

TRANSCRIPT: EDITH SHEARIN

Interviewee: Edith Shearin
Interviewer: Willie Griffin
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START OF CD

Willie Griffin: All right, state your full name for me, please?

Edith Shearin: My full name, I'm Edith Liggin Shearin.

WG: Okay, and your date of birth?

ES: Three, twelve, '35.

WG: Three, twelve, '35, okay. And where were you born?

ES: I was born in Anderson, South Carolina; moved to Charlotte when I was three.

WG: Okay, when you were three. So when you moved to Charlotte, what area of Charlotte did you move to?

ES: We lived in Brooklyn.

WG: Okay.

ES: On--.

WG: What street?

ES: South Brevard Street.

WG: South Brevard Street, okay. And was the transition--? You say you were three years old, so you probably wouldn't remember much about Anderson after you left?

ES: No, I don't know anything about Anderson.

WG: Okay. So in Charlotte what did your parents do and who were your parents?

ES: My father was Marshall Grady Liggin, Sr. He worked at the Frederick Apartments in maintenance.

WG: The Frederick Apartments?

ES: Yeah, on Church Street. And my mother worked in domestic at the Charlotte Hotel.

WG: Okay. So what did he do at the apartments?

ES: He was in janitorial service.

WG: Okay, and your mother was in domestic work, and what was her name?

ES: Daisy Pruitt Liggin.

WG: Daisy Pruitt, okay. What type of people were they?

ES: My mama and daddy both were very hard working, very strict. My father became ill when I was--. He fell off of the ladder at the Frederick Apartments and he could walk with a cane. And then years later they carried him to the Good Samaritan Hospital and they went into his back, and we always said they punctured his spinal cord. He was in a wheelchair for forty-eight years and he never had any pain or anything. But during that time you're young and don't know that we could have sued, you know.

WG: Right. So this was--? How old were you when this happened?

ES: Ten.

WG: You were ten years old, okay. So this was in the 1930s? Or was it--?

ES: Forties.

WG: Forties, okay, forties.

ES: So there were nine kids. There were six boys and three girls. I was the oldest girl.

WG: You were the oldest girl?

ES: So I had to raise--

WG: Most of them.

ES: --most of them because my mother worked at night.

WG: Okay. She worked at night? She was a domestic that worked at night? Was it one particular family?

ES: She worked at the Charlotte Hotel.

WG: The Charlotte Hotel, okay.

ES: Down on Trade Street.

WG: Okay. That's interesting that she worked at night because it would seem that she was cleaning up the rooms in the day time.

ES: No, but she was really mostly around the manager. She worked mostly around his places and would be there to do things for him.

WG: Okay. So how was that fulfilling that role of big sister?

ES: Fine. It worked fine because I had to cook, learn how to cook, wash, iron. We had a bathroom on the back porch.

WG: In downtown Brooklyn. [Laughter]

ES: Yeah, on the back porch.

WG: This is where you washed, where you used the restroom, everything?

ES: Yes! And we had a heater that we would put in the bathroom.

WG: [Laughter] So you had electricity but you put the heater in the bathroom so you could use the restroom.

ES: And we had to heat water.

WG: Now were most homes like this?

ES: In that area, some of them, unless you lived up on Liberty Street where the most teachers and things lived at that time.

WG: So there was Liberty--. What was Liberty between?

ES: Liberty was between--. You know where Morehead Street goes? That was Liberty and Vance along in there, coming back towards 2nd Street.

WG: Okay, so all that's gone now because of Belk Freeway?

ES: Yeah, yeah. All of that is gone.

WG: Okay. So I guess were your brothers and sisters--? Were you very close knit? Were you close to them?

ES: Yeah. We had to work. I started working at age thirteen, babysitting.

WG: Babysitting, okay, just in the neighborhood?

ES: No, I used to babysit for a family in the Frederick Apartments.

WG: Okay.

ES: And I used to take the kids, walk up to the First Presbyterian Church on Trade Street, and play out under the tree.

WG: With the kids. Do you remember the family's name?

ES: No, I don't. I really don't.

WG: How long did you do that for?

ES: Did it for two or three years.

WG: Two or three years.

ES: Yeah. Then when I got in high school I was in DE, Distributive Education, and I got a job at the Lincoln Theater.

WG: The Lincoln Theater? That was at--.

ES: That was on 2nd Street. That was the--.

WG: That was the black theater.

ES: The black theater.

WG: Okay. So what were you doing?

ES: Selling popcorn.

WG: [Laughter]

ES: [Laughter] And making spiced ham sandwiches.

WG: Spiced ham sandwiches?

ES: Ten cents. Sold a many of them.

WG: So you really enjoyed that job?

ES: Enjoyed it, famously.

WG: So was that the theater, then?

ES: That was the theater. You got to see all of the gospel singers, all of the rock and roll singers, because 2nd Street was one of the main streets in the black neighborhoods so they all came.

WG: When they came to Charlotte they came through the Lincoln Theater.

ES: Yeah.

WG: Who do you remember particularly?

ES: Oh, a lot of them. I knew Brook Benton, Sam Cook. Sam Cook and I were very good friends. The Temptations, the Platters, I knew all of them.

WG: [Laughter] Was there anyone in particular that you enjoyed the most as far as the concert?

ES: Sam Cook. Sam Cook, when he was singing gospel. He was really the genuine.

WG: Okay. I imagine there were some packed houses when those people came through.

ES: Oh yes. [Laughter] Oh yes.

WG: So if you could characterize Brooklyn, I mean just describe it, because a lot of the people that I've interviewed--and there's a lot of debates in Charlotte about urban renewal and the destruction of Brooklyn--some people say it provided better housing for some, some people say it tore up the neighborhood. How would you--just your general opinion?

ES: My general opinion of Brooklyn was the type of neighborhood like where they say, "It takes a village to raise a child." Anybody could say--. Grownups could speak to you then and you had to move, you know. It was more like a family. Everybody knew everybody, very close knit. Everybody was going to Second Ward High School.

WG: And you attended Second Ward.

ES: I attended Second Ward, graduated in '54, class of '54.

WG: Okay. So you were coming out right when Brown v. Board of Education was decided.

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay.

ES: So it was good--in some places for some people it was good. It gave some people better homes. And some of the uppity people who already had nice homes on Boundary Street, Alexander Street, Stonewall Street--. The Alexanders lived on Stonewall Street--that owned Alexander's Funeral Home?

WG: And you lived right--.

ES: And I lived on Brevard Street but our backyards connected. So it was just a mixed neighborhood, the have and the have-not. But the haves still treated the have-nots--.

WG: With respect.

ES: With respect. And even until today you can always tell if somebody died that lived in Brooklyn, if you go to the funeral, it's like a family reunion.

WG: [Laughter] You still meet a lot of people who lived there.

ES: You still see a lot of people from that area.

WG: So talk about that. A lot of the community in Brooklyn was dispersed and, I mean, were there any type of networks to try to keep those people together?

ES: Well--.

WG: Or did they just--? I guess in churches, they probably met in churches afterwards.

ES: Well what happened when they say, "You got to go," Rev. Kerry says, "We want to stay. We would like to stay."

WG: And Rev. Kerry was at--?

ES: Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. And they said that everything had to go. There was not going to be any churches. But when we moved, what do you have downtown now: First Baptist Church, right downtown, not too far from where Friendship was.

WG: Wow, mm hmm.

ES: So you had the United House of Prayer, which was on McDowell Street, you had East Stonewall Street, Bethel, St. Paul, Brooklyn Presbyterian Church, which combined with [00:09:47] Street Presbyterian Church. But all of your predominantly black churches were torn down and moved. The only one that was left was Grace, right there on Brevard Street, but they have moved now but that's designated historic. So they can buy it but you have to keep the--.

WG: The outside façade and pay the taxes.

ES: Yeah.

WG: So all these churches, describe the average church, I guess, church membership, the activism in the churches. What were some of the more active churches or pastors of churches?

ES: You had the United Church House of Prayer was always huge but they were not as active in politics, I think, until it got into the '80s, mostly the late '70s and the '80s. But you always had Rev. Kerry who was active. You had Bishop Leake.

WG: Okay, right, from Little Rock.

ES: Little Rock. You had Rev. Worth. Rev. Worth had gotten older so he was not as active. You had Rev. [00:11:08], Sister Gillespie, who was active.

WG: So what all do you know about Coleman Kerry? I hear a lot about how active he was but nobody knows that much about him.

ES: One of the most genuine people that I have ever met in my life, very warm, came to Charlotte single, good looking. Friendship grew because of his good looks. All the women--.

WG: [Laughter] Are you serious?

ES: I'm serious! I mean, you know, I'm telling the truth. All the women, once he got there, the women just flocked, you know, because he was a handsome man.

WG: Where was he coming from, do you know?

ES: He came from Texas.

WG: He came from Texas?

ES: Yeah, and could preach.

WG: Did he hear about Charlotte, or did Friendship recruit him?

ES: Friendship recruited him at the time because Rev. Powell left and they were looking for a young minister, so they got him. He could sing. And his best friend followed him here, Rev. [00:12:24] was out Mt. Sinai, which was on the corner, I think of [00:12:31] Street. And Rev. Barnett was at a church in Belmont. They had formed a trio, and they could sing. They really could sing.

WG: [Laughter] Okay. So did he ever get married?

ES: Yeah.

WG: He did get married.

ES: Got married and married Marizetta Hardy and they adopted a little boy.

WG: Oh, okay. Is he still around?

ES: No, he got killed in Atlanta about four or five years ago.

WG: I think I do remember reading something about that. He graduated from Morehouse, I think?

ES: Mm hmm.

WG: Yeah, he graduated from Morehouse and he went back to Atlanta to start working. I do remember that, okay. Okay, so you were a member of Friendship then?

ES: Grew up in Friendship.

WG: Grew up, and your parents were members as well?

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay. So I guess we can back up a little bit and talk about Second Ward. When you entered--you said you graduated in 1954--so you went to school there, and from my understanding Second Ward was actually two schools in one. There was Alexander Street School and Second Ward at the same time, or was it--?

ES: Well Alexander was an elementary school. Second Ward's a high school. There was only-- Well it was actually three at the time: Second Ward, West Charlotte, and Plato Price.

WG: Plato Price out in--.

ES: It was out off of Steel Creek, out in that area, so there was only actually three--.

WG: High schools in the area that served blacks.

ES: Yeah, during that time.

WG: And would you say that Second Ward had the largest of the populations?

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay. So what was going to Second Ward like?

ES: I loved it.

WG: Was it a smaller environment, like Brooklyn?

ES: Well it was small but most of the kids who lived--. The kids who lived in Third Ward, First Ward, Fourth Ward, Cherry, Greertown, Brooklyn, went to Second Ward. So the kids on this side of town went to West Charlotte.

WG: So West Charlotte started in '38 so it would have already been built, okay. So were there any teachers who stood out to you that you really liked?

ES: Oh Lord, yes. [Laughter] Miss Maddie Hall, she was very strict. You had all good teachers during that time because--. Well during that time if the teacher disciplined you the kids got a beating. You go home, you got another beating. But you had Miss Maddie Hall, you had Cecelia Wilson.

WG: Okay. I've heard that name.

ES: Um, Mrs. Moore. Penny Perry was the librarian during that time. You had a man named Mr. Levi who taught chemistry, and he stuttered, you know, so--. [Laughter]

WG: Y'all used to pick at him?

ES: Well, if you did not bring in his homework--. They had an old dry cleaner on the corner of 4th and Brevard named Charlie Fines, cleaner. Mr. Levi would say, "[Stutters] You go by Charlie Fines and get you a laundry bag and that's what I want your homework on in the morning." So a brown laundry bag then, what you put your dry cleaning in, was this wide. So when you cut it open--.

WG: Everything would be folded up neatly inside of it.

ES: No, when you open it, it was wide, so that's how many times you had to write your homework.

WG: Wow. [Laughter] That was a punishment or something?

ES: Yeah, if you didn't bring your homework in, you know. You go to Charlie Fines' and you had to buy one of them laundry bags and you had to do your homework on it. Then you had Mr. Frederick Wiley, very good English teacher. You had Mr. Wingate, Bob Woods. You had a lot of men.

WG: Okay. That's unusual because--.

ES: Well we had a lot of good men teachers during that time.

WG: Right. In a lot of schools, especially further in South Carolina, on the coast, you find mostly women, mostly female teachers. And then a lot of them if they were teachers they couldn't be married as well. So now were the men, were most of them married?

ES: Not during that time, but during the time we were there they would start dating. And we saw a lot of the men teachers marry a lot of the lady teachers.

WG: Oh, okay, okay.

ES: They formed unions, you know. Mrs. Virginia Hill taught and she married Mr. Woods. There was another--. Oh, and Mr. Wilson was the driver's ed--Bud Wilson--was the driver's ed teacher. He was nice. But there were a lot of married--. Mr. Levi and Mr. Wiley was married but there was Bob Woods and Mr. Wingate were not married, and you had Kenneth Powell who was the football coach, he wasn't married. He later got married. And you had Mr. Topley, he taught shop during that time. You know they had bricks, you're laying bricks, and all that kind of stuff.

WG: So how was the layout of Second Ward? What was it like?

ES: You had two floors. You had two levels, brick. During that time we didn't have any air conditioning because it was all windows, so you had to open the windows.

WG: About how many classrooms did you have in the school? Do you know? Were there quite a few?

ES: Oh yeah. You know, because they went all the way--. The building was more like a business, because it was up, see, and then the classrooms went all the way round.

WG: And you changed classes in between certain subjects?

ES: Yeah, changed classes.

WG: Okay. So how did you feel about school?

ES: I loved going.

WG: You loved school? Okay. Did you intend on going to college, or did you [00:19:22]?

ES: I went to--. They had a business school at McCrorey Y.

WG: Okay.

ES: And I started there but I stopped because I started working, like I said, at night at the movies. You know, I was still working. I worked two jobs.

WG: Mm hmm, because you were from a big family. You had to help support the family.

ES: Yeah, yeah. So I missed out on that. Then when I graduated from school I started working at Club Bali.

WG: Club Bali? How do you spell that?

ES: B-a-l-i, which was right here on Beatties Ford Road where the water works is. Where the railroad track is, that's where Bali was.

WG: Okay.

ES: And Bali was a private club for the younger professionals.

WG: Like who? Who would have been the younger professionals?

ES: Postal employees, teachers, the younger teachers. The Excelsior was the private club for the older professionals.

WG: And these would have been doctors and lawyers.

ES: Lawyers, teachers, and all that.

WG: And so this was in a matter of two blocks from each other? [Laughter]

ES: Yes. [Laughter] So a lot of times you would see them going from place to place. But on Sundays they used to be standing in line when the club opened to get in, all dressed up. People used to dress then, you know. Women would have their gloves on and I mean they would be dressed. And it was private so you didn't have--. Sometimes we'd stay in there until 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning partying.

WG: So if it was private how did you get memberships? I mean--.

ES: Well you had to know somebody to get a membership. And if you didn't have a membership you couldn't come in.

WG: You had to be in the know. [Laughter]

ES: Yeah. And that was the way the Excelsior was as long as Jimmy McKee had it, you know.

WG: So you had to have a membership.

ES: Oh you had to have a membership, or unless a member would bring you in. You could come in as a member's guest.

WG: You had to be really from that professional class and you had to be known in the community.

ES: You could drive a truck, but you had to be--. You couldn't be no riff raff, you know. You just had to be upstanding in the community some kind of way. You couldn't be no riff raff. You did not have any teenagers in there. So like if your grandfather was at the Excelsior that means you was at Bali.

WG: [Laughter] Okay, I got you.

ES: So when your grandfather went home then you went to the Excelsior. You graduated from Bali to the Excelsior. So that was the two. And then you had the Hi-Fi.

WG: The High Five?

ES: The Hi-Fi Country Club, there on Estelle Street. That's where all of the entertainers performed: James Brown, Ike and Tina Turner.

WG: Are you serious? All this was in Charlotte?

ES: All of that--. This is where a lot of them got their start, at the Hi-Fi Country Club. They would come down Sunday. They had live entertainment.

WG: Who owned the Hi-Fi Country Club?

ES: What was his name? His name was Harper. Gloria Kendrick was the manager for years.

WG: Okay, Gloria Hendricks?

ES: Gloria Kendrick.

WG: Kendrick.

ES: Uh huh.

WG: Okay.

ES: I can't think of Harper's first name.

WG: So now the Club Bali, you said that most of the entertainers came through Hi-Fi Country Club, but in Club Bali--.

ES: Club Bali, a lot of them came there too because Raymond "Flat Tire" Mason--.

WG: I have no idea who that is. Who was that?

ES: He was the owner of Club Bali, little short fellow, but he worked for Jim Crockett.

WG: Okay, now I've heard--.

ES: Crockett Promotions that used to bring all of the rock and roll shows in Charlotte?

WG: Mm hmm.

ES: Well "Flat Tire" owned Bali and so after a rock and roll show they all usually came to the Club.

WG: Okay, I got you. So why did they call him "Flat Tire?"

ES: Maybe because he was so short.

WG: Short, okay, okay.

ES: He also had a band.

WG: And he was from Charlotte?

ES: I'm not sure whether "Flat Tire" was from Charlotte or not. I think he was.
No, no. I don't think he was from Charlotte.

WG: Okay.

ES: I don't think he was from Charlotte.

WG: And you began working there right after you graduated in 1954?

ES: I began working in Bali I think in about '58. And I started working at the Excelsior--. Bali closed in '68 because of the highway.

WG: Okay, right.

ES: And I started working for Jimmy at the Excelsior in the '70s.

WG: In the '70s?

ES: And I worked there until the late '80s, maybe the early '90s.

WG: So what was that experience like, looking back on your working experiences in those clubs?

ES: You cannot--. I could write a book.

WG: Just on the things that you've seen.

ES: Yeah, and the people that I've met and the fellowship and the friends that I still have, and the respect that I got. That was during--. In the early '60s that's when we started the Black Caucus in Charlotte.

WG: Okay. In the early '60s?

ES: The early '60s.

WG: And it was you and who else was involved?

ES: Willie Stratford, Jim Richardson, James Polk, [00:26:10] Polk, do you know him?

WG: I know James Polk, yeah.

ES: Rowe Motley.

WG: Okay.

ES: You know Rowe was the first black county commissioner in this town?

WG: No, I did not know that. Rowe Motley--how do you spell that?

ES: You didn't know that?

WG: I didn't know that.

ES: There he is right there.

WG: Oh, okay. Wow. Rowe Jack Motley. And he was from Charlotte?

ES: No, he's from Alabama. He went to A&T. He married a Charlotte girl, Alma Moreland.

WG: Okay, one of the Moreland girls, okay. I remember the Morelands. I've heard of their family. Okay, so what did he do?

ES: He worked at the post office.

WG: Okay. So talk more about these people. There's a lot of people who've been politically active who worked at the post office. And you mentioned that the post office was a professional job at that time.

ES: It was, but it was also a government, and you could not do it outward, see.

WG: Okay, okay.

ES: See you could not get out and politic for somebody.

WG: And promote yourself as being political active.

ES: Until you retired.

WG: Okay.

ES: So a lot of this came after--. Well Strat and those were doing a lot of it when they were working at the post office.

WG: But they were doing it behind--.

ES: They were doing it through me or somebody else, you know.

WG: So talk about that. I mean I guess--.

ES: Well I tell you what happened. We started the Caucus because during that time you had some black so-called leaders who we called the "bag men." On election day they would tell the candidates that they could deliver the vote and they were getting all of this big money.

WG: So this was probably considered the old guard of the political--.

ES: And they were not delivering the vote.

WG: Okay.

ES: So the Caucus [00:28:10] Rev. Kerry, Rev. [00:28:13, and Bishop Leake started the Caucus and it consisted of the chair and the vice chairman of the Democratic party of the predominantly black precincts.

WG: Okay, which were who? Who were those people at the time? Do you--?

ES: I was one of the--. I was chairman of my precinct. You had Rebecca Taylor who was chairman of 25. You had Willie Smith who was chairman. You had Leroy Polk, [00:28:49] Polk's brother, who was chairman out at 17, Greertown. You had Phyllis Lynch who had Cherry. You had Charles Porter who had 11, Summersville. So we did--. On election day when we would go to the executive Democratic meeting, in order for us to get anything done, we would politic with southeast Charlotte.

WG: Okay, the Myers Park district, that area.

ES: So southeast Charlotte and the predominantly black precincts--.

WG: Sort of worked together as a team.

ES: Yeah. So if you had them two, you were going to get elected because you couldn't get elected either way if you didn't have southeast Charlotte and you didn't have the black community. There was no way you were going to get elected. So that's how we formed a bond. And we kept the bag men out because we didn't take any money.

WG: Right, okay.

ES: All we wanted was a seat at the table.

WG: To get the issues talked about and dealt with.

ES: We was working for the totally black community, not for self.

WG: Okay. So when did you get your politics? How did you even get to the point to where you were this district's committee chair for the Democratic party?

ES: I got elected.

WG: You got elected?

ES: I got elected from the Black Caucus and southeast Charlotte.

WG: I mean so did you--? Was this something you sought out, or was it--? I mean how did you--?

ES: They ran me. [Laughter]

WG: [Laughter] They just ran you--. I guess because of your connections at the Club, you were meeting so many people.

ES: And then I was active in the Party, see, so they would always have a ticket they would put together, you know: first chair, the chairman, the first vice chairman, the second vice chairman, the treasurer, and stuff.

WG: So I guess what I'm trying to understand is how did you even get into that arena? When did you first say, "I'm going to get involved in politics," [00:31:08].

ES: Well we got involved--. Stratford.

WG: He talked to you and started--?

ES: Willie Stratford says, "We're going to take over. We're going to take these precincts." [Laughter]

WG: Okay. [Laughter] Because the old guard was not doing--?

ES: Controlling the precincts. So he said, "This is the precinct election." They have it every year, you know. "Get your folks together," and brought all of us together. So we all got together and when you go to--. See you have to go to your polling place and you have to have ten people there in order to have--. So we had our folks together so we went and we took it.

WG: Now, and this is all in this little area that we're in right now. This is taking place in your particular precinct. Now there were some--.

ES: We did all of this predominantly seventeen. We did all of them.

WG: Okay. This is the 17th district.

ES: No, it was seventeen predominantly black precincts.

WG: Okay, I got you.

ES: Hidden Valley, Clanton Park, all of them. So that's how the Caucus got started. You had seventeen predominantly black precincts, all black, see. So we took all of them.

WG: So how many--?

ES: Our people took all seventeen.

WG: Okay. And this was this network before that formed the Black Political Caucus based out of the Excelsior Club.

ES: [Laughter]

WG: I mean it's like a political machine but nobody--. I guess from what I'm seeing in different places is that there was this new, I guess, collection of black political power rising out of the shadows of this older guard, trying to really address the issues.

ES: Because you had Reginald Hawkins, and you had--what was his name?

WG: Fred Alexander?

ES: Fred Alexander was not per se a bag man. Oh, what was his name--used to live on my mama's--? I can't think of his name right now. But you had about three or four.

WG: Who were pastors, or were they--?

ES: You had Reginald Hawkins, uh--what was his name?

WG: Charles? It wasn't--.

ES: It wasn't Charles. They hung Charles because the students, they hung him. I cannot think of his name. He lived on the street my mama lived on. Well anyhow, they were the bag men, you know, they had the white folks thinking that they could deliver the black votes.

WG: Right, okay.

ES: Rev. Cavis, Rev. Cavis.

WG: Chavez?

ES: Cavis, Rev. Cavis.

WG: Cavis, okay. How do you spell Cavis?

ES: I think it's C-a-v-i-s.

WG: Okay.

ES: They were the so-called folks then who--.

WG: Were taking money to deliver votes, I guess?

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay. You had mentioned that the students were active or very adamant about hanging Charles in effigy. How active were they at that, because from my studies I've seen that there was sort of a radical movement of black power during the '60s, they formed the Black Panther organization? Do you remember that? That was all during the same time.

ES: Yeah.

WG: Who were they? Did you ever come in contact with any of them?

ES: I didn't come in contact with any of them because it was done on Smith's campus. It was done by Smith students.

WG: Okay. And they never tried to come to the Excelsior Club or anything like that?

ES: No, because students couldn't get in.

WG: Okay.

ES: Students couldn't get in.

WG: Okay. So talk a little bit about Willie Stratford. You had mentioned him earlier but we didn't really talk much about him.

ES: Stratford was--. He was an artist.

WG: Right. And did this start earlier or later in his career?

ES: I think earlier. He started dabbling in art after he retired and stuff. Very religious person. At one time Stratford used to be an alcoholic. He was an alcoholic in his younger years.

WG: But he also worked at the post office as well, you said.

ES: Yeah. He was supervisor at the post office.

WG: Was he one of the first black supervisors out there at the post office?

ES: No, I think he might have been the second. He was on every board there was. He was at Metro, the homeless shelter, the Boy Scouts.

WG: And he was from Charlotte as well? Did he go to Second Ward?

ES: He grew up over in what you call it?

WG: Greer Heights?

ES: No. What did they call it then? Right below the train station there was a section of town that they called--. I can't even think of it. You know below the train station right there just before you get up to 10th Street, you know, where the homeless shelter is? You know where that [00:37:01]? It was a section, used to be, of people who lived back in there, homes and things. I'm trying to think--. I can't think of the neighborhood. That's where Strat come out of and then he bought a house on [00:37:18] Avenue for his mother. He and his mother lived there and then he moved out on Park Road. And when he left Park Road he bought a house down here on Poplar Street in those condos. That's where he died. And he belonged to St. Mark's.

WG: St. Mark's?

ES: Way a minute, it's not St. Mark's--Lutheran church.

WG: Okay, so he was a Lutheran.

ES: Yeah.

WG: Very few--there were a few blacks in the community who were a part of a Lutheran church.

ES: Well it was a white church. And so that's why a lot of folks say, you know, he wanted to be white, you know, haters.

WG: Right. [Laughter]

ES: I ain't no hater, you know.

WG: He was just a man.

ES: Very smart. Everybody who got elected in the black community he pushed them: Jim Richardson, Charlie Dannally, Norman Mitchell.

WG: Right, okay.

ES: Norman Mitchell worked at the post office too. Did you know that?

WG: I do. I met Norman Mitchell one time. He told me he had worked at the post office one time. So I guess with the political scene, I heard that Willie Stratford at one time had tinkered with running for mayor, I think even before Harvey Gantt or around the same time.

ES: He ran for city council but he did not win.

WG: He didn't win, okay.

ES: He didn't win.

WG: And this was around the same time that Fred Alexander was running?

ES: No it was after Fred.

WG: After that, okay. So talk about this bridge with Stratford. You were telling me last time I spoke with you about the effort.

ES: Well they said that it would be too expensive.

WG: You mean the city, the city government said.

ES: [00:39:18] was it the state?--said it would be too expensive to build a temporary bridge across Beatties Ford Road until they got--.

WG: Eighty-five?

ES: And so that meant that we would have been cut off--. The people coming across would have been cut off. We'd have to go all the way around Hoskins Road and all back in there. So all of the people were saying that's going to hurt the black businesses, you know, coming down through this way, and the churches.

WG: Because they had already relocated from Brooklyn, most of them, on Beatties Ford Road by that time, right?

ES: Yeah. So that's when we got together and called Senator Herman Moore, Senator Maxwell, and told them what we needed and what they were trying to do. And Ike Heard, who was an architect with J.N. Peace, drew up the plans and went up and measured what it would cost and we had all our stuff together. So we had this meeting and had Herman, Maxwell--Herman Moore and Maxwell--and some more senators from Raleigh to come down and they brought the engineers.

WG: Okay, to try to--

ES: The first time the House of Prayer let you have a meeting on the top floor.

WG: Mm hmm, and they were in their present location right there?

ES: Yeah, right out here. So when we got there, had a crowd. And the engineers got up there and started talking about they had their diagram about how much money it would cost and everything and how expensive it would be. We had this minister

[00:41:19] from Caldwell Presbyterian, the church with all the stone going up Beatties Ford Road?

WG: Right, yeah.

ES: [00:41:27] ministers so we had to get all of them with us. So then when the engineers got through with their project then Ike Heard got up with his figures. He told them how much money it would cost to put that temporary bridge up there. Them engineers' mouths fell wide open. So that is how we got the bridge. If it had not been for us the bridge would not have been there, and that is why the bridge was named the Willie J. Stratford Bridge.

WG: So all of you collectively decided that it should be named after him? Was he sort of spearheading--?

ES: He spearheaded it. He actually spearheaded it.

WG: He contacted all of these people like the engineer to come do the survey and all this? Okay.

ES: Yeah.

WG: Why do you think no one knows much about Willie James Stratford?

ES: Everybody knows about Stratford.

WG: Older people, but I mean there's no marker. I mean besides the bridge they don't really tell how the bridge formed. They just have his name up there but nobody knows who Willie James Stratford is as far as the younger generation.

ES: No they doesn't, but that's why we had--. I raised, I think, thirty thousand dollars myself for that Y.

WG: For the Willie James Stratford Y, okay. Wow. So has it--? The Y is already open?

ES: It's open.

WG: And they have plaques for him over there?

ES: Yeah.

WG: I need to go over there and see that.

ES: The name is up there: Stratford and Richardson.

WG: Okay.

ES: You need to talk--. If you just really--. Omega Autry was his best friend.

WG: Omega Autry?

ES: Let me see if she--. Let me see if I can get her. [Sound of touch tone telephone] He got her involved in everything. She was on every board.

WG: Seems like he got--. I mean he got you involved as well.

ES: Let me get my book. [00:43:41] The truth be told--. Here's one of his pictures, Willie, right here.

WG: Oh, wow. [Pause]

ES: He had a showing at one of the banks and had his work up.

WG: Okay. Yeah I hear that Johnson C. Smith has his collection now.

ES: Oh, did they get--? Did [00:44:17] give it to Smith?

WG: I think so. So when did you move over here to this neighborhood?

ES: Twelve years ago.

WG: Twelve years ago? And after you left Brooklyn, where did your family go?

ES: Went to 423 Beatties Ford Road.

WG: Okay. So you were right on Beatties Ford Road. [Sound of touch tone telephone] [Pause]

ES: Omega Autry.

WG: Omega Argery, okay. I had Autry.

ES: That's what it is.

WG: A-u-t-r-i-e?

ES: A-u-t-r-y, Autry.

WG: Okay. So I guess this phase of Charlotte's civil rights movement, what did you notice about it? How would you characterize Charlotte's civil rights movement?

ES: We have come far but we got a far piece to go.

WG: Like what areas?

ES: In all areas. They say--. Things are better than they used to be in certain areas, but if you look around, so many blacks think they've overcome and they've forgotten where they come from. They did not reach the hand back--.

WG: To help those trying to come up.

ES: To help those trying to come up. And me personally, I don't think we've got any black leaders now.

WG: In Charlotte.

ES: In Charlotte. I think the black leaders in Charlotte since Jim died are more in it for self or in it for what they can get out for themselves, not for the total community. So many of them you call or come to a meeting, they don't even show up unless it's election time, and here they come.

WG: So the Excelsior Club sort of created this environment where you automatically had to help poor people up because you had these people coming through.

ES: Yeah.

WG: So after Jimmy McKee--you didn't mention much about him. What type of--? What was his background?

ES: Jimmy came up the rough side of the mountain. He came from--. I think there was about seven of them, came from a big family.

WG: Okay.

ES: But Jimmy was kind of the head of his family. He had a sister, Dr. McCartry, who lives in Charleston. But Jimmy kind of spearheaded and helped all of them get where they are. Jimmy was a very warm person. He would give you his heart.

WG: Right. I saw he did a lot of work with children--.

ES: If you respected his place, now. You had to respect Jimmy's place. You could not come in Jimmy's place with a hat on. You had to take that hat off and then it had to stay off.

WG: Southern etiquette. [Laughter]

ES: And he would do--in the years when it wasn't feasible for integration--you had the attorney general who had a membership at the Excelsior, Rufus Edmisten, you had Jim Hunt, the governor, you had Eddie Knox, the past mayor.

WG: And this was before integration had occurred in the city?

ES: Yeah. They all had memberships--Miles Hayes, the attorney Miles Hayes, or Jim Whittington, Belk. All of them used to come out there and just enjoyed coming out

there because--. And they would come out there when they were not running. They'd just come out and sit on the bar.

WG: And just talk.

ES: And just talk, you know. That was Jimmy's personality. So if you were running, if you didn't get through the Excelsior, you knew you wasn't going to win.

WG: [Laughter] So how did he get the funds to start the Excelsior Club? What was his background? What was he working in?

ES: He was working for a trucking company.

WG: Okay. He drove trucks, or--?

ES: No, he worked on the dock, you know. And then he just saved his money.

The Excelsior was a house. Did you see that in there?

WG: Yes, I saw that. It started off as a house.

ES: And then every year during membership time he would do something.

WG: Okay, use that money to build--.

ES: To add on, you know.

WG: Okay.

ES: To do something different in the club. He added on, knocked a wall out, and do this--.

WG: So when he first opened up the Club, did he ever state what his goal, what was he trying to create with the Club?

ES: Just what it was: a place where a man could take his wife and feel comfortable.

WG: Okay. And they served food, they did everything.

ES: Yes, they served food. They served drinks. You know, we had a bar.

[Laughter] Members had lockers.

WG: So you were like a hostess at this place.

ES: I was the barmaid, loved doing it.

WG: So you fixed a good drink?

ES: Oh, yeah! [Laughter] Oh, yes, and even 'til today I remember what they drank. If you didn't change I remember 'til today what you drank. So when they'd walk in the door I'd just have their drink. They'd walk in the door, I'd set their drink in front of them, you know, unless they changed.

WG: So what was Stratford's drink?

ES: Strat didn't drink.

WG: Oh, that's right. You said because at the time he was a recovering alcoholic.

ES: Yeah, he didn't drink. He drank ginger ale.

WG: Okay. What about--.

ES: Charlie Dannally drinks vodka and tonic.

WG: [Laughter] That's a good drink.

ES: Yeah, he drinks vodka and tonic. And Charlie's been drinking vodka and tonics for I know over thirty years.

WG: [Laughter] Okay. And Richard--what's--?

ES: Jim drinks Scotch.

WG: Scotch, okay, good drink as well.

ES: Yeah, Jim drinks Scotch, Johnnie Walker Red.

WG: [Laughter] So I interviewed this one guy, I think it's Everett Taylor, who also worked at the post office out there with them, and he was telling me how when blacks started to, I guess, vie for better positions within the post office they would come to the Excelsior Club and meet and talk about how to take these tests. Now was there a lot of activity at these--? I guess they were called the Civil Service tests.

ES: Well see you had a room upstairs so you could go up there and nobody new couldn't go up there. We had two meeting rooms upstairs. That's where most all of the clubs met, those clubs that's in that book.

WG: Mm hmm, these social clubs?

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay.

ES: That's where they met. Bridge club, they'd meet every Wednesday. That's where they all had their Christmas parties and their dances and things, at the Excelsior.

WG: Okay. So this really was like a center.

ES: Yeah. It was the center, you know, because there actually wasn't any place else to go.

WG: So talk about, I guess, after schools started to integrate. You graduated in '54 but you were still here throughout that process when they were going through all this trouble about integrating schools. Did you see a change in, I guess, the students or the student population going through the schools?

ES: Well let me tell you what happened. They took Myers Park--going back to Myers Park--they took the kids that lived in Myers Park, Colony Road, Selwyn Avenue, Hermitage Court, and bused them to West Charlotte.

WG: Right. This was in 1970, '71, something like that, they started that.

ES: They started that. That's why West Charlotte became so popular and the kids were so smart because West Charlotte then had everything they needed: the best teachers, everything. Then '92/'93--.

WG: Right when I graduated from high school.

ES: They stopped. And where do they come from now?

WG: Right, this community. This community right here.

ES: So you see there's still a disparity. You see what I'm saying? As long as you got the haves--

WG: Coming to the schools, you're going to--.

ES: --coming to the school that school will survive. That school will have the top notch of everything. When the haves leave, the school is going down. And this is what has happened all over Charlotte to the schools--the low testing schools? That is what has happened to the low testing schools.

WG: So are you an advocate of busing to get the schools, I guess, economically desegregated?

ES: Economically--. I hate to see the kids bused because--. And white people are saying they don't want busing but the black kids bear the burden of the busing. They're the ones who have to travel so far. Most of the white kids are in their neighborhood or else they're in private school. When the kids can't go to their neighborhood school the parents put them in private school. So the black kids over here bear the brunt of the busing. So it's still not equal.

WG: Also, I guess, one of the other things that hasn't really been discussed in Charlotte--they've talked about busing over and over--but I understand a lot of black teachers lost their jobs when these schools started to desegregate and some of the black schools started to close. Do you remember that?

ES: Yeah.

WG: And uh--.

ES: And even now they're saying that if you don't come up to a certain--what is it?--grade, you'll lose your job, you know, and stuff. Now my thing is, if you have been teaching twenty-five years, how can you not be--?

WG: At a certain level.

ES: At a certain level? I mean the system has failed even the teachers that let them stay with not being prepared. Do you understand what I'm saying? So why are you going to blame me if you have let me stay twenty-five years and all of a sudden I'm not prepared?

WG: Yeah that sounds like an inside malfunction within the system. They're not doing anything to provide the opportunities for extra studies, extra training for teachers.

ES: And I think maybe the teachers need to be like the doctors: every so often you need to be re-certified or you need to go to some kind of workshop.

WG: Mm hmm, they're not providing enough of that.

ES: You know, to bring you up to this what's going on now, because every year they change how they're doing something. Now that's the way I see it. I didn't have that problem because my daughter came out in '92. You came out in '93.

WG: Yes, ma'am.

ES: So you all were at West Charlotte.

WG: See I didn't get to get to go to West Charlotte. I wanted to go to West Charlotte. I was bused all the way to East Mecklenburg.

ES: Oh, okay. You went to East, okay.

WG: But it was still a good experience.

ES: It was a good school--

WG: Yeah.

ES: --when Pop Miller used to be out there. You weren't there when Pop Miller--.

WG: No, he had left.

ES: He had left, yeah.

WG: But it was just--. I think what I remember most is the environment being so mixed. You had a good assortment of students where you could see students who had come from well-to-do families who knew that they were going on to college so you got exposed to so many other things.

ES: It's still like that.

WG: Right, yeah.

ES: You see what I'm saying? East hasn't changed that much. They kept East like that, you see, but they didn't West Charlotte. There wasn't nothing but Hispanics and blacks up there. My daughter, she goes up there. She mentors. She has a student, a young lady that she's mentoring. She says she's going to take her all the way through.

WG: That's good. Because I taught up there for two years and I thought that I could help, but I don't know [00:58:06].

ES: But you see when you see, you know, that the system don't want it known, you know. And I think history needs to be taught when kids are this age.

WG: Don't wait until they're in high school. [Laughter] Yeah, it's pointless then.

ES: Yeah. You know my granddaughter just falls out and laughs. She says, "Oh, Granny!" I said, "Honey, you better eat that bread," I said, "Because [00:58:35] you didn't have no bread," you know.

WG: Right.

ES: But children--babies having babies, that's where we are in this generation, babies having babies. What can a twelve-year-old teach a one-year-old?

WG: Not much.

ES: Babies having babies, twelve and thirteen.

WG: I look at my relationship with my mother. We weren't close at all because she was so young. It took my grandparents to raise me. And I was fortunate because they don't do that anymore. Grandparents don't raise kids. And so you wouldn't say that there were a lot of teenage pregnancies, not as many as there are today, definitely.

ES: No. Well see the kids now at thirteen and fourteen are more sexual active than the kids, I think, nineteen and twenty. I mean because all of them young ladies I see in the street pushing these carriages, these girls look like they're still babies themselves, you know. So babies having babies, twelve and thirteen, and their mamas, they're not too much older. The grandmamas are not too much older. You see what I'm saying?

WG: That's right.

ES: So the system is broke. Now how we fix the system--. The black churches--. Well our church is stepping up. A lot of the black churches are stepping up, and I think that's what's going to have to happen.

WG: Do you think that they have fallen off for some time?

ES: Yeah, some of them have. I think some of them, the churches now--these mega churches--what I call community churches, most of them are for me.

WG: Let's see how big we can get, how many more members we can get.

ES: How much money I can get. I control everything. You see what I'm saying? It's not about the total--

WG: Community.

ES: --community. You look at [01:00:44] down in Atlanta. My sister lives there. She says he don't even let the people touch him. Now you know he's got all of that money, and here you got a member can't touch you? Something is wrong!

WG: Mm hmm, right.

ES: You know when you get above that you are God--. But see God isn't--. Like I tell folks, God got something for all of these ministers--.

WG: [Laughter]

ES: You're laughing honey, but I'm telling you. God has got something for them because they're using God's name to make kings of themselves.

WG: Right. And it'll come back. It always comes back.

ES: So, until the churches step up--. You got a few of the churches in Charlotte that are stepping up, but I think they could step up a little more.

WG: So what does University Park do in the community? What are some of the things that they--?

ES: I don't know what University Park is doing now.

WG: Not University Park, I meant Friendship. I meant to say Friendship.

ES: Oh, Friendship has--. Right now we got the YOU, university.

WG: Okay, what is that?

ES: It's a school, summer school, and it's about--I think it costs about twelve or thirteen hundred, fourteen hundred, dollars. They're open a week after school closes and they close a week before school opens. They have to wear uniforms. They can be there from seven until six. My granddaughter goes. She's going to the third grade so she's in the third grade there.

WG: Wow. So she's getting extra schooling over the summer, pushing her further along.

ES: They have over two hundred children.

WG: Hmm. And I imagine they have members of the church who probably teach and serve.

ES: All certified teachers.

WG: All certified teachers.

ES: All certified teachers--all certified. They're certified teachers. And they teach them black history. They have--. You can pay extra. They can do music, Tae Kwon Do, chess. Once a week they go take them swimming. They take them to Discovery Place, ImaginOn. Once a week they go somewhere. They have classes up

until 1:00 and then after 1:00 they do other educational things. And they feed them.

Now this includes lunch, everything, a full meal--vegetable, meat, starch.

WG: That's good. That's good. I had no idea that they were doing--.

ES: Oh, you should go up there and see it. It's amazing. They give scholarships for kids in the neighborhood who cannot go. We have taken the old sanctuary part. We have a homeless shelter for women and children. We have a--. They do the international South African--. We bring fifteen or twenty South African children here for [01:04:17]. The kids stay with some of the--.

WG: Families?

ES: Families and they take care of their uniforms and stuff.

WG: Okay. So Dr. Jones has sort of picked up where Coleman Kerry left off and sort of taken it to another level.

ES: Yeah. We're fixing to build AIDS homes. We're going to build a new childcare development. And we have the best in the city right now, number five star, Marizetta Kerry Child Development Center.

WG: And that would be after Coleman Kerry's wife?

ES: Yeah. It's named after that. Now they have one in the old church. It's there at the old church.

WG: Okay.

ES: They've always had one but we're going to build a new one.

WG: A new one.

ES: It will sit off by itself, not in any church. It's going to be a stand-alone building by itself.

WG: Wow.

ES: We're going to build a home for AIDS; going to build a senior citizens' complex. They went in with the city. The city gave them three million dollars. And all in back of the church they're going to build a park: baseball, soccer, tennis, all of that, and it's going in with the--

WG: That's going to be nice.

ES: --Parks and Recreation, you know.

WG: I guess we can back up a little bit. We didn't talk much about Coleman Kerry. I think you did talk about Coleman Kerry, but his relationship with James Humphrey, J.B. Humphrey, at First Baptist. They did a lot of activism in the community as well. Do you recall any of the things that they were doing as far as getting blacks employed? Because one of the things in the Civil Rights Movement they don't really discuss a lot of the push for economic equality and getting blacks better employment opportunities. Did any of that take place at the Excelsior Club, any of those pushes, or any of the people that you were involved with were they involved in that push?

ES: Well Rev. Kerry was involved with the Caucus. He was one of the--.

WG: Founding members?

ES: --founding members of the Caucus. So he had a lot to do. You know he ran for the school board.

WG: Right.

ES: He was instrumental in a lot of blacks getting in higher up positions, you know, in the city.

WG: Okay. And was Philip O. Berry, was he involved with the Excelsior Club?

Did he come by the Excelsior Club? Do you remember?

ES: He came through the Excelsior, yeah.

WG: Okay, because he was one of the first elected too.

ES: Yeah, school board member.

WG: So was he one of those people that y'all supported early on?

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay. What about black women who were really active in the community, besides yourself?

ES: Phyllis Lynch.

WG: Phyllis Lynch.

ES: You know she died about five, six months ago, was very active. You had Sarah Stevenson who was on the school board who was very active. You had Rebecca Taylor who was very active in the political arena. You had Bertha, Dr. Roddey, who was active.

WG: And these women, they got support in the community, especially from men? It wasn't a strained relationship between [01:07:50].

ES: No. There wasn't no strain. They supported them, got really good support, you know. During that time we was pushing who we could get, you know.

WG: If you find someone qualified you [01:08:03].

ES: Yeah.

WG: Okay.

ES: Didn't make any difference whether you were a woman or a man. If we felt like you was ready and you would be--wasn't worried about yourself, was more in the community--then we would push you. They tried to get me to run but I told them no, I don't want to run.

WG: Why not? Why wouldn't you run?

ES: Because I'm kind of hot tempered.

WG: You felt like somebody could push the wrong button?

ES: Yeah. I'd be like Jim Richardson. I'd be ready to--. [Laughter] Jim was down there in the--. I had to call Jim--. Is that on?

WG: Uh huh. I can cut it off.

ES: Jim was down there in one of them--. [Break in recording] --always liked to work in the back. I never wanted to be up front. I'm in the background, I work--.

WG: That suited you fine?

ES: Yeah, that suited me fine.

WG: As long as you were working to make things change for the better?

ES: Yeah, you know. I just never wanted to be up front. Just let me be in the background.

WG: There's a lot of added stress to being a leader.

ES: It is!

WG: People always want to be--. You have to--.

ES: When I was acting chairman and I was vice chairman, people call you at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning with all kinds of crazy mess, you know.

WG: So you become counselor, you become--.

ES: Yeah, because see your number has to be--

WG: Published.

ES: --published, you know. People get drunk and call you all time of night and stuff. So no, I've never wanted to be out front. I get enough calls as it is now. You know if something happens: "Edith,"--Parks Helms, we're real good friends--"Edith, what's going on?" you know. And he tells me, he'll say, "I don't know what these folks going to do." We're going to miss him, Parks Helms.

WG: He just retired, didn't he?

ES: Yeah. He's not going back on and I don't know--. You can see Vilma Leake and James down there now. That's going to be a circus.

WG: Going at each other and just keeping a ruckus always going.

ES: Yeah, going. And it's going to get ugly.

WG: So what happened to the black political power in Charlotte, because at one time it was at its height?

ES: Well the way it is now these young people they go off on a tantrum, and like I was saying, it's not about the community it's about them. You see what I'm saying? It's about them.

WG: So would you say like, I guess, it seems as though at the height when black people were coming together with the Black Political Caucus this was shortly after urban renewal, Brooklyn was being torn down, and so there was this sense of loss in the community. But everybody has become accustomed, I guess, to being separated and the black community isn't one central community so you're getting these attitudes that we're not together. I don't have to worry about this person or--.

ES: And you have--what do you call them?--migrants?

WG: Migrants coming in who don't know the history.

ES: Who don't know the history of Charlotte and they do not care.

WG: Right.

ES: And that's why too. All of these people are coming, migrating here from the North. This is why the schools are messed up now. They want it like they have it up North, segregated schools. You see what I'm saying? They want neighborhood schools. This is how all this started, all of these Northerners, and they move down to Huntersville, Ballantyne area, Matthews, and if you read the paper, that's where all the trouble is, all of these Northerners.

WG: Raising hell about what the schools don't have and what they want.

ES: You got a lot of blacks who come in here who's uptown in the power structure who are not Charlotteans so they don't have the love of the city. You see what I'm saying? They are coming here but where are they moving to: Ballantyne. They don't even know this is over here. A lot of them come in and say, "Oh, I didn't know this was back in here." But white folks are now trying to take it.

WG: McCrorey Heights, this area.

ES: Yeah, because it's downtown. You know, you can stand out there and see the--.

WG: The skyline.

ES: The skyline. We get letters every day wanting to buy.

WG: And you've had to form a neighborhood committee to talk to people and to get them not to--.

ES: We just had the secretary of the neighborhood association to write them and tell them, "Don't write us. We're not selling. When there's a house for sale we know who's going to get it."

WG: Okay. So do you think they do the same thing up in Hyde Park? Do they have to do the same thing? Because these were--. I think Hyde Park and McCrorey Heights were two of the neighborhoods that were built.

ES: They're not as bad after Hyde Park.

WG: Okay, because it's a lot further down.

ES: It's further down. This is downtown now.

WG: Centrally located.

ES: This is downtown.

WG: They've designated this as "downtown?"

ES: Downtown.

WG: Okay. Hmm. I didn't know that.

ES: Have you been out--? Did you go down Martin Street like I told you to go?

WG: Mm hmm.

ES: You see what I'm saying?

WG: Yeah, I saw that. That is ridiculous. They're going to drive--. All those people are going to have to move. They can't afford it.

ES: Well see this is what I'm saying. This is downtown.

WG: Okay.

ES: So they're doing to this area what they did to Brooklyn. You see what I'm saying? They're putting these four hundred, five hundred thousand dollar houses next

door to a hundred and twenty thousand dollar house, so what's going to go up? The taxes are going to go up. So that person can't afford to stay there.

WG: Some people would argue that it's bringing in gentrification. You now have blacks and whites living together again.

ES: How long do you think that's going to last? How long do you think that's going to last? If you've got a five hundred thousand dollar house do you want an eighty thousand dollar house next to you?

WG: No, you don't.

ES: Huh?

WG: You don't, yeah.

ES: Well what is down there on Flint Street and Martin Street? What is down there?

WG: I've seen those homes. I've seen those homes. They don't even look like homes. They look--.

ES: They're up in the sky. So do you think they're going to let them little houses stay there?

WG: So it's going to push blacks further to the fringes of Charlotte.

ES: Yeah, so where they going?

WG: How do you feel about the train system, the decision to put the trolley coming up Beatties Ford Road and not the train, or the train not running to the airport because it would have to run through the west side of the city? Have you--?

ES: I don't want--. I think the blacks have born the burden. I know it's coming, but let the trolley come.

WG: You think that would do a service to this side of--.

ES: Yeah, because the train comes, blacks are going to lose their homes.

WG: Yeah, if the train does come in.

ES: Just like they did right--. You know where 16 is?

WG: Mm hmm, yeah.

ES: Well that's where Mr. Martin, Dr. Reginald Hill, Wright Hunt and all of them lived, over there. They took about fifteen houses when 16 came through there that belonged to McCrorey Heights.

WG: So when did this become McCrorey, because from my understanding--?

ES: In '49.

WG: In '49, and up until that point part of this was called Douglasville, or something like that?

ES: No, this has always been McCrorey Heights. Dr. McCrorey who was president of Smith bought all of this land, so it's all been McCrorey Heights.

WG: So where was Douglasville? There was a Douglasville around here somewhere.

ES: I don't know about Douglasville but I know Douglas Street.

WG: Douglas Street--where--?

ES: Well it's right down from below where the Excelsior used to be.

WG: Okay.

ES: All of that was taken when they--. Douglas--you had Club Bali, then you had Douglas Street, then you had--.

WG: Okay.

ES: So that's what happened to Douglas Street.

WG: Okay. Is there anything that you would add, just to help me better understand or, I guess, that you might have wanted to add about the black development in Charlotte, black political power, civil rights movement, anything? Because I know I'm going to talk to you again [Laughter] so I'm not even worried about that.

ES: I just think that this generation has got to wake up to what's going on. They're so complacent. And when you be complacent you don't see what's going down in front of you.

WG: So how would you challenge us, this younger generation? What would you tell us to do?

ES: Challenge you to get involved with the system.

WG: Like what--?

ES: Get involved on the precinct level. Get involved; go to your precinct meeting whenever they say there's going to be a precinct meeting. Go to your precinct; get to be an officer so you can go to--. I don't care whether you want to be a Republican or a Democrat. I'm not saying what you be but you need to get involved in the system because this is where you find out what's going on. The power to be, your senators and all of them, comes to the executive board meetings. We appoint--if somebody dies you have the power, if you're on the executive board, to appoint who's going to be the next, see. So you need to get involved in the system. And once you get involved in the system then you have the contact with people that you can pick up your phone--. I can call Parks Helms and find out what's going on in Myers Park. Or, "Parks, what are they going to do downtown?"

WG: Okay.

ES: Or I can call Parks, he can find out anything, you know.

WG: And this is because you've been involved all these years.

ES: Yeah! You need to have somebody that has your ear. And I'll tell-- Now my daughter's kind of getting involved. She's involved with the Obama--

WG: The campaign.

ES: --campaign, which I was glad to see. But then when she gets ready to vote: "Mama, who I'm supposed to vote for? I don't know these people."

WG: The local people.

ES: Yeah. But you see you need to look. Read the paper. Find out what they stand for. You know what you want for your children.

WG: Definitely.

ES: Find out-- Even the school board. Our black kids that sit around, nothing bothers them. When they have a meeting about the school--

WG: None of them show up or none of their parents show up.

ES: And that's sad.

WG: That's hurting.

ES: You know you ain't hurting the white men; you're hurting yourself.

WG: Exactly.

ES: And that's how come you don't show interest in what you want over here, so therefore it's going here. And so you have no voice to bitch because when we came to you and asked you, "What do you want, here, for the west side of town?"--

WG: Nobody showed up.

ES: --nobody showed up and nobody said anything. And then when they said, "Well we're going to--." "Huh? Huh?" You know, it's too late now.

WG: Okay. I never thought about that.

ES: And see I've gotten too old. [Laughter] I can't--you know. I've gotten too old. So it's a new generation so you need to get involved. I don't care where you live, what state you live in; get involved because that's going to control your life.

WG: You're right.

ES: Wherever you pay taxes you need to get involved. You need to know your politics. You may want to run for senator one day.

WG: I'm one of them like you. I don't want to--. [Laughter] But I do want to be involved. I do want to--.

ES: You understand what I'm saying?

WG: Yes ma'am, I do, definitely. And see I'd never thought about it.

ES: Well you're intelligent. You see what I'm saying? You can sit back and you can listen to a politician and you can almost tell--

WG: [01:21:00]

ES: --whether he--yeah, whether he's for real or whether he's not. If you don't want to run at least you can be a voice for your neighborhood.

WG: Right. I wouldn't mind doing something like that.

ES: This is what I'm saying. You see what I'm saying? You could be a voice for your neighborhood. [01:21:21] right down here, nothing happens unless they call me.

I'm the first person they call, the first person they call.

WG: [Laughter] They know you're going to speak your mind.

ES: I'm the first person they call.

WG: And you're getting tired. You're tired of that. But I mean--

ES: You know.

WG: --rightfully so. Who else better to call though.

ES: Yeah, but like I was telling Alma Motley--she was calling me this morning. That's who I was talking to, Rowe Motley's wife, and I was telling them, I said, "Alma,"--they have six boys and one daughter; they adopted a daughter--I said, "You and Rowe, your children, if they don't have what you need--." I said, "You all need to enjoy y'all's life, because children don't want what you got." I said, "You all are at the point where you should never let nobody take the J out of joy.

WG: [Laughter] That's true. That's true because they'll take it.

ES: Yeah, and she said, "Well Edith, you know you're right." And I said, "That's true." I said, "Y'all done worked hard and give those children stuff." I said, "When you die, that house,"--they live right down there--I said, "Your children got their own house." I said, "They ain't going to care nothing about your house." I said, "They're liable to rent it out unless you stipulated you sell this house to nobody because the average person can't pay--." If a person can pay a thousand dollars a month, Willie, rent--.

WG: Right. They can buy their own house.

ES: They can buy their own house, unless they put Section Eight. Section Eight going to tear your house up.

WG: Mm hmm, it will. You get people in there who aren't used to having anything. They don't take care of it.

ES: No!

WG: Mark up the walls, tear stuff up, doors, windows, yeah. Hmm.

ES: So that's my thing to my daughter. I tell her, "You need to get involved."

WG: So did your daughter decide to move on the west side of town?

ES: She lives out off of Mallard Creek in--well actually off of Prosperity Church Road.

WG: Okay, I know where that is. I have some family that lives out there.

ES: Starbrook is on one side of the street if you turn left going down and she lives in [01:23:47]. She lives on the back of Highland Creek. She's in Highland Creek but she's in Cabarrus County.

WG: Oh, okay, okay. See I have family that lives in Highland Creek right over there.

ES: Yeah, well she's on the back of Highland Creek. But she's in Cabarrus County but she's got a Charlotte address. But they pay Cabarrus County tax.

WG: Better than Mecklenburg, probably a little bit cheaper.

ES: Yeah, but she's on the back of Highland Creek on the Prosperity Church Road side.

WG: So you didn't talk much about your husband at all.

ES: My husband and I separated when my daughter was five.

WG: Okay.

ES: So I raised Jarita by myself. I don't know where he is. He lived in Philadelphia. And we just never had any more contact.

WG: After that.

ES: He used to call her and she would--. He would say, "I'm going to send you this." And I never pushed him for any child support because I said that I was never going to make nobody take care of something that was theirs. So then he kept lying to her until she said, "I don't even want to be bothered with him." So that was her choice, not mine, because I used to take her to see her grandmamma until her grandmamma died.

WG: So you remained active, I mean politically active, as a single parent. That had to be really hard.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

WG: So did you ever at times think that the reason that you had to remain active was for her?

ES: Well it was for her and my parents, you know. Like I said I worked two jobs forty years but my sister and I took care of my mama and daddy up until they died. And then she had an apartment and I had an apartment because we put them in a house and we were paying the house payment so they wouldn't be shoved around. And I said to her when my daddy died, I said, "Why don't you and I find us a house not far from mama?" and we moved in together. I said, "Instead of having three everything we'll just have two." So that's what we did.

WG: Okay. Y'all moved here.

ES: We bought this. This was the Selwyn Street Presbyterian Church parsonage.

WG: Okay.

ES: And Rev. Smith built a house right down on Patton so they had just let this house go down so we bought this house and had it remodeled and stuff and added on and

stuff, you know. And then when my mama died we sold the house that we was buying for her. So that was--.

WG: So your ex-husband, he was here in this picture. Was he involved politically in Charlotte?

ES: Well with me. He would go to meetings with me, you know, because he wasn't here that much because he traveled with the band.

WG: Okay. So he was a musician.

ES: He was the sound technician for James Brown.

WG: That's right. You told me that. That's right. Okay.

ES: So he was home on a leave when they were [01:27:08] came through here so that's why they were up there.

WG: Okay.

ES: But he went to attend everything with me, you know.

WG: Okay. Hmm. Well I appreciate you giving me some time to spend with you.

ES: Yeah, but call Omega.

WG: Okay, I will.

ES: She can give you background about Strat because she was his very best friend. She was--.

WG: Okay. I am going to--. I'm probably going to leave and go back to Charleston.

ES: Mm hmm. How's it going down there?

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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