

African American Burial Ground Project (AABGP)
African American Burial Grounds
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Cheryl Rodriguez (CR): So I'm talking to Yvette Lewis about the Zion Burial Ground Project. Today is February 22nd, 2021. And she's going to—she's going to answer the question: How did you become involved in the Zion Burial Ground Project? Okay.

Yvette Lewis (YL): So a reporter from the *Tampa Bay Times* contacted me and asked me could he have a conversation with me, so I granted him that. So he came to the office, and then when he was here at the office, he explained everything. He laid out the details, he laid out all the information. And so, it—I was, you know, shocked and all, but that's how I got involved. He came to me, and had a conversation, and it went from there.

CR: So he was involved in investigating—he had found out about the burial ground project—

YL: Yes ma'am.

CR: And he was involved in investigating it, so he contacted you. Why do you think he contacted you?

YL: I think, mainly, he contacted me because of the part of the NAACP dealing with African Americans. And it was such a huge—he knew this was going to be impacting African Americans in Tampa.

CR: Good. Okay. So you talked to him, and then what did you do after that? After you had met with him and talked to him, what happened after that? What step did you take?

YL: I was in—first I was in disbelief, and I was like, No, it just really can't be true. You know, then I was in shock. You know, you go through all of the emotions. And so—and I remember

clearly stating to him, and I said, "You do know that this is not pretty, and this is not good. Where do you plan on living? Are you looking for another job? Because you are exposing everything. You are going to expose so much." So he said he had been working on it for a long time. So yeah.

CR: Yeah. So you understood that it was monumental, and you also felt like this exposes —this is another picture of racism in Tampa—.

YL: Yes.

CR: You were really touched by all that you had learned.

YL: Yes.

CR: So tell me some of the actions that the NAACP has taken on behalf of this project. I know that there was a time when there was a group of us meeting regularly, and when the pandemic happened, that kind of disrupted a lot of things. But what has been happening with the NAACP on behalf of the Zion project?

YL: So one of the things is that we're on the committee helping them and assisting them and making some decisions, and that's going to better serve the community. And also, better serve—give the people a proper memorial, a proper resting place.

CR: So when you say committee, what committee are you talking about?

YL: There's a Zion Committee that Tampa Housing Authority formed. And so, we're on that committee. And we meet once a month, you know, by Zoom because of COVID. So we meet once a month, and then they—we are going through step by step in the whole process, you know, we have the architectural people there, you know, you have people from the city there, representing the city. And, you know, you have a couple people from the elected official's office there, representing them. And some people from the community, people from Robles Park as well as the Tampa Housing Authority.

CR: Okay. Do you think that they're making good progress? How have things gone with that committee?

YL: I think the committee is understanding the process. But do I think it's making good strides? Do I think it's making good steps? No, I don't. We continue to—the city continues to run and roll blocks. The committee with the city of Tampa—the city of Tampa pretty much has never embraced it and never—I think they did acknowledge that it was there, but they have never really embraced the whole thing and said, "You know, let me right this wrong, let me jump in, let me do something." They've never done anything like that. Which makes it difficult with the

committee, because you really need everyone's input to help with this, because we didn't do this. The City of Tampa did this.

CR: Yeah. I know that the housing authority has put up a memorial of sorts at this point. Do you think that they have done everything they can do for the project? For the cemetery? You know, in terms of recognizing it or acknowledging—having a different attitude that what the City of Tampa has.

YL: I think they have done quite a bit, I really do. But can they do more? Yes. There's a lot more to do, and I think, Let's step it up, let's do it. You know, it's real sad that we live in the city and they haven't—the mayor hasn't come out and addressed this and said much of nothing to it. You know, we have a congresswoman, Cathy Castor, we have a representative that sits on that committee with us, but we haven't gotten anything. He just sits there. Sucks up the air, that's all he do.

CR: Wow. So the mayor has never made any kind of public comment on the Zion Cemetery?

YL: Not to my knowledge. She came to one meeting. Honestly, I got there probably about ten minutes late at that meeting, so as I was walking in, she was walking out. So she didn't even stay about five minutes, so I didn't even—I don't know what she said, to be honest with you. So I have not seen her say anything. I understand that she didn't do this, but I do know that the City of Tampa did do this.

CR: Yeah. You think the city is responsible for what happened?

YL: The city is responsible for covering this up.

CR: Based on the—you're saying that based on the research that Paul Guzzo did?

YL: Yes ma'am.

CR: Okay. So the other issue is that the residents of Robles Park were affected by this. What do you know about what the Tampa Housing Authority has done on behalf of the residents who were displaced or who had to move?

YL: So Tampa Housing Authority, they moved everyone out and found everyone a new place to live, and they said the people have an opportunity to come back, but they always say that, but they never do. So I mean, I guess that's the politically correct thing to say. So, you know, they were planning on tearing down Robles Park anyway. So the people were going to be displaced. Honestly, Dr. Rodriguez, they don't want black folks—common black folks—to live over there. They want to develop that into a beautiful piece of land that white people will reap the benefits off our misery and suffering. So, they are just hurt, and they're upset that they found a cemetery.

CR: So the cemetery kind of messed up their plans.

YL: Their plans. Yes ma'am.

CR: So now they have to figure out a way to work around the cemetery, right?

YL: Yes.

CR: Is that what you think that's what they're doing?

YL: Yes. So we have dealt with the architects. So we're working with the architects now, and some of the designs to me, I feel like, is totally disrespectful. Because—

CR: Oh, really?

YL: Yeah. Some of them, they want to put a park bridge out there, and a walking trail out there. So if these people have been walked on, buildings on them, why would you want to put a walking trail out there? They were like, Oh, so people can walk their dogs and they can sit out there under the tree. And I was like, Are you kidding me? So that was one month.

CR: So walk through a cemetery?

YL: Yes. Oh, you would have never known it was a cemetery, because it—the only thing is, it would have just had a grassy field. That's it. So then they came back with another design where we're going to put a river, a river going to run through it. So you're going to put a river where these people, once again, where their loved ones laid them to rest? So they said, Oh, well we're going to build the ground up and put more dirt on it, so the caskets won't be disturbed. Wow. So I was like, Are you hearing this? So I said, "There is nothing here that you want to make pretty. I know you're trying to make it pretty; you're trying to make it livable so all of them can come and love it and live up on it so it can be a beautiful park. Our story needs to be told and the truth needs to be told. And some of our history is not pretty. But it is up to us to make sure it's told and told correctly."

CR: So they are more—they seem to be more concerned about the ability to gentrify, and make, you know, a profit off of it. Use that property as a, you know, as a way to make money.

YL: That is correct.

CR: Because they would, in order for them to really honor it, they're going to have to sacrifice some of that land. They wouldn't be able to, you know, they can't build anything on it. So I guess they're trying to figure out the best way for them, the most profitable way for them to use the land.

YL: Yes.

CR: So is it—do you feel like it's kind of a frustrating situation, you know, just being on that committee?

YL: It is very frustrating, because I feel like they are the people who are there, they're just sitting there and doing nothing. The city staff, they just sit there and, you know, do pretty much nothing, just holding up a seat. Keeping a seat warm. And no actual concern or no actual input or empathy for the people, you know, it's real sad. It really is.

CR: Yeah. So tell me what you would like to see done to honor the, you know, the Zion Cemetery and the descendants and African American history in Tampa.

YL: What I would like to see is an open field, have the markers up there where the graves are and let people see that this is a cemetery. And then on one of the corner pieces of land, have a center that's telling the story, and turn that center into a genealogy center where people can go and research their genealogy. Their loved ones, their ancestors. Because see, this cemetery was not lost. It was forgotten about and back then, black folks couldn't discuss it, or they couldn't bring it up, because they were afraid to challenge.

CR: So you have some specific ideas in mind about how this cemetery could be honored.

YL: Yes ma'am.

CR: And have you brought that up to the committee?

YL: I brought up bits and pieces of it last meeting. And then I just had a separate conversation with Leroy Moore, who's been working with us from the housing authority. So I brought it up to him. So he said, "It sounds like a great idea." So I think it's something worth exploring.

CR: Okay. Yeah. It sounds like something that should be done, you know.

YL: Yes.

CR: So, let me see, I have just a few more questions. I wanted to ask you; do you know any of the descendants of anyone who was buried in the cemetery? Have you run across any descendants? Any people who said that they have relatives there?

YL: No, I don't. I don't know anyone.

CR: Oh, okay. You haven't heard about anyone in Tampa? I think Paul Guzzo mentioned at least one family—

YL: I think it was three families, but the one family that we thought we were going to pan out with, they didn't even know their loved one had a child.

CR: Oh, my goodness. Okay. Okay. So yeah, I'll read that article again, I've tried to keep up with all of his articles, and it does sound like up to this point there has been too many discoveries of family members. So there have been other burial grounds discoveries in Tampa.

YL: Yes.

CR: Can you talk about those? There are at least two others, right?

YL: There is—yes ma'am.

CR: Yeah, there's one at—well, I know that there was one at King High School. I don't know if there's two, but I know that there is one.

YL: There's one at King High School and that was Ridgewood, called Ridgewood. And then there was—there is one at Port Tampa, that's over there on MacDill Air Force Base.

CR: Yeah, have you been at—oh, that's right, yeah—have you been involved in those?

YL: Yes ma'am.

CR: So what kinds of things have you done with those communities?

YL: So the one at King High School, Ridgewood, they're in the process now with the architect, once again, designing a memorial. And putting up—they're in the process of designing one for that committee as well.

CR: Are you on that committee?

YL: Yes ma'am.

CR: Okay.

YL: Yeah.

CR: Okay. And what about the Port Tampa one?

YL: The Port Tampa one, what they did, is tomorrow they will have a ceremony for their memorial over in Port Tampa. And do a dedication there as—for them. So with the Port Tampa one—with MacDill Air Force Base—it's a little different because it's on the base, and so the

community can't get on the base. So they're going to put a plaque outside the base and then they'll tell the story inside the base, so they'll have something there.

CR: Okay. So you haven't really been involved in anything related to that. Any kind of activities related to that one.

YL: Yes, they did talk to us, and we worked on the language that they were putting up on there. I've been involved in working on the language.

CR: Okay, good. Can you suggest some other people for us to talk to, you know, people who have been involved in this—people who have been involved in the project or people who have concerns at the, you know, some of the residents, do you have anybody who you think we could interview to tell us more about, you know, the Zion Project?

YL: Have you interviewed Leroy Moore?

CR: No, but I will. I know Leroy.

YL: Okay. He would be good. You know, you can have a conversation—an interview—with Connie Burton as well. She sits on that committee with us.

CR: Okay, yeah, I'll contact her. I know her very well. I forgot that Connie was doing that. She's on so many things. She's on so many committees, but I love talking to her, so. What about the president of the residents association? Is she—is her last name Eamon?

YL: Yes, Reva. I know she—you can interview her—I know she's been busy working, but you definitely can interview her as well. And then you have Clark. I forgot what Clark's last name is. Clark also sits on the committee. So the resident council is over there as well, too.

CR: Okay. Yeah, was he the man who used to come to the meetings at the NAACP—

YL: Yes.

CR: —when I was coming to them? Okay. Yeah, I remember him. Okay, let me see, I think I asked you everything that I wanted to ask. What, you know, when we have—we're working on this project because, you know, we want to be involved in honoring these lost cemeteries, particularly Zion. We're doing this particular project, we're looking at the Zion Cemetery, and then there's a cemetery over in St. Petersburg that—we're also working on honoring those people. That cemetery was paved over by, I think, the building of a stadium over there. So do you have any suggestions for ways that we can be involved in honoring the people and their descendants? We have—we want to do some public programs; do you have any suggestions for us?

YL: Because you're recording this whole step of the way, right? Videotaping, documenting it. I think that's a great—an excellent idea. And, you know, preserving the news clippings and the articles, what's going on in the paper. Not the paper but on the news media. And collecting it and putting it all together as a story.

CR: Yeah.

YL: And telling this whole journey. And then, you know, next year, during this month, PBS will be airing it on TV.

CR: That's a good idea. Yeah, you're thinking big.

YL: That's correct.

CR: I like that. Yeah. Yeah. We do need to—it's really important to tell, like you said, telling the journey. So yeah, we're thinking of different—all kind of different forms of expression. So we have a poet who's working with us, and he's creating poetry and spoken word around this. And we're trying to think of different ways that we can honor this story, the story of the lost cemetery. Because, you know, if that's important and we, you know—I think that it would be great if we could find out more about the people who are buried there, but that'll take some time as well.

YL: So I know they talked to a lady who was what? Ninety-something years old? And Paul then interviewed her. Also, I would say you can take—look up, start looking up some of the names. Maybe research, pick about twenty names and find their genealogy and see where it's at. You know, plugging it into a genealogy thing, and so I know that's a little extra work, because you don't know, but you can go by the names, to look up the names. Start researching the names. If you have a good database, if you have access to a lot of internet database services and searches so you can plug those names in to where they—

CR: Yeah. Okay, well, that's something we're going to do, that's a whole project in and of itself. But I think it's certainly worth doing. And I was thinking about looking in the directories for the names of different residents during the time that this cemetery was being used.

YL: You know what I want to know? When did they come up with the telephone book?

CR: It goes—I can't remember the exact date, but there was a time when the telephone directories actually had, they would actually list people's races. They would actually, you know, the race of people. So there was—I'm getting ready to go to special collections and find some of the old telephone books.

YL: Okay.

CR: And I can't remember the exact years that they did that. But I'll be investigating that, because that's really important.

YL: You know, also to the archaeological people, I think you really need to interview them.

CR: Yeah.

YL: You know, because they did King, there, you know, as well as Zion. So I think, you know, get their conversation, hear what they have to say.

CR: You're right, yeah. Actually, yeah, I think that Dr. Jackson actually has—we have, actually, we have a student in our research group who's an archeologist, so she's following up on that. But what they do is real important too, because they find all this stuff that's under the ground, so, and they try to make sense of it. So it—yeah, it is important.

YL: Yeah.

CR: So is there anything else that you want to share with me about what's been going on with Zion or what you'd like to see, or anything?

YL: Well, one of the things that I would like to see is the city to—the City of Tampa needs to right this wrong. The City of Tampa needs to correct this part of history. This part of injustice that was done.

CR: Yeah.

YL: Intentionally, to build that, because it was covered up by—everything was just covered up, you know. The land was resold at—for Ridgewood over there where King High School is—the land was taken over there at Port Tampa and given to the military, they took it by eminent domain, so they knew what they were doing at all times. So why do we have to continue to go through this? We shouldn't have to force their hand to say you're sorry or, We're going to fix this. They should be ready to jump in, but what we get is nothing and the wounds are there, these souls have not rested. So they have no—

CR: It's not truly a resting place for those, you know.

YL: They can't rest. They can't.

CR: Right, exactly. Well, I really thank you very much. This is very informative, and I'm really glad that I had a chance to talk to you.

YL: Yes, ma'am.

CR: Thank you for helping us with the project, and I certainly will be back in touch with you. And if there's anything that I can do to assist in the meantime, please don't hesitate to contact me.

YL: I will, thank you.

CR: Thank you. Bye-bye.

End of interview