

Interviewee: Williams, Beneva

Interview: July 13, 2006

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Beneva Williams

Interviewed by: J.R. Wilson

Date: July 13, 2006

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JRW: This is our formal interview for the University of Houston's Oral History Project. My name is Jon Ralph Wilson, J.R. Wilson from the History Department. I am the interviewer. Today, I am interviewing. Your name is?

BW: Beneva Dolores Williams Nyamu.

JRW: When were you born?

BW: March 11, 1942, a little bit after midnight.

JRW: And what neighborhood did you grow up in?

BW: Fifth Ward.

JRW: Fifth Ward, Texas. O.K.

BW: Born in Jefferson Davis Hospital, the charity hospital that Black folks got to go to. Colored people.

JRW: Well, the reason I am interviewing you this morning in particular is knowing that you lived the life of an activist since your teenage years, which has included your work in ... the Namibia work and AIDS work . . .

BW: Never say to me AIDS.

JRW: HIV.

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BW: HIV because I don't work in AIDS.

JRW: Excuse me, HIV . . . and in particular, this morning, what I wanted to focus on is your work with desegregation of the Houston Independent School District as a young woman in 1956. Also for the record, today's date is July 13, 2006. Well, thank you for taking the time and if you will, I just want to know, in the mid 1950s, what was fifth ward like, for one thing?

BW: Fifth ward was great. It was great. You could walk down the streets. In junior high school, which was E.O. Smith, it was a couple miles, I don't know how many miles, but I could walk home without to much effort.

JRW: E.O. Smith was the school you went to? The middle school? The junior high school?

BW: The junior high school, that's what it was then. You could walk. No problems. You could even walk in the middle of the night down that street with no problem. So, we were open and free. There was no freeway. No I-10. All the streets were not more than 2 lanes across.

JRW: What would you do on the way home? What would have been a typical day on the way home for you and your friends from E.O. Smith?

BW: Well let me tell you. Beneva Dolores Williams was a loner. I was a loner because my father Marion, he was the one really interested . . . he took you to school the first day of school. For the first day of school, my dad took me to school, introduced himself to the faculty, to my teachers and then I was on my own. Anyway, I didn't walk home with

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too many people because I didn't have any friends. And the reason I didn't have any friends was because my daddy, the way he worked, he worked shifts so he wasn't always home and, I, being the older, the elder, I had to be home to deal with my sister.

JRW: What is your sister's name?

BW: Ocie Nell Williams. We ended up calling it almost one name. So anyway, I cannot even think of people that I walked home with.

JRW: What did you do after school then?

BW: Go home.

JRW: And?

BW: I am trying to think – what did we do? We did not have TV. I am just trying to remember. What I can remember that I did a lot of times was there was a nurse, her name was Early Raisin – everybody called her Sugar Raisin – and she had this lovely black hair. Her hair was like an Indian's hair. Well, she was paralyzed and she stayed at the house by herself. And I can r

emember things . . . I can't remember if there was anything that I did as far as my sister but I can remember she would just be out . . . "Beneva Williams, come over here," from inside the house across the fence. Now, that is one person that I really remember that I really did a lot with.

JRW: Like what?

BW: I mean, just go talking to her. You know, now that I am thinking about it, it really

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was like a job. I enjoyed her. I really enjoyed her. Anyway, I did not play with children in the neighborhood because our neighborhood was interesting. Even though people of the same, you know, all there, you had different people. On my street, across the street, we had somebody like on the same level – blue collar-type folks – you know, right there and they didn't have any children but I spent a lot of time over there with the Sharps. And then, on one side was a duplex which was owned by somebody. And then my mama's house. And then another house that my mother now owns. And then, there was a schoolteacher and a schoolteacher and then a schoolteacher across the street. Well, the one schoolteacher who had a son close to my age, we just did not mix, had a crush on him for a while. Anyway, I am glad I didn't go that road.

JRW: Do you remember any of the names of the schoolteachers?

BW: Olive Jones was there with her husband, Harold, who . . . I don't know what Harold did. And then, her brother who was Wright. What was his name?

JRW: His first name was Wright?

BW: No, his last name. I am trying to remember what his first name was because what he was . . . you know, like you see the door person, he was the doorman. He was a nice little size . . . for the Rice Hotel. That is what he did. And then, there was Mannie Blackshear.

JRW: Of the Blackshear family?

BW: Well, I don't know which Blackshear . . .

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JRW: Blackshear Elementary – the educator family?

BW: I don't know. We were not mixing.

JRW: With professional families?

BW: Well, see, she didn't have a child. She adopted. She was older and she adopted a child. Her name was Donna Blackshear Reynolds, who is now some big person at NASA. But see, she is much younger than me. And so, they adopted her when they were older. Then, next door was the Allens. And then, the Allens had 2 girls who were closer to my sister's age.

JRW: How old was your sister, or younger than you?

BW: Four years and 9 months. Born in 1965. Her birthday is December 14. She will hit 60. Anyway, I am just thinking about it. We were divided even though we lived harmoniously. Around behind us, there was Elder Barnes. Elder Barnes had a house and then he had a church. All that church just got torn down not too long ago. But Elder Barnes' church, sanctified church which we used to love to go over there and look at the windows while they danced around. So, Elder Barnes. And then, Graves was behind us. Chipper Graves. She eventually taught me how to cook and how to use the stove. Next door was Mr. Simpson who was . . . they were just over there. They didn't have children. He took us . . . at Halloween time, he would come and get everybody and go around the neighborhood. That is like really the only time that I really got with all the kids. I was isolated because of the way my daddy worked and my mother worked. That was the reason why.

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JRW: What did your daddy's work schedule have to do with your isolation?

BW: Well, my daddy was tough. I say this now. I am so sorry it took me until I was grown to really appreciate my daddy. I know that my . . . as far as how you feel about a parent, even though he was tough and I was scared . . . he would hit your butt in a minute. You know spar the rod spoil the child. I hated that. So anyway, when he had to work, you had to be at home. I can remember when I was in kindergarten, he would . . . where was my sister? He would come and meet me because there was no traffic light. Kindergarten, first grade. And then, he would come meet me.

JRW: Where would that have been?

BW: Tiny Tots Kindergarten. Tiny Tots, which is on Solo Street.

JRW: And that is not HISD? That was a . . .

BW: No, that was with Ms. Bertha Johnson who moved to Seattle, Washington. But that was Tiny Tots. And then, up the street was Atherton Elementary School.

JRW: Was Atherton African American or white?

BW: Honey, the school . . . every school before desegregation, as far as I know except Carnegie . . . it was Carnegie School that has been here a while . . .

JRW: At the colored high school, what they called the colored high school?

BW: Yes, but he wasn't black. For a while, I thought he was. See, I don't even know all the people. We knew Phyllis Wheatley was. And Charles Atherton, nobody ever talked about Charles Atherton. And we really didn't know. Dovin . . . I was just reading

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something, running through something, and they mentioned so and so Dovin. Crawford is a black person. Bruce. Kelso Bruce. You know, you had all those. E.O. Smith is a person who was the first principal of Wheatley High School. And Ryan. I was just trying to think . . . and I found out Sanderson which they are going to rename now after Felix Cook which I say . . . they should never change a Black name for another Black name. Mr. Cook went to Sanderson. So, in our time, we were all, every school . . . I am just trying to think of . . . every school that I can think of was named after a Black person.

JRW: And the student population at Atherton was African American?

BW: Yes. 1942? I mean, we started taking the bus in 1956. We didn't see no white people except when you got on the bus or sometimes . . . I was just trying to think . . . we didn't have too many . . . we didn't have any white people. We had one Black woman who thought she was white and she wouldn't sit by us. But we didn't really see no white people. That was the thing – that we were protected. The only way we saw whites were people who were across the track, the real track when we used to go to Weingartens. So, everybody went to Weingartens. There were white people there but they didn't have any Black people to working except Charles Jones who now is something . . . he is retiring from the thing. He carried your groceries, he mopped the floor, and what I did remember was just before I left in 1960, there was a Hispanic guy who was allowed to weigh the groceries because they used to weigh them, put them in a bag and then write the price on it and you could take it over. Well, you know, I kept saying why is Charles out there? He had been around longer. But, you know, he was Hispanic. He was cute. But anyway, that was what, in terms of the school. So, all my life, everything has been Black and that

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is everything. Even in the picture I have from kindergarten, I had a Black doll. And my Mama said . . . when I saw that, she just said to me, “Where else can I get you a Black doll?” Black dolls were hard to come by. You are talking about in the 1940s but I had a Black doll which may have to do with how I see myself.

JRW: Well, the fact that you had a Black doll as an elementary age child and the fact that your father was as protective as he was of you girls and traditional as he was, what was your mom like then? What was she doing? What was her . . .

BW: My mother, and I told her this the other day and she just didn't even . . . my mother is an excellent – I don't know if you would say seamstress or tailor, but she is excellent. I have nothing negative to say about how my mother took care of us. She would make us a new dress the first week of school. You dressed every day that first week and then you started mixing them up. I didn't have any problems with how I dressed except my shoes. I wore my shoes over on the side and they just looked ugly. They looked so pretty and then the next thing you knew, they were just all rubbed on and they were ugly. They were clean but they were just ugly because looking at each other . . . that was my main problem about how I looked. I really didn't have any qualms. I can't think of a single dress my mother made, even up until she resigned from it when she got married when I was 20 something. So, just saying, for that, she was very good. But she didn't work in the kitchen. I don't know who told me that. My dad didn't want her to work in the kitchen. She worked in manufacturing something. She is very nonpolitical. She is very, very traditional. She has got to be dressed properly. She talks . . . she is not

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me.

JRW: If we go to the isolation of the community, the ethnic isolation of the community in the 1940s and 1950s, what do you think it is . . . I guess, two questions here and I will pose it as one: What do you think it is that drove your parents to want you to go to . . .

BW: It wasn't my parents, it was my daddy.

JRW: O.K., that was my question.

BW: It was not my parents at all. It was my daddy.

JRW: This was in the mid 1950s, so you were in junior high school.

BW: Eighth grade. Ninth grade.

JRW: Where were you in junior high?

BW: E.O. Smith.

JRW: And the change was for you to be able to go to McReynolds?

BW: Which was 5 minutes away.

JRW: O.K., as opposed to E.O. Smith which was 1-1/2 miles or whatever away?

BW: In the mornings, I never would walk to school because it would take . . .

JRW: How did you get there?

BW: On the bus. My mama and daddy paid for the bus fare to school. And even if they took people from . . . people had to pay for the bus to go from Pleasantville across through Denver Harbor which was white and they go to E.O. Smith.

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JRW: Now, when you say the bus, you are talking about the yellow school bus or the city bus?

BW: No, it was the city bus.

JRW: Where did you sit on the bus?

BW: Well, I just sat in the back, you know, I did, until . . . I will have to tell you about that one. I sat in the back until when I was just almost out of high school, I was sitting at a place and I never . . . I didn't sit in the back of the back, right on the back seat but beyond . . . you know, you've got the thing where you come in the door. You are sort of like beyond that but not quite up to that. And one time, I can remember I was coming from Sunnyside because I had my cousin and my aunt meeting us at Sunnyside and I was on the bus and I got uptown and I think I remember it was on Rusk downtown where that post office was. For some reason, I keep remembering that building. And this person asked me to move. So, you know, I just sort of moved. I came home and I said to daddy, I said, "You know, they made me" . . . my daddy said, "You stay where you are sitting. If they say anything to you, you just stay there and you take the number and the time of day." So, that was my one time out of all the times.

JRW: That was in high school?

BW: That was in senior high school because it was not too long before I went to college. I remember that because that happened and then, not too long after that . . . when you are going to college, you have got to get all this stuff. They gave me money and I went to Sears to buy my pillows and stuff. So, I can remember now that I got on

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the bus and I don't know whether the devil made me do it or something, I sat down on the front row. And, oh Lord, did that bus driver have a hissy fit. I could see him now.

JRW: White guy?

BW: Do you think Black folks were driving . . . where are you from?

JRW: O.K.

BW: He was white. Not the city buses. There was no Black person driving a city bus in 1956. In 1960, there wasn't, even though . . . there is a book that is written that you should get. I might have it somewhere at home. It is about desegregation. And my daddy said to me on that day, "They already done it but they ain't telling nobody." That is what he said to me. So, I went back and read the book and he wasn't telling no lie. They had the mayor, the business people and the press got together and said we are going to go on and do this because we have got to do it and let them sit . . . so, they would harass you but if you knew, then you could stay. So, that was my situation with the bus.

JRW: Your father, Marion, was he an activist in his own way?

BW: Well, you know, my daddy – I don't know a whole lot about my daddy. He left home . . . I can't remember if he was 16 or 13 but he had not finished . . . I don't know how far but I don't think he got a diploma. Well, neither did my mother get a diploma but for a different reason. But he had to quit school and he ran away from what I am told, so that he could work and send it back.

JRW: From where?

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BW: They lived in Wharton.

JRW: In the country?

BW: In the country, yes.

JRW: So, he went from the country to the city?

BW: Yes, I heard from somebody in terms of he went to Austin. My father was a good cook and he was very efficient. Very clean. He had to teach my mom. He had to teach me. So anyway, in the kitchen, he could just do his stuff and it would be good – no matter what he did. Tea cakes – I am so sorry nobody didn't get that recipe for those tea cakes.

JRW: Daddy's tea cakes?

BW: Oh, Lord have mercy! Make you slap your mama! But he would just get in there and just make bunches of them and wasn't thinking about no, you can't have this. He just . . . my dad was a very generous person and I will admit, I am not getting to be more like he but I used to not be because I think I was like my mama. But, you know, there was no problem . . . if the little guy in the neighborhood wore the same size shoe and daddy loved reptile shoes now . . . he was a neat man but reptile shoes. So, if Raymond Lewis needed a pair of shoes, he got them.

JRW: Where would your dad shop, do you know generally?

BW: I don't really know. He was always neat when he was dressed.

JRW: Where would you, as women of your family . . . your mother made all of your

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clothes?

BW: He did not have any store-made clothes.

JRW: Other than shoes?

BW: Shoes. That is it.

JRW: Where did you buy your shoes? Do you remember?

BW: We'd go to the kiddie places. Daddy insisted upon leather, that I wear only leather shoes.

JRW: O.K., no plastic.

BW: No plastic. I can remember he raised all kind of cane because for the prom, mother went and got these . . .

JRW: What prom?

BW: High school.

JRW: At Wheatley?

BW: Wheatley. So, she went and brought these white shoes. I can remember him saying, "No, you don't need to be putting that mess on my children's shoes." So, it wasn't that he established an ostentatious type of thing, he just got what he needed and he looked good. And he wasn't all out going out buying clothes and stuff. You didn't see daddy going and buying stuff.

JRW: Where did he work? Was he a steel worker?

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BW: He was at Sheffield Steel which turned into Armco, and that is what I have discovered . . . I had a lawyer tell me this and in the book, when they were looking for people to volunteer, they were going to people whose employer would not be jeopardized. So, from what I gather, he didn't move up but he kept the job.

JRW: And when you say "they," you are talking about the NAACP looking for people to participate in the desegregation suits?

BW: Yes, and NAACP was hot stuff. Everybody talked about NAACP. People were just hot stuff. And I guess it was because that was their thing. That is the only thing they had.

JRW: So, in terms of the desegregation suit that your family participated in here in Houston, your father volunteered your family to participate?

BW: Yes, and all I can tell you is I guess it was just his own commitment. See, my father always said, "You are going to go to college." That is all he ever said. There was no other thought, but I was going to go to college. He said that from the get go. So, that was just his thing and he always . . . after he died, when I came back, I found all of these exercise books, you know, that he was really trying to do his numbers and stuff like that.

JRW: And did you go to college?

BW: Hell, did I? Yes.

JRW: Where did you go?

BW: I got a \$2,000 . . . back in those days, a \$2,000 Jones scholarship and they had a

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\$4,000 Wortham scholarship which I am glad I didn't get because the \$2,000 scholarship, if you messed up, you had one chance to get yourself out of the hole. But the \$4,000 scholarship, you were gone. And I had a friend who had a \$4,000 scholarship and he messed up. He messed up and he eventually committed suicide. He had a troubled life. His father had killed his mother and then he went to the school house and killed himself. And then he killed himself because he couldn't handle dropping out, ended up impregnating a girl that he didn't want to marry. Then, they had a baby that was challenged which was his favorite child. They divorced. The baby drowned in Galveston and he just . . .

JRW: That is a tragedy, just a tragedy.

BW: Yes. Then, his grandmother who had taken care of him – Andrew Francis and his grandmother, they were just . . .

JRW: That was his name, Andrew Francis?

BW: Yes, Andrew Francis. He was the neatest guy but except that he was uptight. He was always smiling. You never saw him angry. But Andrew . . .

JRW: Did he go to Wheatley?

BW: Oh, yes. And then left and went off to Howard and he had never been away before. Andrew was a speaker so, you know, going to Texas Southern, he would have gotten into the Bar and that sort of thing.

JRW: The debate team and all that.

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BW: Oh, yes, he was the top person.

JRW: And you were talking about where you went off to school.

BW: I went on to Fisk University. I went to Fisk because I was scared. I was going to be a concert singer. I was going to be Marion Anderson because I really liked her style. So, I went to Fisk. I had applied to Julliard. I applied to Oberlin. I had applied . . . I was here and just thought I was going to make it anyhow because they had all those spicy grades and I had just taken the first SAT thing that I had never taken in my life and I was scared to death because I had to take it over there at Bellaire. Every time I passed Bellaire, I can remember going up there – there were all these white people taking their tests. Scared the whole test. I could have passed the test. I was scared the whole time. But anyway, so I went to Fisk, got there and those Negros, oh Lord! They were so stuck up on themselves. Marty Irvin's daughter, I just saw his picture – good looking guy at his age – Marty Irvin who was a baseball player, and Jackie Robinson and all of that time, his daughter was there and she was spoiled. They had so many clothes, her and this other girl had so many clothes that they broke the thing. And all my clothes, my 2 or 3 things, fell down! But anyway, so I went to Fisk and I ended up rooming with Rosie Henry from Houston so don't say no names when you are putting nothing in here like that . . .

JRW: Every word you say is going to come out in print put in the archives though, the historical archives.

BW: Rosie Henry.

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JRW: Is that Dr. Henry . . .

BW: Please don't tell me what to say because if it is going to go in the archives, I do not want to have my name attached to what I have to say. Anyway, Rosie Henry, we sort of were together because our mothers did things over at the school together. They weren't tight but they knew each other. And Rosie Henry's momma was there when I really could not deal with stuff at home. So, that is why I would go to Rosie Henry's mother but I wasn't necessarily in love with Rosie. I didn't care for her. Rosie just wasn't . . .

JRW: The relationship was really with her mom and you?

BW: Yes. Rosie was just on the side.

JRW: Was Rosie Henry also from your general neighborhood?

BW: Rosie Henry was with me and when she went to Fisk, she put my name on the thing for her roommate but I left it open. I left mine open. So I guess maybe because I left mine open, she had my name. We got stuck together. It did not last.

JRW: O.K. Were you a jubilee singer?

BW: No, I flunked jubilee. I flunked jubilee because evidently, I have a good ear for music so if you . . . my voice teacher who was Ruth Stewart who was really . . .

JRW: He is the one that wears the chopsticks in her hair?

BW: Honey, she don't play! Everything that I have in terms of technique . . . Anyway, everything in terms of technique and stuff came from Ruth Stewart. I have not ever had

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anybody else that was as good as Ruth Stewart.

JRW: She was your choir director at Wheatley?

BW: No.

JRW: Or your voice teacher?

BW: No, she was my voice teacher. Ms. Goldean Gillian at E. O. Smith sent me to her. And I was a teenager in junior high school. That is where I went. She was a big woman but she was a shaped big woman. Wasn't no slop around her. I got in trouble with her. Anyway, I went to that. Ms. Stewart would play the music and see, I had taken piano so I could work out and everything. So, when I came back, I knew the music. And one time, I remember clearly . . . this one time, she said something, "A bird would run into your window, it is so clear over there" because I kept wondering why she got the window down. So anyway, I mean this was just until I went off to college. And one day, she said, "Oh, sing this song for me." I said, "You have to play it through." She said, "You've been sight reading all along." I said, "I ain't never side read." And also, I think I have an ear because if you play it, I can sort of figure out where it is going, you know, unless it is really off – different from what I am playing. So, that is what I did with Ms. Stewart.

JRW: Is she still alive?

BW: Yes, I think so.

JRW: At that the Lutheran church?

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BW: No, she doesn't go over there. She changed. But anyway, what I am disappointed is that she did not talk to me about learning how to sight read. So, I now have this conflict. And then, when I get to Fisk and they said sight read, I fell apart. I think I fell apart the last time since I've been here when it comes to sight reading. And then, when I try to sight read, I really . . . but just let me hear the song . . . I could just go along and somebody would say, "Do you know this song?" "No, I don't know this song but I can feel where it is going."

JRW: But you do read music and play music and sing music?

BW: I do not know how to read music but you know . . .

JRW: Right, because I learned how to sight read in high school myself.

BW: Where did you grow up when you were sight reading?

JRW: Illinois.

BW: We didn't have that. Ruth Stewart was all that we had. You had more stuff... you sittin' up there with them white people.

JRW: So, did you ever then attend a white school here in Houston?

BW: No, they didn't try to do nothing until 1960. In 1960, they took kids out to Kashmere.

JRW: Which was, at that time, a white school.

BW: Them poor little children. I have a videotape at home – I think it is still good. I have a video which I have not really looked at and I hope it is it not dead...from Linda

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Lorelle. She does things in terms of, and I think you even talked to her . . . young men who went to her school. His mother, or one of the children's mamas got fired as a result of that. So anyway, that was 1960. 1956, 1960.

JRW: Wait a minute – somebody got fired as a result of what “that?” What is the “that?”

BW: Taking a child . . . letting a child go to that school.

JRW: And so, that takes us back to your father and if I understand correctly, this effort came out of the union meeting where he volunteered your family . . .

BW: No, he didn't volunteer. I don't think nobody volunteered nobody. They asked them if they would. And I do remember my daddy talking on the phone. He called all around and somebody verified. Later on, Rosa Henry's sister, Erma, she said in the meeting, “I know because Mr. Williams he called around.” So evidently, he called her and I am sure daddy called everybody, he didn't have no problem calling.

JRW: What do you think he was calling around for?

BW: I wasn't paying attention to his conversation.

JRW: Let's restructure that: Out of the union meeting, they perhaps announced in the union meeting that they needed people for the integration effort and so he took on the challenge of calling around to find people perhaps?

BW: I don't know whether he . . . because I remember he came in and then he was calling people. I can't remember whether he asked me first but he said . . . my dad – our

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conflict came when I was scared about something that I wasn't supposed to do and I wasn't quite sure I couldn't deal with it but there were times we had some really nice conversations. So, he'd sit down and when he'd say, "Well, do you want to go over there to the school nearby? He didn't say nothing about with the white folks. He even made a statement somewhere if I can find it that said, "I didn't do that for my daughter to go to white schools. I did it because of the education," and I can remember, in terms of things were so difficult for us. He was tight. He, by then, had had a heart attack at one point. Anyway, he said to me, "You know, I am really disappointed ain't going like I thought it would" because I think he thought that people were going and doing . . . and I am like that, too.

JRW: With deliberate speed.

BW: I get in trouble because . . .

JRW: That is interesting the disappointment and I think it is something that perhaps we don't look at or haven't looked at or haven't talked about as historians but the disappointment around the failure of Brown to immediately resolve the issues of segregation in the schools and all and what that disappointment felt like for those who were on the front lines of that process.

BW: Well, I know he wasn't happy when he said . . . "It wasn't what I thought it was going to be," and that was it. So, he and I didn't do a lot of . . . well, I guess I have to say there also was a hostility in terms of with me, my mother and my sister, so daddy got caught in it.

JRW: When you say "hostility," how do you mean, between the three women?

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BW: You know, I have not analyzed it. It is just that . . . O.K., this is what I have analyzed: I was born. After I was born. What I was going to say, I'm not going to say. After I was born, my father went off to war, off to the war. I was six months old. "I had to go take care of you all by myself." So, we stayed over in Kelly Courts. My cousin moved in. In Kelly Courts, the government rule was if you want to move, you have to move and go to another size house. Mother didn't want to do that. So my cousin stayed there. Then, somebody told. People told. Somebody told, so mother moved over with my aunt and her one daughter. Then, daddy sent his money back. Mama took her money. And when daddy got home, Uncle John had already built a house. When he came home, I do remember . . .

JRW: Which "he?"

BW: Daddy. Not Uncle John. Uncle John was too old. Anyway, daddy came home. I can remember clearly. He knocked on the door, I went to the door and I said, "That's my daddy." I can remember that, but nobody else can. And I remember that.

JRW: Was he in uniform?

BW: Yes. I just remember saying, "That's my daddy," and I don't remember a lot of things about him. But anyway . . .

JRW: Uncle John had built his house . . .

BW: So when they got home . . . so anyway, mother worked. My aunt was a beautician so she took care of me. Now, see, I can't remember what happened in terms of kindergarten - if my aunt kept me all the time because we didn't have daycare like we

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have now. So, my aunt must have kept me until I went to Tiny Tots. By the time I went to Tiny Tots, daddy was there. That is who kept me.

JRW: You went to Tiny Tots for kindergarten?

BW: Yes, on Solo Street. The house is still there but the building that was the school . . .

JRW: Was Tiny Tots in a house or in a building?

BW: There was a building behind . . . I don't know whether we went in that building or not but the building was behind and she had her house so . . . I don't remember details.

Like, for instance, nap time - I can remember my cousin came one time and stayed with us a little while and I can remember her daddy. What was her daddy's name? James. I was going to say Hezekiah. That was her grandfather. But he bought her a bed to sleep on and her chair. But anyway, that was that.

JRW: Billie Joyce is your cousin how?

BW: My mother's sister's child. What I was saying . . . I am doing this . . . I can usually go back . . . today, I think because of that sleep thing, I was so . . . it is not that I am not . . . it is just that I am not holding onto it like I should.

Tape #2

BW: I was talking about the tension. O.K. Mother wasn't with me, you know, on that time. For a certain time, she was going to work because I think my cousin must have kept me. Cousin R.D. We called her R.D. but she told me later on how she didn't like us calling her . . . her name was Raynell. And we called her R.D. because my mother did

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not have us calling them Aunt but we called all of my daddy's ... Aunt Effie, Aunt Tutu.

Everybody was auntie and uncle. Uncle Bubba. All of them.

JRW: And Tutu?

BW: Tutu. I don't even know if they knew. I have to get my car. I have an aunt, the last remaining relative of my daddy's and it is his whole sister . . . see, he had a bunch of heirs. But anyway, tension comes. I have just been analyzing it, you know, just here recently. My sister was with my mother at home with her until she went to kindergarten. Mother was there for her. And then, I had to take over the responsibility. I think that was not a transition. It was just I was stuck. And so, I think a lot of resentment was there. And now, I am my daddy's child. And people say that I am my daddy's child but my sister . . . she get along with daddy, too, but she is momma's child. That I did not know and understand. And mother talks glowingly of how she was, "Oh, she was up and jumping out of bed... with your lazy behind, you were still crawling out on the cold," when the time came. She was born in December. I was born in March. So, what was I supposed to do? Get up and fly? I ain't never talked about that. Get up and fly? You can't compare March and December! Shoot, yes.

JRW: To get ready?

BW: Yes. My daughter walked before she was 1 year. So, she had all that time, you know, and if you are walking 9, 10 months, heck, it wasn't cold. But shoot, she called me . . . well, anyway, so I think that is why the tension started a long time ago. I was sort of pushed and nobody ever really talked to us about, O.K., you all are sisters and brothers.

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That is the way I talk to my grandchildren. And they are just in love with each other. One thing, if nothing else - they have a relationship. And I didn't understand sibling rivalry. And so, I was just jealous because she would go and tell something. I was always getting my butt beat and I think that is why I was mad -because nobody really asked me what happened. And then, my sister has devised a technique that she is going to get there first no matter what - if she has to knock you down. And that has happened within the last 4 years. She is a big girl.

JRW: Nothing has changed?

BW: Yes, so, that was always what happened. I can remember one thing that they said . . . I will always remember that. It had to do with smoking. I should know better - I am the oldest. We were under the house smoking cigarettes. Debbie smoked Camel cigarettes . . .

JRW: How old were you?

BW: We were young. I think I was still in elementary school. So, we were under there. I mean, that was one thing we had fun with. Then one day, daddy asked me about cigarettes. Now, I don't think nobody saw nothing because if they'd seen something, they would have seen both of us because we never did it alone. You know, don't drink alone . . . but somebody told. And I never remember . . . "But Ocie was smoking, too." He said, "Oh, you are just trying to get her in trouble because you are in trouble." Never . . . I can see if he asked and he said, "Beneva, you are the oldest - you are responsible." O.K. He didn't beat me but I'll tell you, you never found me with a cigarette.

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JRW: To this day?

BW: Plus, I was so . . . because I sang and I always wanted to protect my voice.

JRW: So, in terms of elementary school, where did you go?

BW: I went to Atherton Elementary.

JRW: You went to Atherton all the way through?

BW: E.O. Smith 3 years.

JRW: And then E.O. Smith for junior high for 3 years and then onto Phyllis Wheatley?

BW: For 3 years.

JRW: Let's come back to the desegregation struggle of your family being involved in . . .
. . . and really, your family being a pioneer family along with Dolores Ross' family.

BW: Well, Dolores has been the one . . . I left in 1960 so every time there were stories
and everything . . .

JRW: She was available. But if we come back to that struggle, what do you remember
your father going through or doing? What do you remember experiencing as a 14-year-
old, 15-year-old, during that time period as it relates specifically to that desegregation
case?

BW: Well, I am going to tell you what I do remember: I do know that that name that
my mama gave me to be unusual . . . because you had Williams, it was a trip. I know,
recognition and still get some recognition today of Beneva. They don't have to get the
rest. Beneva Williams? Yes. That sort of put a little pressure on me because there were

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a lot of expectations now that weren't there. What happened . . . I don't know whether somebody was upset . . . I got the Jones scholarship but I was in the top 20%, not the top 10%. But somebody said, oh no. They didn't want to give it to me because "her daddy makes too much money." I don't know if there was something in there, but I did get a Jesse Jones scholarship to go to school. Anyway, all I know is I just went. Daddy said something. I really had lots of trust in my daddy. Sort of like, if he said he was going to beat you, he was going to beat your butt.

JRW: If he said, "that fire is not hot," then you knew that fire was not hot?

BW: Yes. The only time he did something to me one time . . . I think he was just so angry because he was frustrated . . . had to do with us fussing and stuff. I told him that I don't like anybody to call me stupid. So, he said stupid to me and I can tell you . . . I don't remember but I can say that it just hurt me so bad. So, I got angry with him because how could he call me stupid? Also, he took me to the preacher to ask . . . because he was concerned and so I said to the preacher, I said, because so and so . . . it was something that had to do with daddy. Now see, this is why I don't like preachers. The preacher had me sit up on his lap and he asked me, "Now, what is going on?" And then he called daddy back in and then he would tell my daddy what I told him. So, I didn't like the preacher no more because he told what I said in confidence, you know? So, all of that got me messed up because after that, you know, I was sort of scared because if the preacher was going to do this, he didn't do nothing in terms of talking to me and my daddy. It was just sort of like it was settled. You know, he didn't beat me no less. So anyway, I knew my daddy really, really cared but it was just that I couldn't get that

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together. And also, I just wasn't the type that attracted people because, see, I didn't take no stuff. I mean, I wasn't going to talk about nobody. There was Alma Eatman who was an albino and Lord, you know . . .

JRW: An African American albino?

BW: What else kind? They wouldn't send an albino to my school.

JRW: Oh, he was at your school?

BW: No, I mean, Alma Eatman was in my class. She just died a couple of years ago. And she really had some bad stuff as far as eyes and stuff like that. But Alma, I can remember one time, they teased her or something. I can remember one time walking over to the wall at the elementary school and just touching her, you know? And I didn't really become friends with her because I really didn't have no friends really, because a little group of hers that were together but I really wasn't part of . . . they pick on people. When it came menses time, I wasn't running with them. And then they had some girl from California. What was that girl's name? And everybody is so glad to be around her with her proper speaking self, you know?

JRW: So, tell me, did you ever go to court yourself physically?

BW: Yes. I didn't bring that picture but if I had brought the article that I kept laminated on the front page of the *Houston Chronicle*, May 17, 2004, there was I on the front . . . when I got it, it was so funny . . . somebody told me, "Oh, you are on the front page of the paper." So, I am going to see all this African stuff, you know, me on the front page and there was me, Dolores and I on the front page, just like when we were going to

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court. Now, I don't remember too much. I don't remember anything except going to court.

JRW: Tell me what you do remember about that day, the day you went to court?

BW: All I know is I went to court, and I remember standing at the door. I have a thing that I don't remember a lot about my past so I don't know if that has some psychological . . . or what it means.

JRW: Do you think it was a scary day?

BW: I was never scared because my daddy was there.

JRW: You were never scared because your dad was there?

BW: At least, I don't think . . . I never had any nightmares. The only thing we got from that . . . you went to court and the only thing I got as far as that, as far as people knowing us was one Sunday morning, these white folks were out in a black Cadillac. They were sleek. You know what Cadillacs look like. They said, "We don't want to integrate." That is what they were saying.

JRW: Where were they on this Sunday? At your house?

BW: In front of the house. Right there before we went to Sunday school.

JRW: So, they had signs or they were yelling?

BW: They were just sitting out there in front of the car singing. And I found something . . . one time, they put our address in something that was published. See, I didn't get to talk to daddy about that. Mother doesn't talk about it. "Oh, that is all in the past. Why

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do you want to talk about the past?" If I try to talk about my dad, "He's dead." Well, hey, how do you forget about your daddy?

JRW: Do you suspect it was a fearful time for her?

BW: Yes, because she didn't want it . . . the only thing was after the attention came, she was fine. I guess the worse or something didn't count. She wasn't in for it, she just wasn't. I will tell you another thing. When I was at Fisk, Janet and I were friends. Janet was a white girl who was an exchange student. And at Christmas time, Janet needed some place to stay. So, I called up . . . my daddy said, yes. The next thing you knew, they said no. I really didn't think about it. Racism did not . . . the whole idea of racism did not sink into me until I went to California and worked for the Red Cross. I am sure I was discriminated against because I applied for a social work position and I ended up getting . . . they told me they didn't have one. Within a short time, 2 white girls came up as social workers. Now, the difference between a social worker was like night and day.

JRW: They gave you a job but not a social worker job?

BW: For 4 years and all I did . . . they didn't give me no training, no nothing.

JRW: Just administrative stuff.

BW: You just go and play cards with the sailors in the hospital. With two older women. These two girls came.

JRW: Did you have your degree by then?

BW: Well, I am going to tell you. When they hired me, I was getting ready to leave

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school. By the time I got there, I had had it because I had messed up.

JRW: This is Fisk?

BW: No. University of Oregon. It was Fisk University, University of Oregon, and then I worked a while in California, then I went to the University of California. Then, I came back here to the University of Texas. That is the last school. So, that is 4 schools.

JRW: Did you graduate from UT?

BW: Yes. I have a masters degree. And guess what?

JRW: Where did you get your bachelors then?

BW: University of California. My first masters from University of California. Social work.

JRW: And your second masters?

BW: Public health. And that is a story, too. I discovered that those white folks did not expect me to graduate.

JRW: At?

BW: UTSP, School of Public Health.

JRW: Here in Houston?

BW: Yes. This old man who was from . . . he had worked with WHO. He had been the deputy. He said to me, "You know what? They were surprised that you . . . they didn't expect you to pass." And evidently, they must have been looking because Mr.

Hawkins, Dr. Hawkins - he was the best teacher I ever had - he managed to make

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me not be scared of epidemiology and I will tell you - I did so well in terms of this one thing, epidemiology, after they told me. After somebody had the courage to say what is tinnitus? It was easy for me to figure out why these people were having these ringing in their ears, you know, because it was sitting right up in that thing. So, you know, that was one . . . in terms of a course. I didn't like none of my courses in Public Health. That is why I flunked. But anyway . . .

JRW: But now, you are a public health advocate?

BW: Well, I have always been an advocate of a lot of good things. I am a person who ate well always. Now, I got to be chubby when I got to Fisk. I gained 50 pounds. Anyway, that is what I gained. And I really didn't really realize it until we went . . . at Fisk, some of us were taken on this field trip to Cleveland, Ohio, and I knew I was heavy but I didn't know how much heavier. I was something like 125, 130. Got on this scale - the man said 175. He said it out loud, so everybody knew. And I said, Oh my God! In a short, short time. And then, the man went to guess everybody's weight. And he guessed everybody's weight except mine. He had me at 150. So, he came and felt my arms and he guessed it exactly. I just wanted to cry. I wanted to cry. Somebody had put me out and set me up as a debutante - this man in the neighborhood. You know, he, I guess, comes respect for all of that. I was a debutante. And I said, I had to wear a tent. Mother loved that dress because she made it. I can't stand that dress because it ain't nothing but a tent!

JRW: Let me ask you something. Who was the family attorney for this desegregation?

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BW: Francis Williams, Weldon Berry, and I can see this little man who had a bald head. I need to try to find out what his name was. But those are the three. But, in time, Weldenberry is like the last one to die and he died within the last 5 years. But I don't know who died earlier - Francis Williams. This other man, I remember his name but for some reason, I evidently . . . I know Weldenberry . . . I don't know if it is because I had some dealings with him.

JRW: What dealings did you have with him at the time?

BW: I don't know. I do not remember anything except standing there at the court . . . going to the schoolhouse and standing.

JRW: When you say "going to the schoolhouse," what . . .

BW: Going from my house. My daddy would say, "Are you ready to go? Come on." And he would walk quietly. Farmer Street, Orange Street, Stonewall Street, Market Street and then across the track.

JRW: Were other people with you?

BW: No, I told you he called everybody - nobody ever went.

JRW: Oh, that is why he was calling.

BW: Yes, he was trying to see if other people . . .

JRW: So, it was literally you and your father, Marion, hand in hand and you walked . . .

BW: No, it wasn't hand in hand.

JRW: But you walked from your home on Farmer Street over to McReynolds alone?

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The two of you alone?

BW: There was no freeway. No I-10. So, that was a peace walk and it was all wooded area after you passed Stonewall Street.

JRW: And so, the two of you walked up to and into that school to register you for that school but you were turned away?

BW: Yes.

JRW: Did you get inside the school?

BW: We got in and up to the clerk's desk.

JRW: In the office?

BW: Yes. I went back there to visit there another time. I remember that. They have one door that you go into but you have to go down the hall a little bit because the office is back over in another hall.

JRW: O.K., and you did that?

BW: Did that. There were no kids right immediately. All I can remember is kids were outside a glass thing. We were in there standing.

JRW: Were they all looking in at you?

BW: Yes, I remember the faces. I wasn't phased, you know? That is all I remember and all I know is daddy was talking to them and the next thing I knew he said, "You take this and go on upstairs." I don't know if he gave me a note or nothing. "You are going to school." I went to school. I went to school and I didn't say nothing to nobody because I

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didn't have no buddies to talk to. And then, the next morning, all of this in the newspaper. Oh Holy shit! I mean, from the time that happened to the time I went to school.

One time, there was an incident - I lost my purse on the bus. A lady called and said, "Oh, I found Beneva Williams' purse." So, I was getting ready to go . . . Mama said, "No, I will go." So, she went. The lady got there and she said, "Oh, I thought I was going to see Beneva Williams." Also, you know . . . I analyze stuff because I really don't get the chance . . . I think all of what I have intentioned and everything, also, my music and also just the kind of person that I am, people would have some things of jealousy in my family, I ain't calling no names. I am just thinking because I never really . . .

JRW: As you play the tapes back in your head.

BW: If I don't talk about something, I can't . . . one of my frustrating things of being isolated is I don't have anybody to talk. When I pick somebody, I just drive them koo-koo because there is so much stuff that I have to talk about with somebody else in terms of having been able to see . . . I truly believe, and I don't know why I really believe that, was that nothing in life is a coincidence. Everything has . . . because I was looking at . . . this happened to me with the police and stuff . . . I see that this office a long time ago was annoyed with me, you know. And then, there is a lady who I now am friendly with who came to my defense when they were giving me a hard time. And see, I am seeing now . . . all of that was to be because of having to know this person and still maintain a relationship because she can be a witness to the fact of what happened if somebody had

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to ask. So, you see why so many things . . .

Another thing is . . . I just thought about this recently. My doctor always says to me, he stops in because I got tired . . . "You are the reason that I am wearing this white coat," because he was able to go to Baylor medical school. Even though he had to sit outside the library, he was able to go to that school. So, why is it . . .

JRW: Who is it?

BW: Dr. Gathe.

JRW: He is African American?

BW: Yes.

JRW: How old is he?

BW: He is light.

JRW: How old is he? Around your age?

BW: No. How could he be going to the schools that were desegregated after I left?

JRW: Well, medical school though, I mean.

BW: He said something about he was caught up in 1966 in the Public School thing. Somebody told me how old he was. But anyway, he says that and I keep saying, why is it? Why is it I would get HISD and it would come back to a man who, you know . . . why? That is that. And there is something else, I just looked . . . in terms of time, it is just, you know, falling into place and so forth. So then, you get to really thinking about all these things people have said in the bible and stuff. You know, a lot of stuff is making

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sense. A lot of stuff is making sense.

JRW: Did your daughter go to HISD?

BW: My daughter went to HISD. We came back . . . she was born in Tanzania, East Africa. She came here speaking fluent Swahili. She went to Kidde College in Southmore where she learned English and where she stopped speaking Swahili. And then, she went to Edgar Allen Poe because I wasn't very happy with the . . .

JRW: The neighborhood school?

BW: Yes, with where she had to go because I went over there and they were jumping all out of the windows and stuff.

JRW: What school was that?

BW: Henderson. I looked at Atherton. I wasn't really totally happy. And then, all of a sudden, I said . . . I didn't realize the difference between desegregate and integrate. So, she ended up being bused.. you couldn't do any afterschool activities, which we did all the time, and if something happened, you'd have to go get her if something happened and take her to school.

JRW: Did you take her to her first day of school at HISD?

BW: I took her. Did I take her to register her? No, she was on the bus. She went on the bus.

JRW: But to register her, to get her in to Poe and to go through that whole process . . . I guess I am trying to see is there any emotional connection to what you and your father

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went through and what you went through with your daughter and whether you were cognizant or conscious . . .

BW: No, at that time, I guess I would have had to go because I know another time . . . yes, I took her around because I went to Poe and then we were looking at the schools over in River Oaks, Rogers. We both got turned off by Rogers. So, we didn't go there. We finally went to Edgar Allen Poe and then we ended up changing because she said, "Mama, why is it the Black kids don't ever get the math and the science? They always just get the arts." Well, when she said that, I just sort of got a reaction to it. She went over to Wainwright which is in the southwest and that was like five day in the morning. Did I take her to school? I took her to school. I think I took that girl to school every day because I worked at Child Welfare which was down the road from her. So, I took her to school to Edgar Allen Poe but then she was bused to northwest.

JRW: But no recollection of any next generation in comparison to what you had experienced when . . . the McReynold's experience?

BW: No, because she had really not dealt with that because when she came back, she went in to . . . O.K., she was over there with the Africans, then she came back and she went into a white school. Both times, a white school. So, she had that. Then, she went back and went to a Black school.

JRW: What high school did she graduate from?

BW: Girls High in Harare, Zimbabwe.

JRW: Is she an activist, in her own way?

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BW: My Sekai may end up being an activist but she ain't. I think things skip a generation.

JRW: O.K. Sekai is her daughter?

BW: Sekai is my granddaughter.

JRW: What is it?

BW: Well, her name is really Sidney Sekai but I just didn't call her brother by his Zimbabwe name so I call her, her real name, Sekai. Anyway, my daughter has no recollection in terms of that. Sekai now . . . in terms of long hair . . . people have sort of asked in terms of her skin. I saw at one point, in terms of going to school, in terms of . . .

JRW: Is she biethnic?

BW: What kind of "bi"??

JRW: You are speaking of long hair and skin.

BW: She has long hair. She has long hair and beautiful . . .

JRW: Complexion?

BW: It is blacker than mine. You are darker than I. She has a beautiful, black, dark . . .

JRW: Smooth, glass . . .

BW: She's got gums that I want to take a picture of. You can see definitely, distinctly her white teeth. And she is just a beautiful baby. Black. She was a black baby when she came, with a head full of hair. My daughter was not black. My daughter is lighter than I am with a head full of hair. Unfortunately, and this is . . . I'm saying to other people,

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that the reason my children are not like us is because they didn't have to go through that and see, in going through that, you talked about your history and you talked about, steadily talk about the hard times. So, I didn't have no struggle. There really wasn't no struggle for me. And the only reason I know about my family is because we went to the country, Wharton, and to Altair where my mama was. We stayed down there some summers. I don't know who Mr. Altair was but its out 91 towards San Antonio. So, you know, we knew that. My daughter did have hard times but it had to do with going to school in Zimbabwe because there was no transportation. My daughter had . . . I am letting her get away with some of her anger because I realize, you know, that compared to me, she had to walk places. She went to one school, and I went to visit the school and she was sitting right next to the toilet. And children all crowded. I eventually was able to get her over to a private school at the end of that primary school. And then, she went to an all Black school, Girls College.

JRW: Now, you lived in Zimbabwe during the independence struggle?

BW: No, I lived in Tanzania and then to Zambia, and I was there when Namibia's independence came. That was just before I got my earthshaking news.

JRW: And your husband was directly involved in that independence struggle?

BW: He was with SWAPO [South West Africa People's Organization]. I have no idea what my husband did. I just found out that he got some training in the Soviet Union so that had to be before the independence. I don't think it was after the independence. So, there was so much he did. We went together. Ndapanda was around 3 when we left and

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we didn't see her again.

JRW: Your daughter?

BW: Yes.

JRW: How do you spell her name?

BW: Ndapanda. Nyamu.

JRW: Do you know how your father felt about how long it took . . . I know you mentioned it earlier before schools because this is 1956 that your family participated in an attempt to desegregate the junior high school and it is really not until 30 years later that we actually see desegregation.

BW: You ain't see no desegregation. You see integration.

JRW: Desegregation. We haven't see integration.

BW: No.

JRW: This is integration? Desegregation is where you allow folks in but you don't necessarily mix.

BW: No, desegregation is you go . . . to desegregate, for instance, us going to . . .

JRW: Lamar?

BW: No, us going over to McReynolds.

JRW: That is desegregation.

BW: We were in our neighborhood. To me, there is a difference.

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JRW: Yes, there is a distinct difference. I think, for me, desegregation is for my son to be able to go to Lamar but not assimilate into the actual . . . still can't play football, still can't be on the chess club but you are allowed to go to class. Still can't take the upper level courses.

BW: I think either way, you would have had the same problems. So, for instance, suppose we had gone over to McReynolds. The white people would have been there. See, now, you have got to make an effort, whereas, wherever the other one was, it was just like go and you don't make no special nothings. You just go and do it. You stop segregating. You just walk into the school. O.K.? For instance, if they had done that immediately, you would have had a white fight but you would have had a very interesting thing because you had people over in Pleasantville, its over on the one side of the people, Clinton Park and Galena Park . . . Galena Park had their own school, was on another side, and then you got Cashmere Gardens and stuff over here. Those white folks were all boxed in. It would have been some real mixing. I think desegregation is sort of like just stop desegregation and stop right then and there.

JRW: What is integration?

BW: Integration is where you've got to move people around to mix. I really think so. You end up having to bus. With desegregation, you wouldn't have been busing. Do you understand what I am saying?

JRW: I understand.

BW: Unless there were too many folks, then you'd have to bus somebody over, you

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know.

JRW: What is your feeling about desegregation and its effect on the community at large?

BW: I think we didn't know what was coming. We thought we were going to be free and we were going to be able to do . . . and things were going to be like you and your marriage, are all along the same thing but.... you have to realize that people do not like change. They don't like change.

JRW: How do you think that desegregation effected the education of African American students, in particular, Houston or wherever?

BW: Well, because it has taken so long and so much hostility, it didn't go away. During this thing on this . . . some program came on and there was a family, a group of people in Shaker Heights, in Ohio, Cleveland. They said, O.K., we are not going to go through all of that. And they went to school together. And they asked them, "How do you feel as far as race?" They just went right there together. They didn't do no shaking up. You've got to do something if you've got to take somebody, because everybody not over here is Black where there used to be whites, where they could have gone in together. I have to look at that, but I think I did. I am sure we desegregate, "de" meaning not. So, not segregated.

JRW: In terms of the kind of education that you got at Atherton and the kind of education that you got at Phyllis Wheatley as compared to the kind of education that your daughter would have gotten at, say, Lanier or somewhere and going then to Lamar, how

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do you feel about . . . and when I talk about desegregation, that is what I am referring to.

BW: What they did, from what people said . . . they took all the good people. First of all, here in Texas, our Black teachers had masters degrees. There is a man, Mr. Mays, who worked over at Wheatley in the vocational kind of thing. He had a doctorate in something, you know? So, our people were well-qualified.

JRW: What effect did that have, do you think, on the education that the kids got?

BW: Well, first of all, with the integration, everybody goes everywhere. The whole community is mixed up. Desegregation, you would have still been over at our house and you went to school but your teachers might have been the same. The integration just took everybody out and scattered them all over to hell and they took our good teachers and put teachers in. They did not do anything in trying to deal with race relations or anything. Ain't no nothing about any of us getting together. Just like they brought all these people in from the flood and they ain't done nothing to assimilate . . . one school did do something . . . it is like people are coming and be ready. They didn't have no rights. You can't put people . . . I mean, even with a marriage. You can't just walk off the street and the two of you walk in here and we wed and we go on. You know? Just like, you know, when you were talking about your marriage - there are things you've got to . . . it can't go the same. There are things you've got to do.

JRW: Do you think that African American children were better off under desegregation or segregation?

BW: In some ways because the discipline we had was a lot better, because white

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people have a different form because they are scared. They are scared. They are scared to do anything. They are scared.

JRW: What about encouragement or lack thereof?

BW: I think we had . . . there may be whites but, you know, they encourage . . . our teachers lived in our neighborhoods. Like I was trying to tell you, I was saying before. I am just going to go down the block. On our street, there are 3 teachers. And then, on the next street, I don't know what Mr. ... Mr.?? did but he wore suits. I am just trying to think of what Richard's father did. I am just realizing I didn't know what his father did. And then, that was Ms. Graves. Her husband worked at the hotel. Next to them were blue collar. People down one side. Then, on the street, you had the high school principal from high school, you had the big junior high school principal, Mr. Chatham, who was the junior high school . . .

JRW: He was at Atherton?

BW: No, at E.O. Smith. Ms. Olivia was at Atherton.

JRW: She was the principal?

BW: Yes, but she lived in third ward. They started moving back to Third Ward. She couldn't have been in third ward when I was there but she was somewhere. Anyway, then you had, on that next street, the principal Dr. Caldwell, then the man who was the first African American electrical... um, um

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BW: No, appliance center.... oh, he was further over.

JRW: Pat Smith's father?

BW: Anyway, we had a nice . . . there was a dentist. There was a plumber.

JRW: Who was the dentist?

BW: Barkley was his name. He had 2 children. There was a dentist, there was a plumber. It was homogenized. Now, you've got the old people who are there but you don't have none of the . . .

JRW: Well, I think the interesting thing, and certainly compared to 2006, is that you actually knew your neighbors by name and intimately - you know, you actually knew who they were. And in 2006, people, in many instances, don't even know the people across the street or next door to them at all.

BW: The house next to me is a red house and they don't take care of their yard. I think they are selling dope over there. The lady next door is retired. She and I don't get along in the first place because she has to tell me what to do. And then, You got a homeowners in there, but you've got more people in rent properties.

JRW: I guess you have seen the significant change in fifth ward in terms of what it was like when you were a child in the 1940s and 1950s, and then certainly even once you came back in the 1980s to see the change that had occurred in that 20 year period, let alone the change that has occurred since the 1980s in terms of . . .

BW: Yes, I was back here from 1975 to 1983.

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JRW: And even the revitalization that has begun now and just all of the change and transition that your community has gone through in the last half century and all. How do you feel . . .

BW: I am sad because we were segregated but we were happy around each other, you know? We were kind to each other. Even though I was a principal we would come for tea, you are kind to each other. It is all gone and again, it is because we got free, we let go of what we had. Somebody was talking about history has so much to do with it. When you've got your history . . . and see, it was short history but they still had it. Now, see, my grandson knows Daddy Doctor. He was like 2, almost 3 when he died.

JRW: Who was that?

BW: Daddy Doctor was my mama's father. He died in 2000. So, he sort of kind of. We would go see Mama Carrie and I knew Grandma Lou before she died.

JRW: Who is Mama Carrie and Grandma Lou?

BW: Mama Carrie is mother's mom. Daddy Doctor's mother's dead. Grandma Lou is my daddy's mama. So, we knew them and we knew some of the older uncles. We used to go spend part of the summer at this cousin sister girl who . . . when I was in high school, she was already married for a little while in high school but she was close enough to our age so you could go and have fun. We got our first boyfriends... oh lordy... there.

Tape #3

BW: The atmosphere.

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JRW: So, the sense of loss of community, I guess?

BW: There ain't no thing as community. And I even see, like my daughter, out where she lives at ... all these houses, people don't know each other, don't know each other at all. A Hispanic family on one side, and you've got people from India on the other side. She doesn't know them. The only people that she sort of kind of got to talking to are the people across the street who came from Peru and the little boy rings the doorbell all the time. "Kuda, kuda."

JRW: Who is Kuda?

BW: My grandson. Kudakwashe. They don't know any history. Because of what is going on with my daughter, I am not having consistent opportunities . . . they are not given the kind of . . . my father was a major encourager. He talked to you, read. My daddy knew more about . . . I went to Tanzania and I went to Tanzania because daddy told me about it when I was trying to smart-aleck and tell him. He went on and I went "uh oh" I think that's where I'm going, as opposed to Guinea.

JRW: How much formal education did your dad have, roughly?

BW: He doesn't have a high school certificate. I think they only went through 6th or 7th grade. Neither did my mother.

JRW: Do you have any idea what he would have done had he had the access and opportunity to have gone on?

BW: I don't know. You know, I just think my dad talked a lot, he knew everything. I don't know if he would have been a teacher. I never thought about that, what

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he would have . . . that is interesting. I said Lord, when I get to heaven . . . I hope he went to heaven!

JRW: Hope we get there, too!

BW: I just would like to say I want to meet him in heaven. So anyway, I really realized after that he was really . . . my friends used to say, "You said that your daddy was mean." Mr. Williams is because he'd go out there and talk to them but see, they had to do things to keep . . . because we were alone. He was just strict.

JRW: Where did you grocery shop? Weingartens, you said?

BW: Weingartens. That is all we knew. Weingartens and then you could go to Burts.

JRW: What is Burts?

BW: That is a little shop that has been down there owned by the same family, down the road from Weingartens which is Fiesta now.

JRW: What street is that?

BW: Lyons.

JRW: On Lyons?

BW: Yes. So, that is where we went shopping and you went to town on Saturday, got your clothes, got yourself up, washed, dressed, ate your breakfast about 8, be there when the stores opened and you were home before noon. You never saw talking about going to the toilet or eating. After I got my little independence, I was 13, mama then let me go. Just like that. Didn't have to beg.

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JRW: Ride the bus to town yourself?

BW: Ride the bus to town and go to town.

JRW: Where would you go?

BW: Well, just go down there, you know, if I had some shopping. They even let me shop. See, I have never had a problem with shopping because I would go downtown to go shopping.

JRW: I mean, where would you go? Any particular place that you liked to go to regularly?

BW: Well, we had Foleys, we had Woolworths, and Walgreens ... and Sears, out here on Main Street. And then, after we got a car, going to those other places but that was after I left.

JRW: What church did you go to growing up?

BW: Pleasantville Baptist Church. Reverend Lonnie Haywood Simpson.

JRW: Did you sing in the choir?

BW: Forever and ever, amen! That is the one thing that I did.

JRW: Did you sing solo also sometimes?

BW: Thank you and I even remember the first piece that I gave called "The Spirit of Giving," and my grandma, Mama Carrie . . . my grandmother was a lovely person. She was really . . . she was very sweet.

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JRW: That is your mom's mother?

BW: Yes. Very sweet.

JRW: So, she wrote your first . . .

BW: My first and only speech. It was called "The Spirit of Giving" and I kept that piece of paper for a long time and lost it. But I was just so proud. I could see myself standing there. The only thing that I didn't get that I thought I was going to get was Hiawatha.

JRW: The Song of Hiawatha?

BW: No, it was a play, it was a whole play. Was that something like a musical thing is Hiawatha?

JRW: Did you go to Sunday school?

BW: Yes, I went to Sunday school. I went to church. I went to a 3 o'clock thing and then 6 o'clock church again.

JRW: And was there a youth group also?

BW: Wait, I'm telling you. Then, on Monday nights, you went to bible school and choir rehearsal. Then, Tuesdays, on certain Tuesdays, they had communion. You didn't have communion on Monday. Had communion on Tuesday. And I am trying to think if I ever went . . . for some reason . . . Thursday was choir rehearsal night. People complain about church?

JRW: I know, for me, it was MYF, Methodist Youth Fellowship or something like that.

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BW: BYU.

JRW: BYU was ya'lls?

BW: Yes.

JRW: Did you ever go to summer camp, church summer camp or anything?

BW: They didn't have that. We had bible study. Well, we didn't really have anyplace to go.

JRW: Up in Illinois, we had this camp that we could go to.

BW: You were already integrated a lot more than we.

JRW: No, it was Black. It was AME.

BW: Well, you know, I think of things up around that way. The south was just retarded. The south had to deal with cotton a lot longer where everybody else was industrialized. We were able to go to a Girl Scout camp which was separate or either used at a different time than the white folks.

JRW: Where was the Girl Scout troop based?

BW: Out of Pine Crest Presbyterian Church because historically, Reverend Boyce started a lot of stuff because people did have things.

JRW: Now, Pine Crest Presbyterian was African American at that time?

BW: The one you just wrote the check, right across the street from Wheatley.

JRW: O.K., and so that is where the Girl Scout troop was based out of?

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BW: That is where the Girl Scout troop . . . I didn't get to do too much because I would get punished and I don't remember what the punishment had to do with . . . I know one time, I got punished because I did not make my bed the way my daddy said to make it and I got punished.

JRW: Oh, dang!

BW: I was punished and punished and punished. And I don't know if that is the kind of stuff stuck or something that I did but I think I did have something to do with it. I really think it was because I never . . . I always felt like a distance. I never felt like daddy would have time ... to go sit up on his lap and stuff, you know, but anyway, I was on the side most of the time. Like I said, I don't have anybody now that I know that I have any kind of . . . I tried when I came back here . . . there were two people and Pat was one of them but we just didn't . . .

JRW: Pine Crest is the church that you attend now?

BW: Pine Crest is also the church were Pat's father went and then he turned around and became a Catholic when he married.

JRW: The church that you attended when you were a kid, what was its name again?

BW: Pleasantville Baptist.

JRW: Is it still there?

BW: It is still there. It is still there and they have built . . . it is old brick church and now up in front of it is a senior citizens home.

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JRW: Can you see it from I-10 and Waco?

BW: No. I don't know if you could really see it because it is not something . . .

JRW: I mean right on the feeder road. O.K.

BW: If you go up and go over Market in front of the feeder road, then you can see it.

JRW: What was that like? Do you remember...? Let me see. Were those expressways created while you were still living in the . . .

BW: We don't have expressways. Don't come bringing that foul language in here.

JRW: I am sorry. Freeway.

BW: Don't impress me. Freeway.

JRW: Was I-10 there when you were growing up?

BW: No, didn't I tell you that when I went in 1956, we just walked down the street?

JRW: Was it built during your . . .

BW: No, it was after 1960.

JRW: Was that weird, at some point, to come back and see that your . . .

BW: Still is weird. It still is. You know, when I think you don't go through the slow transition, you don't go through the process, it is like you see . . . I see your son when he is 5 and the next time I see, he is 8 and you say, "Are you really grown?" Well, what in the hell do you think he is going to be? But you know, you have to, in a sense . . . it was like my daughter trying to make that gap. You figure, now this child is 22 and I am still

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with holding when she is 15. How do you do that?

JRW: In essence, your community was sliced?

BW: Busted up because what happened is a lot of those people didn't migrate over to ... the called it in Third Ward ... strolled over here to Sugar Hill . . . over there along MacGregor, that was the Jew's area because they couldn't stay in River Oaks and then they moved out there to Bellaire. People just went in and took those houses. And some part of third ward was there but I don't know up to where did it . . . I am trying to think.

JRW: Alabama was the dividing line. Everything on this side of Alabama was African American and everything on the other side was not.

BW: The south side.

JRW: Yes. This is a doctor's house right here on this corner, Dr. Lyman, this two-story brick house here on Holman. Dr. Bryant and all them, up and down Holman. These two-story brick homes that you see generally were built by the Black professionals.

BW: Covington ... a lot more, I think.

JRW: Your dad built your home?

BW: Oh, Lord, stick by stick. Yes. I can remember standing out there and the wood had gotten all black and my mama said oh ... I do remember when we moved in. It was cold. We had a Christmas tree up. And it was empty.

JRW: Were you in elementary or junior high? What part of life was that for you that you remember moving in?

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BW: I don't know. I don't remember.

JRW: Was it elementary or middle school though?

BW: It had to be junior high school.

JRW: And he actually built it?

BW: He built it with some of his friends. It was all folks worked together to do that.

JRW: What do you mean?

BW: People worked together. In those days . . .

JRW: They all worked at the steel mill?

BW: No. Just friends. It just amazes me how I remember where you would have houses going up and then you not finish for a long time. You don't see that no more. Everything goes up in 15 minutes.

JRW: Why would they not be finished in a long time?

BW: Because they were doing them themselves, like daddy. You know, put your foundation down. Then you save up some money to buy all the things around this and then you save up some money and do something. And you save up some money and buy the shingles. My mother said they never had a mortgage. And then, he bought some other property. They also bought out right things, you know.

JRW: That house is built on Farmer Street?

BW: Yes, there are two houses on the same lot.

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JRW: Are they still there?

BW: Yes, Uncle John, yes. Honey, it is strong. Just like my house. My house is strong and at times, you know, in terms of insulation, it gets hot in there, it is hot.

JRW: In your original family house, does your mother still live in that house?

BW: No, because that one was the small house. That is the big house. My mother and my sister now live in that. You are going to have to feed me.

JRW: You know what? I think we probably have talked about the desegregation of the Houston Independent School District as much as we possibly can and I just want to thank you for taking time to allow us to do that and this is J.R. Wilson with Beneva Williams Nyamu. It is July 13, 2006, still, two hours later. I just want to thank her and peace out!

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