

NOTICE

Materials in our digital Oral History collections are the products of research projects by several individuals. USF Libraries assume no responsibility for the views expressed by interviewers or interviewees. Some interviews include material that may be viewed as offensive or objectionable. Parents of minors are encouraged to supervise use of USF Libraries Oral Histories and Digital Collections. Additional oral histories may be available in Special Collections for use in the reading room. See individual collection descriptions for more information.

This oral history is provided for research and education within the bounds of U.S. Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S.C.). Copyright over Oral Histories hosted by the USF Libraries rests with the interviewee unless transferred to the interviewer in the course of the project. Interviewee views and information may also be protected by privacy and publicity laws. All patrons making use of it and other library content are individually accountable for their responsible and legal use of copyrighted material.

Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: A31-00091
Interviewee: Darlene Harris (DH)
Interviewer: Sherri M. Anderson (SA)
Interview date: November 9, 2005
Interview location: Tampa, Florida
Transcribed by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Transcription date: March 2, 2011 to March 15, 2011
Audit Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Audit Edit date: March 21, 2011 to March 22, 2011
Final Edit by: Dorian L. Thomas
Final Edit date: April 18, 2011 to April 20, 2011

Sherri M. Anderson: This is Sherri Anderson speaking. Today is November 9, 2005, and I'm about to go and interview Ms. Darlene Harris, principal librarian of the Urban Libraries here in Tampa. The interview will be taking place at the Robert Saunders Public Library on Nebraska Avenue.

Pause in recording

SA: Okay, Darlene, let's try this again. Thanks for meeting with me today. Let's start off the interview by telling us your name, where you were born, and when you were born.

Darlene Harris: Greetings. My name is Darlene Harris. I was born in Tampa, Florida, January 23, 1960. My parents migrated here from Georgia in 1959. I was the first child of five to be born in Florida; everyone else was born in Georgia.

SA: Yes, and why did your parents come here from Georgia?

DH: To provide us with a better life. My parents were sharecroppers in Georgia. They owned a small farm and a little store in Georgia, and my mom and dad both were not high school graduates, no formal education. My dad had a seventh grade education, and my mom a fifth grade education. And they just wanted to provide a better life for us, and make sure we get an education and go off to college and had a good life.

SA: Right. So, when you moved here, did you move to West Tampa?

DH: Yes.

SA: Where did you move in West Tampa?

DH: On Main Street. Like I said, they moved here in 1959, and they moved on Walnut Street. And that's where I was born. I was born in Clara Frye Hospital; at the time, that was the only black hospital here in Tampa, and I was born in Clara Frye in sixty [1960]. I was raised on Walnut Street in West Tampa, the heart of West Tampa, until about—I would say about twelve, thirteen; then we moved on Howard Avenue, which is right around the corner from Walnut, Walnut and Howard, and stayed there until I got to high school, when we moved to the Hyde Park area. I was about sixteen, seventeen years old.

SA: So what was it like as a child then, and an early adolescent, growing up in West Tampa? What was it like for you?

DH: It was a good life. When you're comparing life situations then to now, I can truly say I had a good life. It was a good upbringing. A lot of people tend to disagree because it's such a materialistic world now, but we had more sense of a family there. We had a great appreciation for the smaller things in life. I can remember growing up in a neighborhood that owned the African proverb "It takes a village." It really took a neighborhood to raise children during that time. It was okay for Miss Shug or Miss Inez to discipline us when we were in the street doing something. It was, "I'm gonna tell your mama what you're doing." They called you and you got disciplined by them: you got a whooping from them, they called your mom and you got one from her, then when your dad got home you got another. But it made us—I can say, for me, it made me a better person.

We just had a good life. Crime existed, but it wasn't like it is now. We could actually leave our doors unlocked, our bicycles outside, our skates outside, and not have to worry about someone stealing them or breaking into your homes. Things weren't as plentiful as they are now, and that goes with the time. But we had a real good life, and my parents instilled in us a sense of pride and integrity, and those things are just absent now; you don't see it. So, I just think—I can say I had a good life, I had a good upbringing, and West Tampa was a good place. I think my dad did a good job in choosing for us to live in West Tampa, because it was a melting pot. We had all races there, you know: Hispanics, we had the Italians and Cubans and African Americans, and we worked together. We lived harmoniously together. Of course there were the divisions, but it wasn't so prevalent as it is now. It was good.

SA: So when you were a child, do you remember in your own grocery stores and your pharmacies, do you remember seeing people of other races or other backgrounds?

DH: Oh, yes, yes. I most certainly did, and we had the neighborhood stores growing up. We had the stores that were—because it was hard times, too; they weren't colluding or anything. It was good, but it was hard times and we worked together. We had Charlie, who owned the corner store or the neighborhood store, and he would extend credit to working families there, so that was kind of a tradition; we grew up with that. People had their names on the list and you could go get things, and they knew the family. These were—it was an Italian family that migrated here, and they owned the neighborhood store. It was a melting pot. It was predominantly African American and Cubans there. We didn't break in that store, we didn't steal from them, 'cause it was just known, you know, these people—we're all here together.

And the drugstore, I remember the drugstore. You didn't have money—the drugstore was on Howard, and they made a lot of the medicines and stuff in the back, and they would give you—the pharmacist would know and give you the medicine again, on credit, and it was just a given that when you got paid you came and you paid your bills. And in that, we learned the sense of word, giving your word. Those things—you see that. And the sundry store, and I remember Alessi Bakery. We used to get the free donuts and the cookies, and we'd smell them when they were baking, and we would come and the neighborhood kids could go in there and they would give them to you. It was good times, it was good times.

SA: What was the name of Charlie's store? Do you remember?

DH: Charlie's. We just called it Mr. Charlie's store.

SA: Where was that located?

DH: On Howard and Walnut, right there in that area. Then we had, like, a little games—a pool hall, Mr. Henry's place, and that was where they had—what was that? Not the—the jukebox. And we could go in there; they had, like, sandwiches, and that was kind of the first fast food place in the neighborhood. It was owned by a black guy, Mr. Henry, and we would go in there and they had the pool table and the jukebox, and you could get a ham and cheese sandwich, fairly inexpensive, but it was a place where the kids and people hung out. You know, we put money and we dance the day away, and we have old people out there playing dominoes or sitting there, and it was good. You know, it was good when kids and adults mixed and nobody was messing with the kids and stuff.

SA: That was on the weekends?

DH: It was usually on the weekends, but it was open during the day. It was like in the evening, though. We were not allowed to go during the weekdays because we had school, and come home and do our chores and stuff. And we would occasionally, being kids, sneak around the corner and see what was going on. But that was just a hangout for us—definitely on the weekends—for the kids. You had some kids that—parents didn't much care about where they were, and those were where the other neighborhood mothers came in and took care of those kids. They would hang out there all the time. But it was safe. You could walk, you know, to those places in the evening and night and not fear anything's happening to you. And we had the gas station, Red's Filling Station, and there again, if you didn't have the money or the means—that's when bread was like twenty-nine cents a loaf, so you're talking a long time ago. Everybody looked out for everybody.

SA: What school did you go to?

DH: I went to Dunbar [Elementary School].

SA: You went to Dunbar. On Union?

DH: Yes, yes. Union and Rome Street.

SA: Tell me how long you went to Dunbar and what you remember about that—your teachers.

DH: I went to Dunbar, and before then—back up—I went to Roosevelt (inaudible), which is Head Start, which is still in existence right now. It's on Fremont [Avenue] and Union. I went there, and that was the same place as you would go get your shots and vaccinations. I went to Head Start there, and from there I went to Dunbar, and I went to Dunbar until the third grade. But what I remember most about Dunbar was the lunchroom and the food, the smell of the food. The big thing was—everything went on in the lunchroom. We had our plays, and I was very active in school plays and productions. Everything took place in the lunchroom. You had the parents' conferences in the lunchroom. When there was a school assembly, it was in the lunchroom. You ate in the lunchroom. And there was a big thing going on with the classes: you met in the lunchroom. So, that stood out; you know, that stands out a lot for me, that lunchroom.

SA: It's very community-oriented.

DH: Yeah, it was very community-oriented. Like now, you have a lot of meeting rooms and things, but everything took place there. When there was a meeting, something was going on in the school, they sent out notices it was going to be at Dunbar in the cafeteria. They didn't say lunchroom; they call it the cafeteria now, but we always said the lunchroom.

SA: You personalized it—

DH: Yes, yes.

SA: —like there's a distance now.

DH: Yes. Yeah. But that was the place. It was kind of like—and I remember that. I remember the Christmas productions. I'm just sitting here thinking, "Yeah!"

SA: And how—so, who was your favorite teacher?

DH: Miss Hilliard. As a matter of fact, I still see her now. She's in the community; she's retired, but she does a lot in the community I'm involved in. But I remember Miss Hilliard, and then my principal was Miss Rita, Dora Rita, who we named a library after. Those two—I can remember Miss Hilliard. She was a tall lady, she was very attractive, and she wasn't as mean as the other teachers. We had some of the other teachers—I can remember Miss Monroe—they didn't have that softer side to them. But Miss Hilliard would always take time to—I had a lot of energy as a child. I didn't get in trouble, but I just had a lot of energy, and she recognized that and she channeled it. I would always end up—'cause I'd do my work and finish, I became her helper, and I would do stuff and then she said, "You know, you did good," and I became an office assistant in Dunbar.

So, at an early age, you know, you're thinking—I can remember my last year was the third grade there. But I would run stuff up to the office if stuff needed to be done. You know, I was that person. She just was always encouraging, and when I would do my work, she said, "Oh, you can do a little bit better than that. That's good, but why don't we try this?" And she always encouraged me, and I think that sense of just—I learned that, and with my home life, to just be the best. Do the best you can do, always give 110 percent. But I can remember her, and when I see her we just always smile, and she

always tells me, “I knew you were gonna amount to something good, do something good and help people.”

SA: Did Miss Hilliard live in West Tampa? Was she African American?

DH: She was African American. She lived in West Tampa. She went to Blake, and that was at Blake Middleton, and actually she knew my oldest brother. So yeah, it was that kind of sense. They went off to college, came back home, and got a teaching job.

SA: And came back to the community.

DH: Yeah. Yeah. And she was just—she was really instrumental. I can still remember her doing a lot, and she was very active with the kids. When we had, like, a production, she was always the one doing the productions and stuff. Yeah, I remember her—and Miss Rita always pulling people by the ear, 'cause I got pulled a couple of times, 'cause, like I say, I had a lot of energy. She was good. Miss Rita, Dora Rita, was always scary.

SA: What's her name?

DH: Dora Rita.

SA: Dora Rita?

DH: Mm-hm. Yeah. She was tough.

SA: So were most of your teachers, then, African American?

DH: Yes.

SA: And many of them from the community—

DH: Yes.

SA: —if not all?

DH: Or either Carver City/Lincoln Gardens. We had some teachers from there. I want to say (inaudible). But from that area, yeah.

SA: And so you had—

DH: It was a big thing for them to go off to college and become a teacher or nurse, but it was more—you found teachers, black teachers, there. And there was the sense they really loved what they did, and they were dedicated to the profession. And I'm not saying that's the case now, but you don't see that; it's a change. The generation now is more like the "me." You know, I'm in at three o'clock, two forty-five, I'm finishing, I'm getting paid a decent salary, and their heart isn't in it. These teachers then, they were dedicated. Their hearts were really in to making a difference. You could talk to anyone in my generation now, and there's someone that was instrumental, and they can tell you about their teachers that really—"You know, I remember her, and I remember that, and they care. Remember?" She didn't play the radio, as we would say, but now it's like, "Who cares?" It's a difference, it's a difference.

SA: And you had role models from within the community, you know, that you could look up to.

DH: Yeah, and I would think that—my family, I can't tell enough. A lot of it came from, like, the church, but my family, my own individual family. My dad and my mom made sure. I'm the youngest of five kids, so I would say my family was my role model, because they were the first and foremost. So I didn't have to get a lot of things from other places, but it just accentuated what the core—my dad already put a foundation there, and it was built upon. But I was a daddy's girl, and my dad had me thinking—my nickname was "Starlene"—that I could just take on the world. And I really believed that, and I think that was—I know that was the reason why I'm here now and doing the things that I'm doing, and just the tenacity and the perseverance. That's what was instilled at an early age, the value of personal integrity. So, you know, it was there. My mom and my dad, they didn't know. They knew what they had gone through and they made sure. All of us, all my siblings, are college graduates; some of us have graduate degrees. But yeah, that was non-negotiable. "You're gonna finish high school and do well, and you're going off to college." There was not debate, no kinda sorta. It was known.

SA: So what role, then, did the church play in your upbringing? What church did your family go to, and what did that mean to you? What does it mean today?

DH: We went to Mount Tabor Missionary Baptist Church. It was right there on Albany and Walnut—I'm telling you, everything was in the neighborhood. You know, you walked and everything was there. It was very key, because our faith was instilled at an early age 'cause our parents—that's just our culture, and it goes way back. Just coming from my mom making sure, going to church, and we'd go to church and we'd pray and we'd know, we recognized our savior Lord Jesus Christ early on as a child. I was baptized early on, as a child. And it became a part of your life; it was interwoven. You get up and you go to school, you go to church—that was another non-negotiable. You will go to church.

And going there, you had the mothers of the church and the deacons, and they just continued, so when you left home it was just a continuum of this is proper, this is acceptable, this is not acceptable, and it was okay for people, other people than your parents, to discipline your children. And you would just pray and hope that they didn't have to, because if, you know, your mom or dad got word that you was cutting up, acting up, that was double, triple trouble, 'cause you had to get it from them, then your mom, then your dad. And that in itself was kind of a deterrent to keep you from doing bad, and we just learned things and we modeled the goodness that people showed, you know, helping care for others than just themselves. You seen that, and they was involved in going out and doing things for other people, and just coming together when there was a need. So, it becomes a part of your way of life, you know, you just do it. It's kind of like tradition played a big part in my upbringing, I can tell you that.

SA: Do you still go to church?

DH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SA: What kind? Are you—

DH: Baptist. The same, Baptist, but a different congregation. If it wasn't for the Lord, I wouldn't be here. I know it's his grace, I recognized that a long time ago. I tell you, raise up a child in this way, and when they get older they won't depart. And during those wayward years—you know, those teen years when you're thinking you've got this all figured out and you know—I strayed, but then I had to come back 'cause I know what helped me then. I knew, you know. I know what was right, and I know right from wrong. So, it's very important. And the same thing, and it's so funny, that we learned, I instill them in my son, and I find myself more and more, “Ooh, I sound like my mama.” You know? And this preaching the gospel, and then my son says, “Mom, you sound like Grandma.” But I'm thinking that's not a bad thing, 'cause it worked for me, you know.

So, yeah, that was—and in the community, you had people doing good things in the community. Yeah. And I think during the times that the civil rights—you know, in the sixties [1960s] and all that—it was more of a cohesiveness, sincere cohesiveness, then [as] opposed to now. I'm not saying it's not present, but I tend to question the sincerity and, really, why you're doing what you're doing. Is it the "me" factor or is it the "we" factor? But then, without a doubt, it was definitely "we," and it's "us."

SA: Absolutely. And we'll return to talking a little bit about community activism; for example, Mrs. Ruth McNair, she's with the West Riverfront—the neighborhood crime watch association.¹ And I also wanted to talk to you about the Friends of the Urban Libraries group. But before we get to that, I want to know how did you become a librarian? How did you become involved in this line of—field?

DH: This profession?

SA: Yeah.

DH: I tell people when I go out and I talk to students about, like, me, a librarian? It wasn't something like—you talk to people now, and they know, "Okay, this is what I want to be when I grow up." That wasn't my course of action how I ended up here. And before I say that, I just think that everything that happens is predestined. The Lord already has your—everything is already ordered if you just follow the steps, and I didn't happen to end up here just—this is what my purpose is, you know, this is truly my purpose.

So, in saying that, I always—when I grew up, I always wanted to be a social worker. I knew I was going to do it, because I was always helping people in the community, and that was an extension of what I had seen going to church and school; like I told you, just helping the teacher. "That's what I want to do." And it was never, like, "I want to be a teacher." No, I want to help a whole lot of people, not just kids but everybody in the whole wide world, including animals. The name—my family gave me the name Elly May Clampett. They used to call me Elly May, because I was always in the neighborhood and I had everybody's children, always had people's children. I'd round up children and I would braid hair and do the odds and ends for people, and I had animals, too. I had dog and cats, just strays, just bring everything to my house. That was just me. They would say, "You always bringing strays," just everybody, and that was just me. Whatever I had, I really thought as a child, I was always sharing and giving, you know. When I got older

¹Ruth McNair was also interviewed for the Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project. The DOI for her interview is A31-00092.

and realized—you know, we're talking about professions and stuff—social worker!
That's what I thought.

SA: Me, too. I have a degree in social work, but I wasn't—it wasn't quite it.

DH: The same thing. So, I went to school, you know, you do the whole nine yards, and making all the preparations, taking everything, got into USF. A year before—in my last year, actually—I interned at Tampa Housing Authority, Section 8.

SA: Yeah.

DH: Yeah.

SA: That—the politics involved in that.

DH: Yeah, and I was there during the Alton White era.

SA: Okay. Tell me about that.

DH: Alton White used to be the director of the Housing Authority, and there's a whole dark cloud on all that stuff, with the scandal (inaudible). But I was there during that era. And I was going to change the world, 'cause I took all these classes in social work foundations—

SA: Oh, right.

DH: —and I'm doing all this stuff. My minor, though, was gerontology, so I did work at —did like a semester at John Knox Village. That was going to be the whole nine yards.

SA: The Presbyterian village that's by USF.

DH: Yeah. And realized that I was young and naïve—and you know the theory, of course; you've taken Foundations of Social Work and how you're supposed to—

SA: Some of us kind of come from different approaches to it, but mine was kind of social change, social activism, more than just working within, you know, the liberal paradigms.

DH: Yeah. That was me.

SA: Yeah. That's a more left-wing approach, which I appreciate, grass roots.

DH: I was gonna change the world.

SA: Right? But were they ready for you?

DH: No. I wasn't ready for it, 'cause I was naïve and I didn't know all that, so I'm applying everything I learned and thought it was just that simple, and what you said, the politics, hit me dead square and were just all up in here. I realized after working there four months that I can't do this for the rest of my life. I got my first evaluation, and I thought I was doing a great job 'cause all these people was coming in and meeting me, and it was like three generations in a two-bedroom house.

What we were doing is issuing vouchers, so I'm signing these people up and, in the meantime, when they're waiting, I would buy—take my own money, buy stuff, and take it over on the weekend after work, you know, and just get all caught up. And I'm thinking I'm doing a great service, you know, I'm helping these people 'cause they're coming back telling me this stuff. And I'm trying to get people placed in the vouchers, and what I did was upstage the workers that were in there, that had been in there for a while. And I wasn't doing it intentionally.

So, to make a long story—I didn't know the protocol, I didn't know the politics, and then my supervisor, who was a part of that, [said] “Just show up,” that kind of thing. You just don't really work. And the vouchers were being saved for relatives or friends. I didn't know that's how—and of course, now I know. But you're twenty-one, you don't know that stuff. And I got the worst evaluation ever. I thought I was gonna—I was standing there. It was just terrible, saying that I was too caught up in my case to be objective. I had gotten too personally involved in my cases. And I was just, like, downtrodden.

And the library at the time was under the City of Tampa, the same thing. So I interviewed and interviewed, and they were just—I just wanted to get out, so I actually—it was all the City of Tampa, literally like a transfer. They hired me 'cause it was under the same. So I

started with the library and thought, “Okay.” I was a library assistant trainee. They had a trainee program. Didn’t have no idea. I always loved to read, avid reader, because that was instilled in us early on by my oldest brother; we would have to read to him every day. So I knew this was gonna be good, and really enjoyed it that year of rotation, doing it. I said, “I think I like this.”

So I continued to work, finished my—went back, finished my undergraduate degree, and then said, “You know, I think I can do as well”—I was gonna get my master’s in social work, so I thought maybe if I go up. And I applied to the master’s program—

SA: And where was this again?

DH: At USF.

SA: Oh, at USF.

DH: All of it, yeah. Marcee Challener, who’s the assistant director now, was so instrumental in (inaudible) right now. I tell people she was truly my mentor. She was always encouraging me, because she’s seeing something in me. She just, you know—

SA: Is that here, or—

DH: Here.

SA: Okay, here at the library.

DH: Yeah, in the library system. And after the trainee program, you know, you go, and I got promoted to the second level and I even went to the supervisor [level] within, like, two years, and it just doesn’t happen. To “2,” but the “3” was a senior library assistant, and it was at a branch. I thought, “You know, I’d like to do that.” And people’d tease me and some of the people had training, and they said you need a certain number of experience, yadda yadda.

Well, anyway, I applied. I was the least qualified, and I was hired because she advocated; she said she’d seen something in me. And when I got there, she encouraged me. “You might want to go to library school and, you know, become a librarian.” And I’d never

thought of it. “Eh.” Brush off a few more years—about a year, and then after that I thought, you know, situation’s happening with my son, and I thought, “Okay, I’m gonna pursue it.” So the director of our library, Marcee, along with the director of the library school, Dr. [Kathleen de la Peña] McCook, took me to lunch, because I was getting ready to go into graduate school but I was going to go into the MSW program. And my brother was like, “You have to be joking.” He said, “They’re going to pay for it and do all this for it.” I said, “Okay, well—”

So, long story short, that’s what I ended up doing. Went through the program, loved it, but the whole time I was working here, you know, enjoying what I was doing and realized I can’t be a librarian, I need that master’s degree.

SA: So, what schooling did you go through for your graduate?

DH: USF.

SA: But for what program?

DH: The library—

SA: Okay, so you never did go to the social work program.

DH: No.

SA: You went to lunch and they said, “This is—we’re gonna—”

DH: Yes. They sold me.

SA: Did they pay for your education, the library system?

DH: Yeah. Yeah.

SA: Okay, so you did your graduate degree in library sciences at USF, and then?

DH: I got promoted. I graduated in August, I got promoted before October. Went from a paraprofessional to a professional, salary doubled, and then within the next year they came back and offered me a branch supervisor. Two weeks later, they offered me the position, a promotion, to a “2.” Then, two weeks later, they offered me the promotion to branch supervisor. So, what happened to me doesn’t usually happen. You know, I was really fast tracked. They promoted me on “1” after I graduated, as soon as I graduated; they said, “You get the degree, we’ll promote you,” and they did. A year later, after working as a “1,” they came back and I applied for—they had them on there and you had to be there at least two years to do it, and I’m like, “I been doing this, and when I went for it, they offered me the job.” Then two weeks later, they said, “How would you like to be branch supervisor?” That doesn’t happen. It takes you usually about five years plus to become a branch supervisor. I did it within a two-year timeframe. So I got two promotions within a two-week timeframe.

SA: And what year was this?

DH: Ninety—ninety-six [1996]. Ninety-six [1996], yeah.

SA: So what do you think—what is it about you that got you this? Like, what do you think is, you know, about you?

DH: Because it’s my passion! When you’re passionate about something—

SA: It shines through.

DH: And I think just generally inside me, I’m a social worker by nature. And it allowed me to—God’s grace allowed me to use my gifts and talent. So after I became that and I’m doing all these things, seeing all this—I could change, I could effect change here.

SA: You could effect change here?

DH: Yes, and I did through my programming. I became the program guru at College Hill. It wasn’t the Urban Libraries; it was just only at College Hill.

SA: So when you started you were at College Hill, in ninety-six [1996], and you knew that you could effect change in that community.

DH: Right. Yes, yes.

SA: That's huge.

DH: And I started doing programs, all different kinds: nontraditional library stuff.

SA: Because you're coming from—this is culturally sensitive. You were African American, you grew up in the city, you know what people need, and one way to work with families is to go through children. Once you reach a family's children, then the parents are going to come in with them, and you can slowly start to effect change on that level.

DH: Yes, from that level. And it was just like, here's an opportunity, and the more I branched out and I seen the need, I thought, "How can I use what I'm doing?" 'Cause I was passionate about, you know, this stuff—and not only that, I became the recruiter for the library school like in ninety-eight [1998].

SA: Okay.

DH: Graduate school. I was on the panel trying to recruit minorities, particularly African Americans. So I said, "Okay, how can I use this?" I'm always thinking to benefit the people, the underserved populations. I've always been dedicated to the less fortunate. That's just—I think—I know that's my purpose, to help those that are less fortunate, and I've always served as an advocate, even before I came in this profession. One, because of my son's disability and his special needs, and it just grew out of that and my association with the community. I wanted to advocate for this community and that. And I felt, "How can I use my job? How can I benefit here? What can we do?" And it was like out of the box, and my director literally referred to me as his out-of-the-box librarian. I wasn't afraid to take on and try new things, even though they hadn't been done. I was not afraid to try stuff.

From that, he came up with the idea, 'cause I had done so well where the staff had been low, nobody (inaudible)—I'm talking about College Hill. I put it, and I said we, the staff that was there, really made them stop and take notice of College Hill because of what was happening there, that branch, and in the community. So, I connected to that community, and that was the first time a library was really, really connected to the community. My motto that I stand on is "A library is the nucleus of the community." We're an information

resource, and I was coming out of library school during that era where technology was just coming out. We need to be on the ground floor. We are the people that are responsible for it. We're keepers of knowledge, disseminators of information.

SA: Right, exactly.

DH: So, how better can I do this than in the community that I'm familiar with, the people that I represent?

SA: Absolutely.

DH: So there were so many opportunities, and then we did a satellite with the housing projects from the College Hill Library. We did a satellite branch, and then my director called. "You know, just, like, do something." So he came up with the idea of connecting the Urban Libraries together and having them fall under one umbrella, and I was like, "That's my job." I claimed it before they even advertised it. Of course they advertised it and interviewed, and I was like, "That's what I want. That's my job," and I claimed it in its infancy, before he really had it all out. It was like two years prior. I claimed it, when it was first announced. I said, "That's what I want to do."

SA: What year was that?

DH: Ninety-eight [1998].

SA: That was in ninety-eight [1998]? Almost eight years ago.

DH: Yeah. I was promoted. The job came out in 2000 and I was offered the job.

SA: That's incredible.

DH: Yeah, I claimed it. "That's what I want to do, that's it."

SA: So, we're at the Robert Saunders Library, and if we situate ourselves—we know that there's more development coming through. And so, the library is going to continue to grow here, you're going to continue to expand, but a lot of the people who you serve, do

they come from Central Park Village or do some of them—so some of the people are coming from Central Park Village, but the housing project is torn down. Then how do you stay connected with—you know what I mean?—with the—'cause the community's gonna shift.

DH: Right.

SA: Like, the demographics of the community are going to shift.

DH: What you do—and it happened in College Hill. We had that happen.

SA: Right.

DH: Remember they did the Belmont Heights? Before, it was Ponce de Leon College Hill Housing Project.

SA: Exactly.

DH: You have to become kind of involved, proactive, and find out. You have to stay connected. And in standing by that, what I mean is as it's changing, you find out where they're going, where they're going to be, and place yourself strategically so there'll still be services available to them, even if it's like an extension where you do outreach and find out who's in that community. Let them know you don't have to stop coming and finding out. You connect. You still do things and you find out: okay, this is what's going on there, so there's a need. You have a new crew coming in, so now you're still connected with that. You may lose—you're gonna lose a good percentage, but here's an opportunity for you to come in on the new group that's coming in, the change. And you position yourself—there again, I got me a place at the table. During the planning and implementation stages, we were there. We went there.

SA: Really? With the Central Park group—oh, you mean for Belmont Heights?

DH: Yeah, Belmont Heights.

SA: Or Central?

DH: Oh, and the same thing here.

SA: Here as well, for Central Avenue?

DH: It was the same thing. You get on the list, so when you're having these planning meetings, I want to go to them.

SA: For the Central Park group?

DH: Oh, yeah.

SA: I'll have to find out more about that later.

DH: Yeah, you do that, and you let them know. Okay, what can we do? What can we do as a library? They had their townhouse—town hall meetings here. We held two of them.

SA: Okay, great.

DH: You see what I'm saying?

SA: Ruth was talking about that.

DH: Yeah, yeah. You have to let them know. We're the library and we're here to help, whatever we can do and whatever. So you can't step back because it's changing. You got to move with the change. When the (inaudible) change, move with the change. And still, you stay connected through different channels. Those people are going; okay, they're gonna be out here; this is what's available here. And you do outreach in those communities. Sometimes you have to go out of your zone. You want to provide the service, that's what we're here for. And in the Urban Libraries, we do nontraditional as well as traditional library services. We do a lot of things in the Urban Libraries that aren't done in any of our other libraries, and that's fine because that's the whole—that's part of the whole community outreach. Partnership building is a big thing, a huge thing; in order to provide that, you need to be in the know. You need to stay involved.

SA: So, give me an example of the outreach that you do. How do you stay in the know?

DH: Like the East Tampa, the Front Porch Initiative. You go to wherever the meetings are, and you become a part of the board of the committees. So in the planning stages, this is what we're planning, these are our goals and objectives. How can we help at the library? Okay, we'll provide this component. Okay, you do this and we'll do that. It's like Central Avenue when they wanted to bring it up. We said, "How can we fit in here? We can conduct—we're information and research. We can do the oral histories. How about us doing the oral histories and recording this data so we can have it put somewhere?" So we positioned ourselves at the table, you know. I need a place at your table. I want to be involved.

SA: And what about Central Park Village? Have oral histories been done with the residents there? How is that—

DH: They've been identified. They've been identified. It's like word of mouth. Some people we identified, we did them. Like—what's her name? Essie, the lady that was in Central Park, was very instrumental.² We have her oral history. We did a play with these different people. So you go—you just kind of pretty much have to say, "Hey, I'm here. What can I do for you?" and just find out what's going on. You have to stay in the know. If you're the nucleus—and a lot of times when you're doing nontraditional library services that means they're not coming in here.

SA: Which means you're going out to them.

DH: You got to go; you got to take it to them. And that's what we do. How do we reach them? We did—we made our facilities and or library—Section 8 or Head Start registration at the library. We turned the whole library into a Head Start registration, because we know that these kids need to go to school and transportation was an issue, so we turned the whole library for those—into a site for registration and start registration.

SA: That's great, 'cause it's accessible. You can walk there, you don't need transportation, you can take your stroller, and you can be back home for lunchtime.

DH: Same thing we did with Booker T. Washington. Since we've been here—since I've been here, we did the same thing. We worked with them, where the parents could drop off

²Essie Mae Reed, who was also interviewed for the Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project. The DOI for her interview is A31-00044.

their information and come and we would meet with them and do it. And we became that—I mean, exactly.

SA: So the school here, Booker Washington Middle, is going to keep thriving; the library's going to expand—

DH: We're in partnership with them.

SA: And of course, you know, at the end of the day whenever the housing—the Central Park Village housing project is destroyed, the people are going to be displaced and they won't necessarily be living in the old Central Avenue area. So, I guess, we just hope, then, that they'll still be able to send their kids to Booker Middle.

DH: Whatever it is, we stay connected one way or the other. And like I say, you won't reach all of them, but the percentage, that core, will continue that same depth. Whenever the new group comes in, you have that one plus this other group; some have filtered out or left, but if they get a foundation and they like it, they come back. We have people that moved out and still come here because of the type of programs. It's of interest to them.

SA: And it's the community connection.

DH: Yes, yes. We're the only library that's doing this. I come from—one lady, we got an evaluation. She moved to Spring Hill, but she comes in here once a month because of our book discussion; nobody else is doing this. Or, "I come in because you have that support group. I moved to Plant City, but (inaudible) you're the only branch that's doing"—that's free counseling, therapy, let's talk. It's going on its eighth year. That's a partner with the Center for Women.

We went to them—that's traditionally—Center for Women is in Hyde Park. That's totally—you're crossing the barriers, but these women still need services. The Center for Women has been traditionally for white up-to-do women, but now they're reaching the African American community. Those people, they know something (inaudible), 'cause I connect with the director and the people in the community. We go to meetings: "Hey, what you doing?" Networking. "Give me a call; we probably could do something." And that's how stuff evolves. Partnership and collaboration is the essence of what makes this urban library whole thing work. But you gotta be out there; you gotta give them something that no one else is doing based on needs assessment.

SA: Right, right.

DH: What are the needs? Let's meet the needs, 'cause obviously they're not meeting it. And when we do the urban library, you're becoming a social services agency, but that's our goal and objective. That's our clientele. We can't depend on our statistics, circulation, 'cause it doesn't compare to yours. If everything was based on circ, we would never get any money, you know what I'm saying? So, we have to come with a different approach.

SA: More innovative. How many people in the Central Park Village housing project do you feel use the services here?

DH: Oh, Jesus. I can tell you now, especially with that DCF—

SA: Department of Children and Families. What about them?

DH: We partner with them.

SA: Oh, okay.

DH: You know, we partner, because now everything is done—they fill it out online. So I would say a good 70 to 80 percent, because of the type of services. Mind you now, we do the GED, we do the different computer classes, we do the DCF, they can fill out their public assistance. A good number of people don't have computers in their home. They don't have transportation to go to them. They said, "Go to your library." It's been advertised. When we partner, we say—'cause it was affecting us, so it was like, "How can we best serve the people and still maintain and provide that good customer service?"

So, we met with the director of DCF. I met with her, along with my boss, and we came up with the schedule. So, they're sending their DCF worker at the different sites in the Urban Libraries—West Tampa here, College Hill, and Seminole—one day a week to help us, 'cause it was just so much. And they can explain it and they can apply using our computers. So now, word of mouth—it travels. "You go to the library; they'll help you over there." So when people come, they'll use it. They'll send their kids when kids need help with homework. The parents don't know how to do it. "Go to the library and have them help you." That's just a given. Kids'll come in, "I need some help with my math." We don't turn them away. We say, "Okay, we'll get there."

SA: So it's not just—

DH: It's sort of like, "Go to the corner store. Go to the library." You know, it's the same thing. Somebody's there to help you.

SA: So in 2005, what you had in 1966-1967 at Dunbar School in West Tampa, it's like it's being recreated at the three different urban libraries. You have West Tampa, you've got Robert Saunders Library and College Hill, and so it's like the heartbeat of the community.

DH: That's true.

SA: It's kind of like replaced—not replaced the church, but is for poorer, underserved populations—and here in different African American communities, it's like this is the heartbeat.

DH: This is it, yeah.

SA: This is it. And it has the technology.

DH: Exactly. And it's throughout the community, and within that population, it's known. You know, you can go to the library for this and they're doing these programs and they have this. "Oh, go to the library." So that population, if we were to continue with the traditional library services, we would have never been able to reach them on a large scale. But now, they're our biggest customers because of what we're providing here. And it's, "Oh, girl, go to the library! You know, you can do that in the library. Oh, yeah, so-and-so goes to the library," whereas before, they wouldn't even ever have thought, 'cause the library was check out books and I'm not reading. So, you know, it has changed, the whole outlook on library services, and we've reached the, as they say, unreachables through those programs being innovated and just taking a chance. My thing is that everybody knows I'm passionate about this. This is truly my passion, the community and people and advocacy, and I tell them if they come in here, the kids come in here, you don't talk to them, don't be condescending to the patrons that come in here—

SA: Absolutely.

DH: Don't—my tolerance is just in all my staff, and I've been fortunate enough to have a good team. And I can't do this all by myself.

SA: Exactly.

DH: It's a good team. And I'm fortunate that the library administration, particularly my director, allowed me to build a good team. I said, "This is what I need in order to make this work. I need X, Y, and Z." So they kind of let me just, "Okay, take X, Y, and Z." And I've been fortunate in that sense, to kind of like "Okay, this is what I want to do; what do you think?" and they just kind of, "Okay, go for it." And it works, and I've been fortunate it works, because of favor. I just know God's favor is upon me. Otherwise, you'd be like, "How in the world?"

SA: And that is no easy feat, what you and what the team—what your team—what the teams have been able to accomplish. It's no easy feat, and so I say congratulations on that.

DH: Thank you.

SA: So, tell me a little bit about the Ada T. Payne Friends of the Urban Libraries group: when that started and how that came about.

DH: Okay. About two years ago, the Ada T. Payne Libraries were formed. The reason—to back up, the reason it came up. We had a Friends group at the College Hill Library, and it used to be just College Hill, Friends of the College Hill Library. And now that—when they decided to combine all three together, we had to do one big Friends group over it, encompass all three branches. So that's how the Friends—it was just going to be the Urban Library Friends, and the name came—I'll tell you that later. But it was first started just as Friends of the Urban Library. There was a need for it, because West Tampa had a Friends but it had been inactive; but Ybor, at the time, never had a Friends group. So we disbanded the College Hill Friends and the West Tampa Friends and came up with the Urban Friends group. So we started a new one. Like I say, it's been in existence now a little over two years.

They decided, "Okay, we need a name rather than just the Urban Libraries." Ada T. Payne was the first recorded African American librarian at Central, at the library that used to be on—oh, Tampa Street. I can't think, I just had a mental break. But when the library, the old library, was first downtown, the first library that was downtown, she was the first African American librarian. And her granddaughter and her niece were Friends of the

Urban Libraries. So we put out—we had like four or five names and had the members vote on them, and they came up with the Ada T. Payne Friends, so befitting because she was very active in the libraries. She was instrumental in kids, though she did a lot of things aside from that—teaching was her background, so she did a lot of things. Some of the stuff that we're doing, she did it, way back when. So unanimously they voted to do that, the Ada T. Payne Friends, so that's how they came about.

The group started out—we have—on record, we have well over fifty active members; at one time it was a little higher. But they were very involved and instrumental doing the Central Avenue project thanks to our leader, the president, Fred Hearn, who was key in getting a lot of things happening now with the Urban Libraries came about. But they're the voice here with the Urban Libraries. They support everything. They recommend and it came about—he wanted us to have a library like the one down in Fort Lauderdale [African-American Research Library and Cultural Center], so he went before the board and recommended. This branch hasn't been renovated in X number of years, and thanks to his effort, along with the group following suit under his direction, the library has agreed to fund—of course, you know the expansion here, the new library, so it's been funded. And they're just instrumental in doing so many things. They're in the process now of forming a foundation so they can gather money to extend and do the part two of it. But anything that we say we need, they're on it. They're a very active, very vocal group.

SA: And Mr. Hearn has been—he's the one responsible for raising these funds and for sort of spearheading the group.

DH: Spearheading, yeah.

SA: And the money that you were talking about that he was able to secure was money for the city budget to expand—

DH: The county.

SA: Money from the county to expand the Robert Saunders Library.

DH: Right, and to be a model similar to that one down in Fort Lauderdale.

SA: Right. And currently we have \$7.8 million allocated from the county.

DH: Mm-hm. And that's why they came up with the foundation to do the part two. It hasn't been funded, but we want to try to raise some money so we can go back to the table and say, "Here, this is what we've done for ourselves. Can you match it or give us something?"

SA: Right. And you work—and with Mr. Hearn being the advisor for Tampa's Black History Committee, which is part of the City of Tampa, so you've now linked Tampa's Black History Committee with the Ada T. Payne Friends of the Urban Libraries group. So you're able to—

DH: Yes, we do a lot. Like I say, collaboration and partnership is the key. It has led us to other organizations, like you said, that one and then other people on, and from there we say, "Hey, what about a program? Hey, what about doing this?" So they have been—the Ada T. Payne Friends, with them on board, it's another key vehicle for the Urban Libraries, getting our message across and our services across, doing what we do best and getting the support and that collaboration and community buy-in. They have been, you know, on the forefront, because we have a lot of key people in the community, particularly African American community, that are linked somehow to these various organizations.

SA: Right.

DH: "Okay. Yeah, sure. Sure."

SA: "Sure, I'll be on the board."

DH: Yeah. "I'll do that, I can spearhead it." Yeah, yeah. It works for us, win-win. It's a win-win.

SA: Absolutely. Well, I know that the Friends group is going to be doing—the Friends group and also Tampa's Black History Committee are going to be doing great work, hopefully for years to come, and at the forefront of preserving local African American history in Tampa. Absolutely. And on that note, the final thing that we can talk about, speaking of preserving local African American history, tell me a little bit about—let's go back to West Tampa, and tell me about the work that you did with Voces de West Tampa, Maura Barrios's West Tampa historic preservation initiative.

DH: I was real excited to be a part of that, and it's still going on, because, one, I grew up in West Tampa. And then the second thing, that the library in West Tampa was chosen as one of the partner groups of the grant. That was another thing, because I used to visit. That was my library, West Tampa Library. And now to be—you know, I look back. As a child, I used to play there and go there and read and visit in the schools. To be a part of this project, to actually be in charge of that library, it's such an honor. It's like everything coming about face. You know, I never dreamed that one day I'm gonna be running this library and be doing all this stuff, so it was truly an opportunity, and one that's just kind of been—every time I think about it, it just kind of brings chills to me.

So I was charged with getting oral histories and information from prominent African Americans in the West Tampa area, and talk about the culture and the growing up there in West Tampa. And in doing it, it just brought back so many memories. I remember some of the people that were instrumental in West Tampa, the names, so I got to meet with them and get their stories and how things happened, how businesses that are no longer in existence that were thriving at one time. Got to meet and talk to the descendents, 'cause a lot of the owners have since passed on. It was really good, 'cause I reported on like the printing press, DuPree Printing Press, the restaurants there, and talking about how it used to be.

You know, just going back in time. And people had no idea—people that were from there, but then people that came to witness it that were not fortunate to be there during that time, or if they were, they were transplants coming in and they heard about it. To just relive that was great. So I was responsible to cover that part. And the Roots—I think it's called Roots of West Tampa: African American, and how we joined together. Like I told you, we had the Cubans, Italians. Everyone knew their place, for lack of a better term, but we worked together.

SA: That was the name of the project? The oral history project?

DH: The oral history project. You know, each of us were—each panel was covering a topic, and (inaudible) Roots and Rhythm or Roots of West Tampa, and it was African American Influence.

SA: So was it a community forum, then, that you helped?

DH: Yeah, it was a community forum.

SA: And also oral histories that you had done?

DH: Mm-hm. It was a community forum, and what I was doing was giving a presentation, like a snapshot, of the various people that were instrumental. It was a panel, and my part was to cover that part, the African Americans that were influential during that time. And I gave—like, for example, Clara Frye. I gave some background on Clara Frye Hospital. People that came in were like, “They had—y’all had your own hospital?” And I said yeah, and I gave information on who Clara Frye was—she was a nurse—and how it started in her house. People didn’t know that history. I presented that. And Blake [High School] and Middleton [High School], the ball game and how they used to close down the shops on Friday.

SA: And you’d go to Phillips Field?

DH: Phillips Field. That was a big thing.

SA: Which is not there anymore.

DH: It’s not in existence. Tampa Prep is there.

SA: Mrs. McNair (inaudible). Tampa Prep Academy.

DH: Tampa Prep. That was the highlight of the week. Stores literally—like if you see Friday night, the movies of how they closed the shops and everybody rooted, that was serious. And we had the parade down Main Street. Main Street was the hub. Everything happened on Main Street for African Americans.

SA: So, two more questions. One, how many oral histories were you able to do?

DH: I did—I identified about ten or twelve people, but actually got to interview maybe about six of them, because of the time and just coordinating. But I was able to get a lot of the information. For instance, I did a lot of research, because they put me in place with people to verify. The City of Tampa Black History Advisory Committee—Myron Jackson had done something similar. Fred did a whole spiel. There again, there’s that—I got some information from them, I was able to—

SA: For the Central Avenue Legacies Oral History Project?

DH: No, for West Tampa. They did another series in West Tampa. The City of Tampa Black History—yeah, they did a whole program on that. So I was able to get some of their information and some of the key people, too.

SA: So not the Black History Committee but a black advisory—?

DH: Yeah. The City of Tampa had that, yeah. Yes.

SA: Are we thinking of the Black History Committee? 'Cause the City of Tampa has a Black History Committee.

DH: It's them, but they also have an advisory board.

SA: So they have also done some oral histories in West Tampa.

DH: But it's all under Fred. Yes.

SA: Okay. Well, I'll have to talk to him about that.

DH: See, that's what I'm saying, the linkage, because my connection with him led me right to that and some people. They actually did a book—I wasn't able to do that, but they apparently did a book with some timelines on the different stores, the first store, the shoe shop and all that stuff. So yeah, you might want to get that.

SA: The Legend Shoe Shine Parlor.

DH: Yeah, all that. And the bicycle shop, Crab's Bicycle Shop. But I remember Crab's Bicycle Shop. Everybody in West Tampa, when they had their bicycles—'cause then it was a big thing to have skates and bicycles. We used to go to Crab's Bicycle Shop, and it was right there in West Tampa. And they talked about that on there. So, yeah.

SA: It was Mr. Jim West. I wonder—he is the owner of the Legend Shoe Shine Parlor.

DH: The owner, yeah.

SA: But he said he hasn't—I don't think he's been interviewed.

DH: No. He was hard to get in touch, yeah, 'cause of the time. I think I talked to a daughter here, but it was hard to—he was on my list. I had a whole list.

SA: I know, and it's a very, very time consuming process to do oral histories.

DH: Yeah.

SA: Are there plans to do more historic preservation, like more oral history projects, with African American residents of West Tampa? Do you know of any?

DH: The only project I'm familiar with is the one that Maura's doing. We as the library, we're doing Central Avenue, but it was eluded that at some point we might want to do West Tampa. But since a lot of that is being done by other groups, rather than—so, yeah, I don't think that—we don't have anything in place, other than working with Maura. That's how she came to us and said that she knew we were key people, because we'd done the Central Avenue project and we had collected those oral histories and things, so it would be a good thing. So, I had some experience.

SA: I know that the University of South Florida, their Special Collections center, they're wanting—I think they're hoping for students to be able to do more oral histories with African Americans in West Tampa. So how can we access the information that you did for the community forum, like the oral histories, the six oral histories that you did?

DH: Maura—

SA: Is that through Maura?

DH: Yeah, but I think to get that you would probably have to—'cause it was all recorded, it's all recorded, and everything was submitted to her. Aside from that, I do have, you know, my own (inaudible) and you can get information from me. I'd be more than happy

to share the information that I do have on some of those key people that you might want to contact.

SA: Wonderful.

DH: Yeah, I'd be more than happy to do that. But she would be the person, because I know she covered all—you know, she has someone who represented all of West Tampa. The African American—each area was represented, Cubans and the whole nine yards.

SA: The whole nine yards.

DH: Yeah.

SA: And the Central Avenue Oral Legacies—the Central Avenue oral history project, which was called Central Avenue Legacies, is that available to the public yet? When will that be out? 'Cause I'm looking forward to—

DH: Our goal was—we've done over, I think, like forty-something interviews we've conducted. I think over half of them have already been edited and gone through. Our goal was to have them up and available by now, on the Web site, so we're shooting—on the library's website, 'cause that was our whole goal, to have it archived somewhere and accessible, so people can actually go through there and look at them.³ So, our goal is sometime next year to get back on that. We kind of—it was kind of put on hold because there were so many other things going on at the time. But that's still—we're going to pick that back up. That's on my—that was written in our goals and objectives for 2006, to continue that and finalize that.

But we're constantly getting more and more and more requests to do them. We're still doing them, not on a big scale; like, somebody'll call and say, "You might want to interview this person," and we'll set it up, whereas before we had a whole team that that's what they were doing for that two-month period. But I'll schedule staff to go out and say, "Hey, get this person's interview, because they're saying"—because of age and that, because once they die, a whole library dies with them.

SA: Exactly. That's an old African proverb, I don't know exactly.

³Interviews from the Central Avenue Oral History Project can be accessed online at <http://www.thpl.org/thpl/history/memories/central/>

DH: Yeah. You just—you don't have that recorded, and that was the whole reason why it came about, because our history, Central Avenue, which was a part of African Americans—it was thriving, and it's not recorded anywhere where you can go look up stuff. It's not archived, except for the little pieces here. These are the stories that we've never told. They were not recorded anywhere. You know, it's the stories that were told from generations, and now we actually have them written so that they can go back in history and we can be a part. We were a part of history, but it needs to be on the record.

SA: Right, for generations.

DH: For generations to come. And for people coming to say, "Well, what's this about Central Avenue?" they'll have somewhere to go now and pull it up, 'cause you go to other metropolitan areas and they have their historic district, and you can pull up stuff; they have stuff printed. You know, they have the trail. And Tampa was like one-fourth (inaudible), and we don't have anything: it was destroyed and it's just gone. So, we're trying to salvage that. We're trying to save what's left, those legacies, and record them and have them somewhere for people, 'cause it's a rich, rich history.

SA: Rich histories.

DH: And it needs to be noted, and it needs to be known.

SA: Well, thank you for your time, Darlene.

DH: You're welcome. I've enjoyed it.

SA: Thank you, Darlene Harris.

End of interview