

African American Burial Ground Project (AABGP)
African American Burial Grounds
Oral History Program
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Julie Buckner Armstrong (JA): Okay, very good. Despite a few technical issues, we are here on Zoom, recording with Gwendolyn Reese about the African American Burial Grounds and Remembering projects. Today's date is May 3rd, and it is 11:23 a.m. So, Ms. Reese, let me just start by asking you—let's see. Where and when were you born?

Gwendolyn Reese (GR): Okay, so I was born April 4, 1949, in St. Petersburg, Florida, at 1300 Upton Court.

JA: Okay.

GR: I was delivered by a midwife in the home of my uncle.

JA: Oh, excellent.

GR: And that house sat right behind Mercy Hospital.

JA: Okay. Very good, very good. So one little detail question, and then I'm going to ask you something about the cemetery and the neighborhood surrounding it and so forth. And yes, sorry, Antoinette Jackson let me know that she needed to introduce herself too. My bad. The technology threw me out of whack.

Antoinette T. Jackson (AJ): Oh, no, no worries. I didn't want to just pop in and have a conversation without you people knowing exactly who I was. So, yes, I'm Antoinette Jackson, also an anthropologist here at the University of South Florida and a part of this project team.

JA: Okay, very good. And, you know, I forgot to say my name as well. The interviewer is Julie Armstrong. Okay, so let's see, a few questions about—let's start with the cemetery, and then we'll move out into the broader neighborhood. So do you—what is your knowledge of the Oaklawn Cemetery complex, which is Oaklawn, Moffett, and Evergreen?

GR: Well, my knowledge is limited. I am not aware of any ancestors who were buried there, although I'm almost positive I have some. But it's not anything I have knowledge about. Based on the times and segregated cemeteries, and those were the only ones for a time for African Americans, I'm almost assured that I have someone buried there. But my experiences, or my memories, are really from childhood—knowing where the cemeteries were located. Also, sometimes in elementary and middle school, we had direct paths we were to follow from school to home, but as children will do, we oftentimes chose to do something that was a little more exciting or maybe even a little frightening as it comes to cemeteries. And sometimes we would—the route we would take home would take us through the cemetery.

JA: Okay.

GR: And it was a little bit of a—well, a little frightening, but more, it was just children pushing the needle and just sort of declaring that “I can do this! I'm brave! I'm—I'm whatever” and walking through the cemetery, which I remember being quite small as compared to cemeteries today. And I remember old headstones. I can recall some headstones that were in disrepair. I can remember a little bit of a cemetery not being as well kept—you know, grass a little bit higher, that sort of thing, as we plotted our way, careful not to step on where we thought graves actually were as we maneuvered through the cemetery.

JA: Right. Right. I have a little follow-up question. So were you living at—did you say 1300 Upton Court? Is that where you lived at the time?

GR: Oh, no. No, I was born there, but I—when I was about two or younger, my parents moved out of my uncle's house. And you know, that's that whole wonderful story of African American families supporting each other, helping each other. My mother was from North Carolina, my daddy from Lake City. They met, they married, they moved into the big house that my uncle owned. And then when I was about a year-and-a-half, they got their own apartment. And that was at 1305 5th Avenue South, what is called Sugar Hill.

JA: Okay.

GR: So that is why it was—the cemetery was on route from school, which was 16th Street—elementary and junior high—to my home on 5th Avenue.

JA: Right. I was trying to get a sense of, like, what your route was when you were going through the cemetery. Now, it's a fairly big complex there—I don't want to say “big,” but there is a complex there. It was Oaklawn, Moffett, and Evergreen. Do you know which of those cemeteries you might have been walking through at the time?

GR: I don't know it offhand, but it's very easy for me to find. I have information—I was walking through the one that would be the southernmost cemetery. One of them was a white cemetery, from my memory, and the other two—but I would have been walking through the southernmost cemetery that is very near what is now Unity Temple of Truth and what was then the Episcopalian church.

JA: Right. And I'm looking at a map, and it was probably—based off where the school is and based on where your house was—probably Moffett. But it could have been Moffett or Evergreen as well.

AJ: Evergreen is—yeah, I was going to say, it looks like—when you—did you know the Perkins House, Gwen?¹

GR: Yes.

AJ: Was that—in proximity to where you were walking, where was the Perkins House, and was the cemetery behind—

GR: Yes, the Perkins House was facing 16th Street. And either one block—I think one block west of the Perkins House is where the Episcopal church was, and the cemetery was just north of the church and just west of the Perkins House. So it was behind the Perkins House.

JA: Right. Okay, okay. Yeah, I might have Evergreen and Moffett reversed.

GR: I think it was Evergreen.

AJ: Yeah.

JA: Okay, okay. So you talked about taking care not to step on graves and so forth.

GR: Yeah.

JA: Were there any, I don't know, folk beliefs or urban legends or anything like that about walking through cemeteries, walking over graves? What dictated your thinking on that?

GR: You know, I'm not sure. When you grow up, you sometimes are not able to discern folklore from other information. But I just recall it being a respect that we had—even though we were playing and doing something we weren't supposed to do, we still had a sense of respect for those who were buried there.

JA: Okay. Now, when you went through cemetery, did you—was there a fence around it, or was it open, or did you go in through a gate, or how did you—

GR: I don't recall any of that. I just recall it being open. We did not climb a fence, because I wouldn't have done it if we had to. I wasn't athletic like that to climb a fence. I don't recall a gate. I just recall it being open.

¹ The Perkins House (53116th St. South) belonged to a well-known family of African American educators in St. Petersburg.

JA: Okay. All right. So can you tell us about some other things that might have been around the cemetery or where you lived? Either businesses or churches or families. We've already talked about the Perkins House, but what else do you remember being around there?

GR: Oh, I remember everything because it was such a good time in my life, and it was such a rich neighborhood. And I have such fond memories of growing up in what is now called the Gas Plant neighborhood, which was actually east of 16th Street. And so I was on 1305, which was about 13th Street, although there was no 13th Street. The block was from 12th to 14th Street, but right where my apartment was would have been 13th Street. And so I lived on Sugar Hill, and there were apartments—you know, I always laugh when people talk about mixed-income neighborhoods. Well, black folk lived in mixed-income neighborhoods well before that was something that people talk about, because redlining and segregation forced us to live together, regardless of our income.

And so I grew up in a mixed-income neighborhood with some houses being brick and two-story, and some houses being masonry and ranch style, and some houses being wooden structures. Some houses well kept, some in disrepair, some beautiful lawns, some dirt yards. So it was just really eclectic in the sense of the structures, the architecture of that time of the different homes. It was just this incredible mixture of all kinds of people, and it was just a rich, very, very rich history.

JA: Gwen, could you name some of the stores, or some of the gas stations, or the insurance companies that—or anything—the beauty shops?

GR: Probably not.

JA: Okay.

GR: But I can go back and get names. But I can talk about—

JA: Oh, that's all right.

GR: I can talk about some of the people who owned them, but I may not be able to recall the name. But I do remember Mr. Walker's grocery store on the southwest corner of 12th Street and 5th Avenue South. And it was kind of like the Sidney Harden store on 22nd Street, where you could buy dry goods and meat and eggs and candy and canned goods. It was just like this little neighborhood store that sold everything. And his name was Walker, and we just called it "Mr. Walker's store." We had McRae Funeral Home, and that was very much a pioneer family in our community.

Right up the street from me on 14th Street was a gas station and a little store. And I don't remember the name of it, but Mary Murph's uncle owned that store, and she worked in the store starting, I think she said, when she was about 12 or 14 years old. And so we used to go there to buy soda pop and candy and other things that children buy when they have a nickel or dime or maybe a quarter. I remember Mr. Robertson's—Mr. Roberson's—let me get it right. Was his name Roberson? Yes, [Roberson's] barber shop. I don't know if that was the name of it. A

woman that I called my aunt—who really wasn't, but she was my first cousin's aunt—Vermell King, had a beauty shop on 14th Street, about 4th Avenue South, just north of 5th Avenue.

There were so many little stores. We didn't have a lot of eating establishments in that part of the Gas Plant area like we had on 22nd Street. There were more eating establishments on 3rd Avenue South, not as many between 3rd Avenue and 5th Avenue. But I interviewed a brother and sister, and their grandfather owned, their grandparents owned, the Red Rose—I think it was called—beer garden. There was a seafood place, and that was on 12th Street, between 5th Avenue and 3rd Avenue. We had the Harlem Theater, which was the other segregated theater: the Royal Theater on 22nd, the Harlem on 3rd Avenue. We had the Johnson—James Weldon Johnson Branch Library, which was our first real library, on 3rd Avenue South.

Mr. Katz had a grocery store. Mr. Katz was a Jewish man, and he had a large grocery store on 3rd Avenue South. My church was Traveler's Rest Missionary Baptist Church, on the west side of 16th Street, between 5th Avenue and Dunmore, because we had two named streets, Dixie Avenue and Dunmore Avenue, and then 3rd Avenue. Those two avenues were between 5th and 3rd. And across the street from my church was a store. I don't remember who owned it, but we used to go over there after Sunday school and sometimes on the way home from school, and it was just like a little corner store. I remember buying peppermint balls and pickles, and I remember seeing pickled pig feet in jars and thinking, Oh, I will never eat that. And I never have.

So we had all kinds of businesses. Former commissioner [Ken] Welch's grandfather—it could have been his great grandfather, but I think it was his grandfather—owned a business on 16th Street. There was a woodyard. But lots of interesting people. Second Bethel Church, which is now called—known as—Bethel Community, was on the corner of 5th Avenue and 16th Street South. And if you traveled north, on the corner of 3rd Avenue South and 16th Street was First Baptist. Those were two very large churches. And there were just so many people who lived in the community, so many people who influenced my life and grew up to be teachers and social workers and just a myriad of professions that they entered into. I lived very close to Campbell Park, two blocks away, so—and Booker's Creek was right around the corner. I never swam in it, I never did anything in it, but it was right around the corner, and I can recall it overflowing after heavy rain.

JA: Do you know how close Booker Creek ran to the cemeteries?

GR: By then, it was underground.

JA: Ah, okay. So it's culverted.

GR: Yes. It had been covered, and I don't remember the creek being open anywhere near the cemeteries. That was a major opening around 12th Street, in the Gas Plant area, and after that it was underground.

JA: So I get the sense that this was a very—you know, we're doing research about cemeteries, but this was very much a community that was very much alive. And I appreciate hearing what

you have to say about it. Do you remember the—any of the cemetery being moved, or bodies being moved, or anything about the cemetery being relocated when you were younger?

GR: And I don't know if my memories are from the actual time or from reading. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. I do have memories. I'm just not sure where they're coming from regarding the excavation of graves and moving them to Lincoln Cemetery. And McRae—Monroe McRae—a member of the McRae family who actually operated the family business, McRae Funeral Home, was contracted with to remove those graves and move them, or relocate them, or reinter them at Lincoln Cemetery. I know that I don't remember this but that I've read the number of graves he was contracted to remove were very—the numbers outnumbered what he was contracted to move, so there were many more graves there than he expected or that he was paid or told that he would be moving.

JA: Was he the only person you know of that was contracted to move those graves, or were there others?

GR: The McRae Funeral Home is the only one I know of. In a lot of my research since then, I don't recall any other establishment being a part of that.

JA: What do you recall or do you—have you talked to anyone about—what was the community feeling, or what were people thinking and talking about when the cemeteries were being relocated?

GR: I don't have any memories about that. I don't remember any conversations about that. Even in my research that I've done—not nearly as much as you all are doing—I don't recall coming across any articles that address that. It's not a part of Rosalie [Peck] and Jon Wilson's book, so I have almost—I have no information, knowledge or memories, about the community sentiment at that time.²

JA: Well, that's still helpful. That still tells a story, so thank you. Do you remember what was on the site of those cemeteries after they were relocated?

GR: I don't recall anything being on the site. I'm searching my memory. I just remember it being vacant. Let me try—let me think. And then, of course, being sort of caught up in the whole Tropicana Field expansion and the interstate, which was really first. I'm not recalling any structures built, particularly in the one that I walked through, which was the one on the southwest that we've identified probably as Evergreen. Yes.

AJ: No apartments or anything?

GR: Not that I can recall. I remember doing a tour, a guided tour of the trail, and my trolley driver—I can't remember his name now—recalled something that I don't remember at all. But I still don't think it was a—it would have been on the north side of 5th Avenue. And he lived there, and they were apartments, and they were pink. And he said they were actually called the

² *St. Petersburg's Historic African American Neighborhoods*, Rosalie Peck and Jon Wilson, The History Press, 2008.

“Pink” something. And that was not a part of my memory at all, but I totally trusted him because he lived there. And so he taught me something. If—I don’t know if they would have been constructed on that land. I had a feeling they had been there awhile, so I’m still not necessarily thinking that they were constructed on the cemeteries, but they were very near Laurel Park, so they very well could have been.

JA: So when did your family move out of this area? Was it related to the Trop [Tropicana Field] and the interstate, or was it before?

GR: No, it wasn’t. It was related to my father building his first home.

JA: Okay.

GR: And I was in fifth grade, and I would kind of guess that was, like, 1958. I was in fifth grade at a young age. I moved through elementary school quite quickly, but I would say that was in the—I’m thinking the late ’50s.

JA: Okay.

GR: Very late ’50s.

JA: I’m going to shift just a little bit to some sort of general questions. You said you went to Traveler’s Rest Church. And do you remember as a child going to any funerals there, or any other funerals when you were a child? I’m trying to get at questions of specific burial practices or funeral rituals or things like that.

GR: Well, most of our funeral rituals are very similar, and they haven’t changed a whole lot even now. But my parents—just like I didn’t—my children did not attend funerals as children, because I didn’t think that was appropriate. And my parents felt the same way, so I don’t recall any funerals when I was a young child. I’m trying to think. I loved my uncle, and I don’t recall attending his funeral. So my parents were protective, and funerals were not actually the place for children. And I think that was very common in my culture, unless it was an immediate family member. But I don’t think our funeral practices have changed very much.

JA: Okay. But that’s important to know that, you know, that kids might not necessarily have gone to funerals.

GR: No.

JA: I mean, that’s an important piece of knowledge. I wish that my family had believed that. Anyway—so do you remember one of your earliest funerals and, like, what was the practice? And you say things haven’t changed, so what are some things that are consistent today?

GR: And, actually, I don’t attend funerals now. The whole funeral—what would I call it? Not a process. The whole funeral thing, I just—I don’t embrace. And so I have attended many funerals, but, by choice, I do not attend funerals now. But the procession into the church, the eulogy,

people speaking about you as a neighbor, or as a friend, or as a church member, or a co-worker. And so all of the proclamations and—there’s another word I’m not—resolutions and lots of singing, and funerals used to last much longer than they ever should have. Probably a very long service. But we also had—and still do—what’s often called the “wake.” Now it’s usually called something slightly different. And that was a service in and of itself as well.

JA: Yeah.

AJ: Did they use the term “homecoming” in—when you were—

GR: No, they did not. That’s—no, that’s a more recent term. The homegoing celebration is—not “-coming,” because you’re going. But the homegoing celebration—some people may call it [“homecoming”]—but it’s a much more recent term to my memory. It was funerals, and then, of course, it was the gathering after. Now they call it the “repast.” I don’t remember it being called that then. But it was where everybody would sit down and eat and reminisce and talk and visit, because funerals were often the only time that families came together and saw one another. And sometimes you only saw members of your family from one funeral to the next.

Reunions became a major part of our culture a little bit later. I mean, I was a young adult when I remembered our families having reunions. And a lot of times, it was said, “We have to see each other more than just at a funeral.” But funerals, almost all family members came. And it was a reunion as well as a homegoing celebration. So it had a sense of—it was a festive occasion after the solemn occasion. “Putting someone to rest,” as it was frequently called.

JA: Well, yeah, what I hear from you is that a funeral was more than just a way of remembering the deceased, but it’s also a way of bringing families together and cementing that bond. So, given that sort of dual importance, how do you think today that cemeteries should be protected?

GR: You know, I think it’s so much more than just a reunion or a coming together. Cemeteries tell the story of a people. They tell the story of a particular family, but because of that family’s connections and links within the community, it tells the story of a community. Cemeteries tell the stories of a people. You learn when they were born and when they died, and based on what quote that the family chose for the headstone, speaks oftentimes to the person—what their role may have been in the community, sometimes even their occupation or their favorite Scripture, but it sometimes, somehow spoke to the character of a person. And so when you walk through a cemetery, which I’ve done at Lincoln because I’ve headed up two cleanups before it changed hands—and I was with high school students, so it was also a teaching sort of field trip, sort of giving back to your community, and caring and respect for the dead and our elders and our ancestors.

All of those things were wrapped up in the cleaning projects that we had, but in walking through Lincoln Cemetery, there’s so much history there. Elder Jordan is buried there.³ The McRaes are buried there. You know, you walk through and you look at the names of the people and the families, and you start to tell the stories of those people and share those stories with others. And

³ Elder Jordan Sr. was born into slavery in the mid-19th century and became a prominent businessman and community leader.

that's just another way of keeping the history and heritage and culture of a community alive, not letting it get lost. Telling the stories so they can be passed on and passed on and passed on, because we know how important it is to know the history not just of a person, but of a community. And I think cemeteries do that in a very different kind of way, but they're important for that reason, because they tell the stories of a community and of a people.

JA: Absolutely. Absolutely. I couldn't agree with you more. Now, given that importance of—you know, that historical importance and that communal importance and the familial importance and all those levels of it, how do you think that sites like Oaklawn or Moffett or Evergreen should be remembered today?

GR: I think—I'm not sure how they should be remembered, but I know they should—they must, not should—they must be remembered. And the story about them that needs to be told is the story of what happened to them as well. I think it's real important for people to be aware how locally, across the state, and across the nation, how cemeteries of people of color, specifically African American people, were paved over, built over. And that is so indicative of the respect and the value weighing that people have of black lives.

And so when we talk about—number one, if we still have the cemetery, we should do everything we can to preserve it, to maintain it, and tell the story of that cemetery. But if the cemetery is no longer there, I just so strongly feel that the story of that cemetery needs to continue. And so if that means markers very similar to the one we have of the lynching memorial, saying the name of the cemetery, the age of the cemetery, when it was opened and when it ended and what happened to it. And I think all of those things are so important, because other than that, people just—all they see is the Tropicana Field parking lot, or whatever it is they see, and they don't realize that there were lives. People lived and died here, and many of those people were major—they were pioneers, and they were major figures in the history of our community.

And I think it is as important to value and respect those who are dead as it is to respect those who are still living. And as African Americans, we are struggling—our struggle has never ended—to be respected and valued as human beings in this country. And so I think cemeteries are just one—another very important way of valuing and respecting the lives of black people—of all people, but we're speaking specifically of African American people primarily because of what has happened to so many African American cemeteries and burial grounds across this country. Many of them we may never know.

AJ: Yeah, and, Gwen, that's what part of the project is also speaking to on the national level and regional level and connecting all of these stories together for the very reason you said: it's not an isolated incident.

GR: No.

AJ: And that we need to uncover the why and the what, in terms of what specifically those sites look like, but why is even the more important question.

GR: Yes, yes.

AJ: And be on people about not continuing that. So that's another reason why talking to you in this project is really important.

GR: Thank you.

AJ: We are working on the Zion Cemetery in Tampa.

GR: Yes. And I just read recently—where was this cemetery? Oh, my goodness. Was it in—it was somewhere like Tennessee or Virginia, and they are—you know, they're doing the same thing.

AJ: Oh, yeah, everywhere. Yeah.

GR: Everywhere. And so this is a time of recognition. It should be a time of acknowledgment. It should also definitely be a time of preserving the stories—preserving and telling. It's not good enough to preserve the stories; they must be told. So we must not just preserve the stories. We must make a—it should be very intentional to tell the stories.

JA: And you know, I'm going to sort of follow up with a little bit of a question in regard to how things should be remembered. I know that the Tropicana Field site is—that there are plans before the mayor and the city council to redevelop it, and I know that you've had some interest in those different plans. So as we talk about—as a city—as we talk about redeveloping that site, I know you said that things should be remembered, but, like, and you didn't necessarily say how specifically, but do you think that that process of remembering should be linked directly to the redevelopment of the site? And should markers be put up there? Should, like—I think I'm asking a question of to what extent should this be part of the development plan, and where would you like to see some kind of memorial effort taking place within a kind of redeveloped Trop site?

GR: I have to be very careful in that answer. I'm the only non-government person sitting on the internal review team for the review of the proposals.

JA: Ah, okay.

GR: So I can speak very generally. I cannot speak specifically at all. I would be compromising my position on the review team, and the decision has not been made, so we're still down to four proposals. I think, however, that it's very important for whatever recognition or way of honoring or remembering be very specific to whatever it is we are honoring. And so the Tropicana Field redevelopment is—the cemeteries are sort of on the periphery of what is actually those—most of those 86 acres, aside from the part that's west of 16th Street. But I just—I feel specifically where a cemetery was located is where a marker should go. Not in or around the area, but on the actual location, or as close to it as possible if something doesn't allow that to happen.

So that's my first response. I think markers have grown—should I say “grown”? We're seeing markers used more frequently now. And we see people actually looking for markers and going on tours of trails across the country in an attempt to learn the history of a community or the

history of a people. So I think markers are very relevant, and it's an excellent way of preserving and telling the stories, particularly if—even if they are isolated markers and they're not on a contiguous trail, they would be included in, for instance, a tour that I might be leading of the African American Heritage Trail.

You know, I also think—and I know you all were talking about this—murals are an incredible way of telling a story, and they've become increasingly popular. And St. Petersburg is almost at the top of the list in having murals, but a lot of our murals don't really tell a story. They embrace the idea of what the Sunshine City is, and, you know, they're very creative, and they're very beautiful. But I would like to see more markers that actually tell a significant—tell an important story. So I think—I'm sorry, a mural—so I think murals are a wonderful way of telling a story. I think markers are an incredibly important way of—because murals fade, and they get painted over. Markers are much more likely to be there for years, for decades, maybe for even generations.

I also have found—let's see how to say this. So in my interviews with people with lived experience in the Gas Plant area, one of the things that three of the people I interviewed insisted on is that I write a book about the Gas Plant neighborhood because I grew up there, too. And they said, That story needs to be told, Gwen, and we won't do this interview unless you agree to write it. But I think telling—even a book telling the story is important. There are—the high school students in Boca Ciega wrote a book about Lincoln Cemetery. I have it. And then the following year, they wrote a children's book—beautifully illustrated—about the Lincoln Cemetery, and so I think there's a place for all of those. There's no one way that we should memorialize what happens. We should look at all the various ways in which this can be done, and so a marker, and then a mural, and then a book, or somebody writes a song—you know, it's never ending, the opportunities to tell these stories and to acknowledge—

JA: I love the idea of this going into, you know, local curricula, whether it's K-12 or university or whatever. So I completely agree with you. So as we begin to sort of wind this down, I would like to know, do you have any questions for us? About the project or this process or—

GR: No, I don't think I do. I think I understand it quite well, but I want to go back for a minute.

JA: Okay.

GR: Because—to the description of my neighborhood. So you asked me about businesses and all of that, but there was so much more to the neighborhood, and I think that it's important for the story to be told of what life was like. Not just the businesses that were there, but what life was like in the Gas Plant neighborhood. And as I interviewed people, they reminded me of things that I had forgotten. They had experiences that I didn't have, based on whether they lived near Booker's Creek or whether they lived on Sugar Hill.

But all of us—all of us—our memories were pleasant, they were joyful, they were—we remembered them as a happy time of growing up. Even in the middle of Jim Crow and segregation, our neighborhoods were a safe haven—usually a safe haven for us, until—

sometimes we had some terrorizing done, like after John Evans's lynching.⁴ Many African Americans fled the city for two or three days because white people were terrorizing the neighborhoods. But on the whole, our neighborhoods were a safe haven.

So we stepped out of our neighborhood, and we were faced with segregation, Jim Crow laws, white water fountains, colored water fountains, you can't sit on the green bench, you can't try on the clothes. But when we were in our neighborhoods, it was—we were free from that. And that, I think, has so much to do with our resiliency and our ability to remain hopeful and our ability to overcome all of the adversities that we had to face.

You know, people would have fish fries in the backyard on certain blocks, and all the neighbors would come and gather on a Friday afternoon, or people would—my girlfriend who lived near Booker's Creek said they would cook crabs. The boys would go out and get crabs, and they would cook crabs. But we had these communal activities that really bonded and binded us together. Part of it was the external influences that were so negative, but the other part of it was just a part of our culture: helping each other, supporting each other. Our doors weren't locked. I don't know when I remember—even after we moved off 5th Avenue into our first home, we weren't locking our doors.

It was where other members of the—[people] other than your family could correct your bad behavior and it was accepted. It was expected. It was respected. It was playing kickball in the backyard. It was playing hopscotch on the sidewalk. It was laughing and talking and playing. It was living next door to people who were role models even though we did not know that—the principal of Gibbs High School living across the street, Dr. [James Maxie] Ponder living next door, Dr. Jones living two doors down, walking to school with my librarian because she didn't drive. So we had all of these positive images because everybody lived together. The minister, Mr. [Lewis] Dominis, the art teacher lived up the hill. Bill Williams, who was the only black business in downtown St. Pete, lived across the street and up the street from me on 14th Street and 5th Avenue.

So it was just this—it was an incredible time. Yes, yes, yes: segregation, racial terror, lynching, racism, Jim Crow, all of the ugliness of the greater society still existed, but within our neighborhoods, within the villages that we created, we were able to provide—our parents, the adults—we were able—they were able to give us a delightful childhood. They were able to give us a childhood filled with pleasant memories, and that is just so important. And the people I interviewed, all of them, we talked about our wonderful childhood. And I think that that's so important, and that's sometimes left out [of] what people usually talk about when they talk about the Gas Plant area—the slums. It was not a slum. There were slum landlords who had slum housing and inadequate housing—atrocious housing—but that wasn't the entire neighborhood.

And so I think our story should not be told as though we were victims. Our story needs to be told as though we were victors, because we were. We were victorious in living and surviving and succeeding in spite of all of the outside pressures, oppression that we dealt with. And that part of our story is not always told, so I will not talk about the Gas Plant area unless I'm able to talk

⁴ In 1914, John Evans, a black man, was accused of murdering Edward Sherman, a white man, and lynched by a mob in St. Petersburg.

about the beautiful homes and manicured lawns that may have sat right next door to a wooden house that did not have indoor plumbing. I will not talk about the racism that was a part of my life without talking about the joyful, wonderful childhood that I had. I will not talk about the negatives of that time of my life without talking about the positives, which far outweighed the negatives, or I would not be who I am today.

AJ: And, Gwen, that is so important. That's the type of stories and information that I've been my entire career working in black communities telling.

GR: Yes.

AJ: The book I have out now, *The Other Side of Leisure*, gets right at that. And that's part of the work we are doing here on this project, is to tell the fullness of what you just described.

GR: Yes.

AJ: And it is so important for people to hear it in context, so I definitely agree with you on that approach and that representation, and that is exactly what we are working on to do with this project with these communities that we're talking about.

GR: Yes. Thank you. Thank you, because it is. It is. Yes, it is. We had wonderful Campbell Park. The negro baseball league played there—the Clowns. I can't remember all the teams. Gibbs High School played football there. The community May Day programs were held there every year. I think—was it Ray Charles or Louis Armstrong? I'm not going to remember—held an outdoor concert at Campbell Park because there wasn't a venue large enough to hold the number of people. You know, we—Goldie Thompson, who was a minister and also a gospel singer and managed a lot of gospel groups, would have concerts at 16t Street Junior High School in the auditorium with famous gospel groups coming from all over the country. We had Geech's Bar-B-Q. We had—excuse me—we had just so much that was so good about the community.

And I'm going to end by saying—and Julie may have heard me. I don't know. But I usually say this in my tours or when I talk about the history of my community. And it's an anonymous quote, and it says, "Civil rights: We got what we wanted, but we lost what we had." And I'm not going to say we want to go back to that era. We do not. But we did lose so very much because it separated us. It tore up our communities. And so we got what we wanted, the right to eat places—maybe not always treated respectfully, even to this day—but we lost a lot. And I regret what we lost. I love the progress we are making and still struggling to make, but we lost a lot, and I regret some of that. And I wish we could have held onto that as we moved forward. So that's my last word.

JA: Well, you know, that's very well said. It's very well said, and I really appreciate the work that—you know, longstanding work that I know that you have put into, you know, making these stories come alive and this history come alive and to really understand the broader context. And it's just so valuable and important, and we just want to celebrate that. And again, thank you for talking to us and helping us with this project.

GR: My pleasure.

End of interview.