the University of Houston which meant that through this popular vote, she had the majority of the votes of the entire student population that decided to participate. But she was valued and recognized on campus as someone who operated with integrity and sincerity. She was always in the mix in decisions about

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programming when Stokely Carmichael came on campus or any of the nationally known revolutionaries we'll say. She and Jean and Omawale who was called Dwight Allen then were always conspiring to make things happen in the best possible and the most forthright way and because they were on campus, they got to spend a lot more time together, but it seems like I was always included. And I appreciated that, primarily because of my relationship with Lynn during orientation during the summer.

EW: Now, you mentioned Stokely Carmichael coming to campus, during this time that you were on campus which was not only a politically active time at the U of H but nationally. Were you aware of this going on the national scene, in terms of the civil rights struggle and this push to end segregation, was being at U of H amongst all of these students from everywhere a bit of a catalyst for anyone who was going on the national scene?

AB: It was because of my class-mates on campus that I became aware of what was going on. I was not paying attention to the news. I was paying attention to the activities that were going on at the campus. The campus became a microcosm of the world. When I heard Stokely Carmichael speak, it was at Texas Southern University and that was the result of a collaboration between students at the University of Houston and students at Texas Southern. When there was a call for student participation to close a dump. You know, that was a local activity but really part of the movement that fueled the movement as it is today. It still continues to effect change in meaningful ways to the localities. So even though there was a dump site that needed attention, it wasn't'... it didn't get the kind of support that it needed until the college campus got involved, the energy of the students, and that was the case across the country, whether it was college students

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involvement or even high school or elementary school children involvement. It was a youth movement.

EW: Let me ask you one of the stand out incidents of that time period was the police shooting on campus at TSU and you were a student at U of H but do you have any recollections of that period when that event occurred and was there any response or reaction from students at U of H regarding this incident?

AB: Definite reaction. There was a seamless effort between students on both campuses to rally for what was right. It was tragic that it took someone's death to get the city to pay attention to what was going on. But had it not been for the energy provided by the youth, we people on the college campuses even that might have been glossed over and overlooked.

EW: I wanted to then transition from the university life into some of the people that came on the scene there that were contributing to your own contribution to the city itself and to the Clariville community. Could you tell me a little bit about the origins of Community Artist Collective?

AB: Sure. The Community Artist Collective, I truly believe is an outgrowth of the experiences of the 60's. Out of the relationship, it was born out of the relationship with Deloyd Parker and Shape Community Center. Watching and helping the organization grow and serve was a wonderful model. It was supported by a coalition of churches. It may still be supported by churches, as well as thousands of individuals, whether they're affiliated with those churches or not who realize the value of Shape Center to the community. As far as I was concerned, there was not sufficient emphasis on the arts and creativity and I had a brief conversation with Deloyd. It must have been in the 70's about

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the need that I saw for there to be an infusion of the arts, at least the visual arts during the summer program. So I volunteered with Shape Center in those years because I was teaching in the suburbs at Sharpstown High School and I longed for the opportunity to serve more directly the children in my own community. There were barriers to my teaching at Yates, my alma mater or any of the neighborhood schools. Shape Center provided an opportunity for me to serve the children directly and get to know their families. And after a couple of years of that kind of experience, it was so fulfilling, it just seemed essential to create an organization that would later be called the Community Artists Collective to make sure that the children in our community received the benefits of arts programming that frankly were being omitted from the curricular experience of the children at school.

EW: So then this started out with you volunteering at Shape and in the summer programs. How then did the Community Arts Collective grow and become the institution it has been over on La Branch and Elgin?

AB: Organizational growth and development is a very interesting thing. It's almost like watching children or a human being grow and develop. It's been 23 years now that the organization has been in existence since its founding formally, in 1987. And although we're not on Elgin presently, there is still a dream of and aspiration to build something that will become symbolic of how a little organization with a big dream can be actualized. So, God willing...

EW: Then and in the 23 years that you have been involved with the Community Artists Collective and then working here in the 3rd ward community, what have you taken away from that experience? What has Community Arts Collective taught you during that time?

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AB: The Community Artist Collective has taught me or reiterated it perhaps because maybe I've known it all along, the value of consistent work toward a goal. It's consistent with passion, out of the passion to serve; the portal has been the arts and education. Arts education is very near and dear to myself and co-founder, Sara Trouty. There are other people who have been involved. We say that the organization was co-founded by two but really, it's based on the dreams and aspirations of a lot of people who agree that this organization, that this effort is worthy of their volunteer time, their dollars, their dimes, whatever.

EW: Looking at the information that is dealing with a series economic crisis that often times in such scenarios that aren't so good at first but usually take some of the hardest hits, what is your assessment of the situation in the present day as far as arts and education or just arts education in general?

AB: That's a very loaded question. You know, the perception is that the arts are ancillary that they are not basic enough. But truly, in terms of human development, the arts are essential. There probably should be a better word. We may need to come up with it. I often substitute the arts for the term creative processing. And creative processing is a kin to problem solving. And problem solving can be associated with any discipline, whether it's physical, like martial arts, or mental, like chess, or physical, like building something. It's about living, it's about navigating one's way, negotiating, being in dialogue, finding people who are also receptive, who care about the same kinds of things that you care about.

EW: I'd like to ask you knowing you were born and you came to Houston early you lived in 3rd ward, you've worked in 3rd ward, you've created this institution in 3rd ward so

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you have dedicated a large part of your life to this community. What aspect of 3rd ward and what does 3rd ward mean to you? What has living and working here meant to you all these years?

AB: Living and working in 3rd ward has meant opportunity. It's meant mobility; it's meant crashing an imposed glass ceiling. It's created opportunities... living in 3rd ward has created opportunities to model a very high quality of life in spite of perceptions. 3rd Ward is very diverse. It has been that way for me since my earliest memory. The street where I lived, within a two block radius, a two block length, or two block radius there was diversity of economic, social, educational background. The little red house that my family was in was across the street from doctors who were pillars in the community. My family was just a young family, just getting started. Further east down the street, Cuney homes... families in more dire straits than my own immediate family. We were all there together, interacting with each other. And that's from a child's recollection! When I've thought about this, I'm still knitting all these moments and memory together so that they make sense, so that they synthesized in meaningful ways, constructive ways, for me to continue to do constructive work in our community. I am one of those children who lived in a project in Austin who came to Houston, who moved into a first home with my family on Wentworth, from Alabama to Wentworth, from Wentworth, south. So, that kind of mobility and opportunity of life, opportunities of life were modeled by my family. I think it's still possible for other families.

EW: So then I'd like to wrap it up by asking you what do you see looking towards the future, what do you see as being necessary for young people coming up whether it is in

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the 3rd ward community or greater Houston, what do you see as being necessary for what you have dedicated your life to which is creative processing through the arts?

AB: I think that it's necessary for people to be confident that they live the wonderful life that they would like to live. That they can show a caring attitude and genuinely be concerned for their fellow human beings and not to their own detriment. They won't lose anything by giving.

EW: Thank you so much for taking some time to sit and talk with me. I appreciate it.

Once we have the video and processed that'll be coming out, I'll be sure to send you a link that way you'll see what we put together, but I definitely want to thank you so much for taking the time to talk about your life and your passion the Roadhouses... I'm sorry the Community Artist Collective. I have to go to the Row Houses later on. But Community Artist Collective...

AB: Well, we're all in this together.

EW: Yes and living and working in the 3rd ward so thank you again.

AB: You're welcome. Thank you for including me in this opportunity.

End of interview