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Ginger Baber: What is today, May the 15th?

Cheryl Rodriguez: Yeah, count from Friday the thirteenth, count forward.

GB: That's what I was doing, yeah.

Essie Mae Reed: Oh, boy— See—all together I had eight children, four boys and four girls. One boy—two boys and one girl—and two girls is dead—I have four children. Let's see, I got two boys livin' and two girls, so I got two boys dead and two girls.

CR: Today what I would—is this on? Okay, today what I would like for us to talk about is some of your recollections of Central Avenue. We're gonna be talkin' to a lot of other people, but if you could talk about some of that today—like first of all, when did you first come to this area?

ER: Well, in 1941 my aunt moved to Sulphur Springs from Savannah, Georgia, so I started—you know, we came to visit her sometimes, and so I guess it was probably was 1943, really, when I actually was old enough to sort of circulate on Central.

CR: Okay, how old were you?

ER: Oh, let's see, I'm two days before sixty-five now, so that's been— (laughs)

CR: All right! So in two more days you're gonna be sixty-five.

ER No, I was just kiddin'. (both laugh) December the sixth I'll be sixty-five.

CR: Oh, okay, December sixth. Okay. I'll have to remember that. So you—1941 was about the time you came.

ER: That's when we came. We moved from Savannah, Georgia to Tampa, Florida.

CR: Oh, okay.

ER: Sulphur Springs. At the time we moved there Sulphur Springs was considered the county, but now it's a part of the city.

CR: Right. So that's when you first started being able to come to Central Avenue.

ER: Yes, that's right. We came to the movie, and to the Odd Fellows Hall, which was on the corner of Scott [Street] and Central.

CR: It's called Odd Fellows Hall?

ER: Well, that's what they called it then, but they call—it was a big building, and different organizations used it. And my aunt—when we came from Georgia, she transferred with the Grand Union Hall there, so we went there to lodge meetings. Folks didn't leave the children at home, they took you with them, so I had to go—my cousin and I had to go where my aunt went, and that's where she went, so that's where we went.

CR: Okay, so that was there on Central.

ER: Yes, it was upstairs right on the corner of Central and Scott, but it was on the left-hand side across the street going north. And underneath it was the barbershop. I forgot the name of the barbershop.

CR: Yeah, I remember you mentioned something like that to me when you called me.

ER: And underneath of that Hall was the—Shelley Green had his restaurant.

CR: Shelley Green, underneath the Odd Fellows Hall?

ER: Yes, and behind the barbershop—see, like the buildings, you know, up the steps was where you went to the lodge meetings, and right before you get to the steps is where he had his restaurant.

CR: It was called Shelley Green's?

ER: Shelley Green's, yes.

CR: Did you ever go—

ER: There to eat? That was the popular spot in town. (laughs)

CR: Did people go out to eat regularly then or was that just the—was that something that people just kind of did as a special treat?

ER: Well, with us, when we came to church and lodge meetings, you know, that's where everybody would go to eat.

CR: Was it big?

ER: Little bit bigger than this room, but you had to wait. That's what made it so interesting and so good. The food was good, and you'd wait 'till you could get a seat. (laughs)

CR: He had a couple of tables?

ER: More than that, about six or seven, and he sold soul food. Certain days they had them good old collard greens and chitlins and stuff like that. (laughs)

CR: So people would wait.

ER: Yes, in line to get in there to eat. And across the street on the corner of Central and Scott was—they called it the Greek Stand.

CR: I've heard about that. What was that like?

ER: I don't know, I never went in there.

CR: You never went in?

ER: No, 'cause I think they sold beer, and so you know them people that make you go in places like that and if you was not eighteen years old you couldn't go no place. Them people checked you to see whether you're eighteen. You couldn't go there and say "I'm eighteen," you had to have proof that you was. It ain't like it is now—the young folks, my grands [grandchildren], they go in the new lounge, Uptown 21, and I know they ain't but sixteen years old. But it wasn't no concern—people cared and was concerned, everybody helped you raise your children.

CR: Exactly.

ER: And that's the way it was.

CR: So, other than Shelley Green's—

ER: Well, on that same corner, right across from Shelley Green on Scott, the entrance, was right—you come right in off of Scott and go into it. They call it the Louis Savoy, and upstairs it was the hotel. I don't know what the name of it but I know the Louis Savoy

was (inaudible). Now when I was grown and was old and had children and moved into Central Park Village, I went to the Louis Savoy because they had Gladys Knight—

CR: You're kidding!

ER: Yes, she performed in there. There was Ike—

CR: Ike Turner?

ER: “Night Train Back to Georgia,”¹ that's where she was singin' that, yes. (laughs)

CR: You're kidding!

ER: Oh, no, I'm not. I think I was fully grown then.

CR: And you saw her there.

ER: Yes.

CR: Oh, wow!

ER: (laughs) Sure did.

CR: Who else did you see?

ER: In the Louis Savoy? I'm tryin' to think of their names, who all was there. Uh—I think they called him Howlin' Wolf.

CR: Oh, Howlin' Wolf, the blues singer²?

ER: Yes.

CR: Yeah, I never heard him (inaudible) Mississippi.

ER: And down the street, down the street before you get to Constant [Street] and Central, well, there, you know, that was the Cotton Club.

CR: The Cotton Club! You heard about that (inaudible)?

ER: We had a bail bondsman tryin' to, after the man just died and I don't know why I can't think of this name. Ah, he was one of the only black bail bondsmen they had there. Further down up in there was the—I think it was called the Palm Dinette.

CR: We only had one black bail?

¹ Interviewee means “Midnight Train to Georgia.”

² A.K.A. Chester Allen Burnett.

ER: Bennie Shuman—there, I got it. Bennie Shuman. I think Ira Blossom was a bail bondsman here, but I forgot where he was located at. But it wasn't on Central, I think it was somewhere else. And ah, across the street from that was, further—let's see, Palm Dinette was down there, and Moses White was had his Cozy Corner, and across the street from Moses White there was another corner called Cozy Corner and El Chico Bar was right on that corner of Constant and Central. And on this side of Central, that'd been on the right-hand side, was Lawrence's Garage, and behind that was the Way Cab Company.

CR: Way Cab?

ER: Yes, Way Cab Company. Did you know that?

GB: No.

ER: Yes, ma'am.

CR: That was off Central around the corner?

ER: It was right on Constant, right behind Lawrence's Garage. It was Way Cab Company, and then I think they converted it into United Cab. I know it was Way Cab Company 'cause my cousin was a driver for it.

CR: Uh huh, on Constant—okay.

ER: Constant sits like this and Central—Constant goes across, or came across Central, and see on that same corner sat El Chico Bar and on this side of it was the Chicken (inaudible), and right up in that little field-like corner was Watts Sanderson.

CR: Oh, okay.

ER: I never was in it, but I know it was there. And down from it was Central Avenue Market.

CR: Central Avenue Market, a grocery store?

ER: Yes.

CR: Uh huh, did you go there?

ER: Yes.

CR: Did most people who lived in this area, did they use that as their grocery store?

ER: They used the supermarket and Joe Polaro, Joe Polaro was on the next corner. Uh, they had—I'm tryin' to think of this other man's name. He had a little place in there; it

was like a little honky-tonk place but it was in there. And before you get to El Chico's there was an ice cream parlor in there—forgot the name of it—and Duke and MacArthur made pictures.

CR: Oh, the photographer.

ER: Yes.

CR: Okay.

ER: And before you got to MacArthur and the pictures it used to be a fish market there, between there and down to where—the Greek Stand was.

CR: So you think this is—basically, you're talkin' about the forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s].

ER: Yes.

CR: Okay.

ER: And on to this same block on Central at Constant was the library.

CR: Okay. They called it Harlem Branch, wasn't it?

ER: Huh?

CR: Did they call it like the Harlem Branch Library, or something?

ER: I forgot the name of it but I think it was East Tampa.

CR: East Tampa?

ER: Up in that same area up in there before between the Greek Stand and before you get to MacArthur, there that is where Kid Mason [Recreation Center] used to be, right up in there.

CR: Oh, okay, so it was in a different location?

ER: Yes, and then they moved it over across the street to another building over there. It wasn't originally there.

CR: Now, let me ask you some things about Central Park Village. When you moved here it was called Central Park Village?

ER: Yes.

CR: Uh huh, and what was it like?

ER: Before it became Central Park Village it was like—they called—it was somethin' like they called it the Scrub or somethin', you know. (inaudible) Harrison and all them little places, and they just pushed all those things—like they take over somethin' like Robles Park, take it over and replace it and buy it.

CR: Right, it wasn't public housing at that time.

ER: No.

CR: Okay. It was just little—

ER: It was just little dirt plots, you know.

CR: Okay.

ER: Like (inaudible) village, until the city or someone, they decide to build it and make it for poor people to have a place to stay.

CR: Yeah, so you remember when you first came here, when you first moved in.

ER: Yes, I moved in 19—um, I think it was 1960.

CR: Nineteen sixty.

ER: Yes.

CR: And you were already grown and had—

ER: I had three children. My daughter—I called her Miss Honey—I had my son, Sarge, and Anthony and Miss Honey. We didn't have but two teenagers and one little girl, then she was about—almost gonna be three that following year, and I moved in here when she was two, two years old, I moved into 1239 Jeob Court.

CR: Your baby was two.

ER: Yes, that's how old she was.

CR: Oh, Sheila [ER's daughter] was two?

ER: Sheila was two.

CR: Sheila was the baby—she was the baby then.

ER: Yes.

CR: Okay, and you had—and your sons?

ER: Clarence and Buck. I had two teenagers and they was almost teenagers when she was born. I don't know who told me to come out of retirement. (laughs)

CR: But you did a fine job.

ER: But I guess I came out of retirement so I could have my kids, you know, 'cause if I didn't have her I wouldn't have anybody to take care of me.

(Phone rings)

CR: What um—my mother tells me about when she and her family moved over to West Tampa, when my mother was a little girl, and they moved to North Boulevard Homes, and she was tellin' me about how happy they were because they were moving to a new place and that it was a very nice place to live. What was it like here?

ER: It was very nice, you know. It was the lead and everybody followed. See, the people don't follow the rules no more, everybody followed the rules. I could not hang my clothes on your clothesline unless you gave me permission. I could not let my children run and tear up your yard, and if I did I was responsible and I had to pay the cost, whatever it was. I could not let my little guys run around and break out your windows. If they saw it—I didn't even have to see it; if someone said "Oh, no, that was Essie Mae Reed's child did that," I had to take care of it. There wasn't "I ain't gonna do this, I ain't gonna do—how you know it was mine? My child says they didn't go along with that." (inaudible). And you know who got them good guys and who's got them little devils.

CR: (laughs) So—

ER: So everybody had a yard and we didn't have nothin' but dirt and it was poor as desert sand but you tried (inaudible) it wasn't nothing but a (inaudible); people had flowers and they tried. And some people had grass who could afford to get fertilizer and plant grass and it would last about as long as (inaudible), but they did it. That was things you did when you cared. And if you had a problem, everybody on my block had a problem, 'cause we did enjoy a club where I lived. We was called, I don't know why they let me name us, but we was called (inaudible) wigglers.

CR: Wigglers?

ER: Yes, the little red worms, the wigglers. We kept—everybody kept it clean, we get out on Saturdays and scrub the sidewalk. We had our sidewalks nice.

CR: Yeah, I remember that, growin' up.

ER: We had everything kept clean, and if you had a lawnmower and I didn't, I could use

the lawnmower; you'd take turns gettin' the lawn mower. You'd come to the office, and with your key you'd get the lawnmower. And if the lawnmower got stolen or misplaced, you were responsible to pay for it. And things was much better.

CR: Uh huh, yeah.

ER: And when I moved in here we had very poor heating; the heat was bad. We had kerosene heaters and pour kerosene in there and (inaudible) a lot of people's stuff got blowed up, you know, and spread that stove dust and stuff. But people, after the riot—the riots in 1967 brought on a lot of changes. We had very bad stoves, refrigerators, everything was just—nothin' was good. You just made the best with what you had.

CR: What do you think were some of the causes of that riot?

ER: I think the oppression that people was under—there was no jobs, no recreation for the teenagers, and just the fact that we was—I would have to say illiterate. We was illiterate to the facts. And everybody thinks that, you know, that when you're poor and live in public housing, you ain't nothin' but trash. And look, like the police officers, when they came in our community, they just jerk all the children up any kind of way. All of that was oppressive and put on a lot of pressure, and who could we go to? Our black leaders could give a damn and care less if you went to 'em, and if you went to them with a problem and some of the people that they got out and campaigned for, wasn't no use to you to even go to ask 'em 'cause they wasn't gonna do nothin'.

See, and when the riot came, there was a young boy that got killed. It was a very—if there'd been someone to motivate him, 'cause he—nobody'd help him. He was a very great skater, he could skate—oh, beautiful, he—the older people would sit down and watch him skate on the playground. We not only paid for his skates (inaudible) that old broke up cement over there, that's where he skated. But he was so good at it. He could play basketball, he could skate and make them hoops on them skates with that basketball.

CR: You're kidding?

ER: Yes. Martin Chambers, that's who I'm talkin' about.

CR: Uh huh, Martin Chambers.

ER: And he was my neighbor's son. And as of today, this woman, 'cause I talks to her periodically—saw her last Thursday, we talked—they have not proven what the young man supposed to have stolen or broke into. He ran all of the time, they say he was fleeing when they shot him down. I went with her to the hospital, and what he had in his pocket, I never will forget it. Two dimes, a nickel, and two pennies.

CR: That was he had in his pocket?

ER: That is what he had in his pocket. So what did he stole? And they was runnin' 'em

when he could have stolen nothin'. But the mere fact that he was—had been, you know, enterin' stuff, breakin' and enterin' and doin' and being black, and runnin'—so what, nobody cared. And nobody cared, nobody cared, and it was very bad, and so through this riot the people broke into stores and they took stuff.

We didn't know, we didn't even do that, none of the children in Central Park Village; they didn't even know it. We saw all the fire, we was out lookin' at the fire burnin'. We didn't have no electricity, so we couldn't look at our radios, and the few of us who had TVs, you couldn't look at the TV, and so we didn't know till daylight that half a (inaudible) had done burned down. The people what knew it on the outside was comin' in, and they were the ones who were stealin' and stuff. We had no electricity.

CR: People not from the neighborhood.

ER: Progress from Progress Village was comin' in here, and comin' in this own Central stealin' tires for cars and canned goods and stuff. And then they issued a—Mayor [Nick] Nuccio was the mayor, and he issued that they look in everybody's house and Central Park Village to see if they had any canned goods or any food from the stores they would go to jail. So there was a lot of oppression, and I just bein' a stupid old girl from the country, I said, "Hey, are we gonna get killed any damn how. We better get organized." So what had to be right was—no, I called down to—I didn't have a phone, I went to a lady who worked for some good white people and her white people had—she had everything in her apartment she needed: washing machine, phone, TV, everything.

CR: Uh huh, the white people that she worked for provided that for her.

ER: They made sure she had everything; she worked for some good ones. She had that before the riots ever came up. So she let me use her phone and then said, "What you do?" and I said, "Well, I will call the mayor." She said, "You gonna call Nick Nuccio?" I said, "Sure will. He born just like me, he can't do nothin' but kill my black (inaudible), 'cause he hasn't dealt with my soul," so I called him. He listened, and I told him, I said, "Mr. Nuccio, Mayor, sir, these women down here with these little bitty children and these babies crying 'cause they can't cook and they can't get no milk for them 'cause (inaudible) no electricity." Within about an hour or so, we had our lights. So then that's when I became like a hero in this community, so every time something went wrong everybody came to 1249 Jeob Court, to me. And I didn't want to be bothered because readin' was my shortcoming. I wouldn't know my name if it was as big as that 'frigerator.

So—but one thing I did learn in Sunday school, I learnt about the Lord. I learnt about God, and I learnt the Twenty-Third Psalm, that the Lord was my shepherd and I ain't had no business of want for nothin' and I was special, 'cause I was a woman. So I said, "Well, I'm gonna try these people, (inaudible) said try 'em all." So I went to various black leaders and talked to 'em and they told me, "Oh, Miss Reed, you don't know what you're doin'; let us do it." I said, "I sure will," 'cause I knew when I got through talkin' to them that I was gonna do it. My mind, I think, was made up when I went to talk to them, 'cause I knew they weren't gonna do nothin' no how, but I wanted to give them the opportunity

to, you know, benefit of the doubt.

CR: Yep. Mostly men, I bet.

ER: It was. So the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] came in with the neighborhood service center, from Ybor City. Chris Baggett and Frank Alfonso, they came, and they had women drivin' around the community, knockin' on doors, trying to get these people. There was some of our neighbors that had—they put 'em through the federal program, and they wouldn't even tell 'em.

So I was mad, 'cause when they was gettin' people I went down to see would they train me. So I had to go to a black lady who told me, in essence, I wasn't about (inaudible), and she said—gave me some blocks to put in the box. So I put the blocks in the box and I thought about it. I said, "Where I work at we don't keep the children. That's for children, I'm not gonna do that." So I took 'em out and I put 'em in that bag, 'cause I could put 'em in there, right? But I was—the devil told me that she wasn't doin' me no—so hell, I wasn't gonna do nothin' here for her. That's what I thought.

So she got her and she looked down and she came in the room where everybody was. Everybody else got a envelope tellin' them what they could go. She come right up and she made the announcement to me. She say, "Mrs. Reed." I said "Yes, ma'am." She say, "I'll be honest with you, you got a good job as a maid, so you better stay there, 'cause it will cost the federal government too much to educate you, to even get you to learn how to read and write your name."

I got up and kicked the desk over. I was so mad, I kicked the desk over and they told me I had to get out. I got out, I went downstairs in the George S. Cohen building, [that] was where the AFDC was, and the employment office. I went down to the bathroom, and I was screamin' and hollerin' and cryin'. And a white lady came in the bathroom and she asked me what was I cryin' for and I told her. She say, "You too pretty a girl, don't be cryin'." Then that made me mad because I was a woman and I didn't want to be a girl, so she told me—she put her arms around me and she cuddled me and she hugged me, and I guess that was something I needed. And she talked to me and she said, "Now what you do, baby, get down on your knees," and I did, and she got down on her knees and she put her arms around me, and she prayed. She was a Jehovah's Witness, she prayed and asked the Lord to bless me and all my overtakins and to help me. So, while she—I sat there, and she say, "Now go back up there and beg her pardon." I went back upstairs and I begged her pardon.

CR: Do you know remember who that was?

ER: Yes, I know the whole name. (laughs) Then I think she done got older and me and her got to be pretty good friends 'cause I was dirty and I struck out against her, and then I found out, I said, "She knew better; she would do better." So I went out and organized me a group of ladies doin' other stuff (inaudible) organized fifty-two, we organized (inaudible). We called ourselves the Welfare Mothers.

CR: The Welfare Mothers, what year was that?

ER: I think that was in either sixty-seven [1967]—it probably was in sixty-nine [1969] and seventy [1970] when this was happening, so—

CR: By that time, was Central still—the riots had happened and Central had pretty much gotten—

ER: It was getting better, but it wasn't rebuilt yet

CR: It hadn't been rebuilt. Had urban renewal come through by then?

ER: I guess they was only waiting for to final—you know, how they go through the transaction of buying and whatnot—so all the leaders came together and they bought it. We—the little people who live in this community went and talked to some of the big leaders such as Moses White, Lee Davis, Perry Harvey Senior—and we talked to them and we asked them would they do something to keep it where we could go to the stores to—

CR: To keep the businesses on that street.

ER: Yes, to try to do something, you know, but they was in for sellin' it, so they sold it and (inaudible) moved to West Tampa and just never— But before they left, they had the neighborhood services going 'round, and they got us organized, and like I said, there was really not nobody would take part, so we organized and they took us to see the [City] Council to complain about the refrigerators, the screens, the stoves, and how the houses was wired up. So I went—we had a lady with us and our president was named Pearl Russell. So we organized—they had the first meeting was held in my house, 1249 Jeob Court, and out of that they organized what they call a Congress of Block Clubs in Central Park. So everybody was different people. I didn't do anything but just come to the meetings, cause I couldn't read and I—you know, and I don't talk no better than I did then, but I use less "damns" now.

(both laugh)

CR: Less damns.

ER: So what we did, we organized and Miss Pearl Russell became our president of the Congress of Block Club.

CR: Is she still around?

ER: No, she died. She lived on Jerico(?). I think her address was 1219 or somethin', somewhere up in there. But anyway, she died. She was workin' on this job for white people, and they fired her because she was doing over the system, doing City Council. I

think Julian Lane was the mayor at that time. I believe he was. Then he lost and then [Dick] Greco came.

But through that transition, I was doing my community stuff. I worked on a job—maid—Monday through Friday, and Saturday and Sunday I went to the tomato field and picked tomatoes. I was skillful at it, I made a good. . .

Side 1 ends; Side 2 begins.

ER: . . .you know, those old people out there had to get up and go stand in a line waitin' for that, so that made me mad. I looked at all them old people, I said, "Them old people done cooked and washed and took care all you people and they got to go through this? Well, hell no, we ain't goin' through this." So I went and stood in line with the peoples to make appointments for them, and to pick up—get their medicine—that's what I started then. Then I started on Mondays takin' off my job, 'cause I believe anything worthwhile you gotta sacrifice. So I took off Mondays, went to work on Saturdays, 'cause I worked for a lazy white lady—didn't make no difference to her—and I took people out of Central Park Village, old ladies.

I didn't have a car, but we'd meet at the bus, and we went. I'd go over to the hospital here, and helped with their appointments, make sure they had their appointments and got 'em right, and so through doin' that I became—I got to be known with other people in other areas that I lived in Central Park and I would do this and my sacrifice. And then one day the teacher out at (inaudible) gave my daughter assignment that she had to go to the library. So I was takin' her and just takin' my three here 'cause I had two grown at that time and then I had three little ones—so I took them and two of my godchildren, took them to the library over there. So I started from that, takin' just all the children that wanted to go to the library, so I took all of 'em, and some of 'em would have a (inaudible) wanted do little different things, so I would bring 'em.

I always had problems gettin' across the street, so one day Mr. Moses White was standin' in front of his Cozy Corner, and he called me. I went to him and he said, "What's the matter?" and I told him I was tryin' to get the children up the street, so he say, "When do you do this?" So I say, "I do this every Wednesday," so he said, "I'll tell you what I'll do, you gonna do it next week?" I say, "Yes, sir." He say, "Well, I'm gonna have a police officer down here to put you and them across the street." So he did, he demanded—he had 'em down there and he put me across the street with my children and we'd go to the library. So I started takin' children to the library.

CR: Now, excuse me a minute. Now, so his business was still there? The Cozy Corner was still there?

ER: Yes, at that time. So then after takin' the kids, you know, to the library, he would always let me bring 'em back and sit 'em back there on his little patio he had, and he would always give 'em sandwiches and juice or whatever he had, so that became a standard. I did that on Wednesday, but on Sundays I had to work because this lady, she

didn't want me to take off Wednesday and I needed my job because I had to pay to stay here. So I did sacrifice, I went on Wednesday. And when I happened to be lookin' on the TV and saw where these people was raisin' hell that (inaudible), so I quoted that to her one day, Ms. Davies, quoted that to her and she say, "Essie, I didn't know you go to church?" She went—

CR: She didn't realize that you go to church.

ER: Uh huh. I say, "Yes, ma'am." She say, "Where your church at?" so I told her, so that Sunday she wanted to bring me home. I let her bring me home and all the people standin' out in front of (inaudible) comin' out of church. I say, "That's my church there," she say, "Is it?" I say, "Yes, ma'am." She say, "What do you do in there?" I say, "I sing in the choir, and I work in the kitchen when we have different stuff." So she say, "The next time you have somethin', I want to know about it." I say, "Yes, ma'am, I sure will."

So we had—the Primitive Baptist congress was meetin' at my church and I told her, and she had an account at Maas Brothers [Department Store], she had me go to Maas Brothers and I got me one of them (inaudible) hats and all that stuff. I didn't know she was gonna come to that church, and I looked out in the audience and she was sittin' in there, her and her husband Mr. Davies and the two children. She came to my church from that day on, so I never had to work on Sundays, and I explained to her what I been doin' on Wednesday, why I wanted Wednesday and the Monday off.

So then she decides she would do good for me, until the day she saw in the newspapers that I had been raisin' holy hell about some problems by us, had newspapers (inaudible) pictures of a young girl sittin' on a heater in a four bedroom apartment, and so you know the heater wasn't hot enough that she would sit on it when it was on, you know it wasn't keepin' hot. So that riled up some of her people, and I went to the Housing Authority board and shut them up. So she tanned me down, she told me that me and the right standards and told me about I had no business doin' that. You know (inaudible).

I told her, I said, "Ms. Davies, you know when I come to work this morning?"

She say, "Well, yes."

I said, "The lady down the street ask me did I want a job, and told me I could come at eight o'clock in the morning and get off at four. She told me she'd pay me \$35 a week and bus fare."

She say, "No, she didn't."

I say, "Yes, ma'am, she did."

She say, "Well, what do you think about it?"

I say, "Well, every day I come to your job I'm always lookin' for somethin' better."

So she said, "Essie, I thought we treat you good."

I said, "Maybe what you think is treatin' me good is not treatin' me good, because you cannot tell me what to say concernin' where I live in my neighborhood. I'm not doin' it in your neighborhood, and I'm not gonna let nobody else tell me what I can't do in my neighborhood."

So she say, "Essie!"

I say "Yes, ma'am."

She say, "You know you're sassin' me?"

I say, "I didn't think so, 'cause I'm just as old as you, I'm just black. You kind of Technicolor."

So she said, "Oh, I'm gonna tell Mr. Davies what you said."

I said, "That would be fine with me, 'cause I could tell Mr. Manny Reed what you say."

So she say, "I thought you wasn't married."

I said, "But I been married, and that's my husband's name. He care just as much for me as Mr. Davies do you." And I was just lyin' when I said that 'cause Manny is gone. (laughs) But she didn't know it!

CR: But she didn't know that.

ER: She didn't know. So what I did was I worked the rest of that week and I worked another week, and I did just like I'd been doin. See, I knew she didn't know how to—she couldn't iron, she didn't know how to do nothin'. She had nothin' to do but go to Plant High School to teach school, that's all she knew.

CR: Oh, she was a teacher.

ER: Mm-hmm. So I say, I know what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna wait 'til (inaudible) in school where she had one of them big things goin' on and she was entertainin' at home and pin it on me to come in and clean and such. I called her and told her I didn't feel like comin' to work that day.

CR: You're kidding!

ER: Yes, I did. She say, "Well, what's the matter, Essie?"

I say, "I just don't feel like comin' to nobody else's house, I wanna stay to mine."

So she say, "Well, how you gonna take care of your children?"

I said, "Black women been sellin' pussy ever since I was born, so I'll sell (inaudible)."

So she say, "No, you wouldn't, Essie!"

I say, "Yes, ma'am, I will." And I didn't go to work none the next week and the next week either, but her children raised so much sand and cried for me to come, 'cause see, I would take 'em different places, so—

CR: How many children did she have?

ER: Three.

CR: And you had to take care of them too?

ER: Yes, and clean the house and cook food, you did everything.

CR: All day long.

ER: Uh huh, and guess what I made?

CR: You said \$35—

ER: No, that's what the lady was gonna give me—

CR: Four dollars a day.

ER: No, ma'am.

CR: Less?

ER: I made \$27.50, \$25.00 and \$2.50 bus fare—oh, yes, ma'am. So in the transition of that I was sittin' home lookin' for a job, Reverend Earl Hartman, who—Greco was the mayor then, so Reverend Hartman and James Hammond came through my community, and so Mr. Hammond told Earl Hartman, "This is Ms. Reed." I talked to him, and what—you know Earl Hartman, and he say, "Ms. Reed?"

I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Do you know where we could find somebody to come and clean our house three days a week and two days in the church?"

I said, "What you gonna pay 'em?"

He said, "Forty dollars a week and bus fare."

I said, "Well, you're lookin' at the person who will be there Monday." (laughs) And I went to work for Earl Hartman, and I worked there seventeen years.

CR: Seventeen years.

ER: Uh huh, and never had a problem. They never had a problem with me and I never had a problem with them, 'cause I knew how to cook and I knew how to wash and I knew how to iron. And when push got to shove and they—cause I wanted to keep my job, 'cause I made good money and people in the church was rich and they gave me a lot of nice (inaudible), help with my church. And if I had any problems, you know, they iron them out for me, and the people in this community that needed I could always go to that church and they would do it, help me, and help me further along (inaudible).

And them times when I wanted to go to Washington, I'd tell Ms. Hartman and the Reverend and they'll say, "Sure, Essie, you can be off." And I'd be off and go and I still got my payment when I got back, my whole pay, and sometimes she would slip me \$50 and he—you know, times when going; they'd say, "Don't let the other one know it." I sure didn't. But they were helpin' me, and she would ask me do I have the right type of clothes, and I'd say "No, ma'am." And she'd take me to Maas Brothers and buy me nice stuff and help me on my way.

CR: That's good.

ER: They helped me. And a lot of black folks used to call up Reverend Hartman—I answered the phone also—they call 'em and they tell 'em that he needed to fire me because I talk about Mayor Greco, and Reverend Hartman told 'em as long as I didn't picket his church or his home he really didn't have anything to do with what I do in my community. And what made me—Mayor Greco was all right until he said—when I was cleaning up in the church—about the white and black goin' to school. He said the little black children didn't know enough to go to school with his children. And I don't think Dickie the third could—I saw his writin' and his stuff in the school. I didn't see he done any better than the rest of them.

But in the meantime, school come through doin' all that. I was prayin' and the Lord laid it on my heart to let somebody teach me how to read and write. I went to the school to try to get into night school, because I'd be raisin' hell on TV and said of mothers and sons, and whores and bitches, and they didn't wanna be bothered with me. Even in my own church they didn't want to be bothered.

CR: They didn't like the language you used.

ER: Uh huh, but I paid tithes and (inaudible). So—well, that was okay because I had to go into my own and learn and knew—know better because I had never been around nobody to actually take pains to teach me. But some old ladies in the community, they would hear me on TV and I'd say "Them motherfuckers," "Them whores," and stuff. So what they did—

CR: You said this on TV?

ER: Yes, ma'am. So what they did—especially if I couldn't get their attention—so what they did was they got together, and they sat me down and they told me what was etiquette, how I should be and how I should act. One lady said she was afraid 'cause I was so violent and vocal on TV and she thought—I never hurt their feelings and always when I went someplace, I always told who taught me how to do.

(Door opens) This is one of my granddaughters.

CR: Hi! How ya doin'?

ER: This is Sheikina [Palmore, her granddaughter].

CR: I'm Cheryl, nice to meet you.

GB: I'm Ginger.

ER: She's not in school today because she goin' to Channel—3, isn't it?

Sheikina Palmore: I don't know.

ER: Channel 3 to do a tapin' for HUD. And one of my grandsons went to Washington at 7:45 this morning to be on this nationwide hook-up with children—see, they (inaudible).

CR: So, I'm sure they wouldn't be doin' all this things if they didn't have a grandmother who had done some of this stuff before them.

ER: They say I'm the meanest old whore in the world. (laughs)

CR: I want to ask you something about Central. I want to hear more about the work that you did. But I wanted to ask you, what did you think about what happened on Central, as far as—just the leveling of Central and the way that it was demolished. What did you think about that?

ER: Well, I was talkin' to you about—there was a time the neighborhood was very upset, but there wasn't nothin' we could do about that 'cause nobody listened. That took away the livelihood for some people. And some people learnt a good lesson, or they no longer could go and get groceries on credit, you know. So that was something that improved our level, 'cause most of the neighborhood stores, they got a book and you never get off the book side.

So the riot was bad in some ways and others it was very good, 'cause if it hadn't a been a riot—I'm sorry the young man got killed—we wouldn't never be able to accomplish in this community what we are accomplishin' through resident management, because we

woulda never been able to get out of the garbage can.

CR: Explain that a little bit.

ER: Because, like most of the blacks who are in positions to help us, keeps in a garbage can. Every now and then if they might let you come out if their son or daughter suddenly is flouncin' around with you daughter or your son. They might let you come out and make the rest of 'em think they're better than you and push you right back. You go to 'em and ask 'em for help, to help you and stuff, they not gonna do it. I know.

Many doors was closed in my face, and I got very bitter and illiterate and ugly. I got so bitter I went to talkin' to some of the leaders about—why is it every time you turn around you don't have nobody black running for various offices, city council. You know what they told me? "The time wasn't right, and don't you—don't worry about that, Ms. Reed, we gonna take care of that." I said okay.

So my son ask me, my baby boy ask me one day—he was lookin' at TV and the buses went on strike. And she said, "Mother—"

I said "Uh huh?"

He said, "You can't do nothin' about them buses goin' on strike?" 'Cause my children thought I could do any damned thing.

So, I said, "Well, I'm gonna do this." So I chat with them, nobody heard me, I went to the others and they said—I said, "Look, help us maids who work on Davis Island and out in Culbreath Bayou and Palma Ceia. Help us get organized and get us a union."

"Oh, leave that alone."

Okay. So what I did was, I left it alone. I went down—the city council, they was gonna have an election. I went down to run for city council and they told me at the supervisor of elections office that you had to have a certain amount of money, and you had to do this and you had to do that. I met all their qualifications but one: I didn't have the money. I didn't have no criminal record, I wasn't a drunkard, I didn't use drugs, I wasn't a prostitute. [I was] hard workin'. I had everything—education (inaudible). It was the money.

Well, I went home and I prayed and done research myself with the Lord, and something told me to challenge. I set to seein' about they got these lawyers in Bay Area Legal Service that help, so I went there and I filed a charge against the state of Florida—sued all of them top big wheels. So that put me in the top ten. I ran against a veteran, who had been there all those years and had never did nothin' in this area for us. I ran against Lee Duncan, scared the hell out of him. I received 10,478 votes, and couldn't read, and I told the newspapers—everybody—when I went to talk with 'em and they asked me questions.

CR: What year was this when you ran for office?

ER: Nineteen seventy-two. I did. So that made me get in the top twenty. Every presidential hopeful was running came by to see Essie Mae Reed at 1249 Jeob Court. I had a tea in my home, Project Women for Shirley Chisholm. I met Shirley Chisholm personally. Some of the residents in here in my livin' room, we made pictures with 'em.

CR: She came to your house?

ER: Yes, ma'am, she did. Arthenia Joyner brought her—the attorney. I know you know her.

CR: I know her, yes.

ER: Sure did. Oh, yes, ma'am.

CR: Wow. But—so basically, you feel that there was some positive things that came out of Central being demolished, which was that people had to—

ER: It sort of stirred us up a bit, and made some of the black leaders really get on the defensive side and come out to help us, because they found out that they need us, because I believe Central could have still remained Central. 'Cause when I went to New York in 19—must have been 1955—Buffalo, New York. And people look at you and you say you from Tampa, Florida, people up in New York say, "You from Tampa? What about Central? You know about Central?" I said, "Yes, (inaudible)."

Stuff like that, 'cause everybody wanted to—and I know my cousins that live in Jacksonville and Gainesville, Florida, they would take weekends and—you know, like they had blue Mondays, and they would come down here to go to Central. You know where they wanted to go to? You'd be surprised. The Cotton Club. Everybody wanted to come and go to the Cotton Club.

CR: So, when you realized that it wasn't it gonna be—that Central wasn't gonna exist anymore—did any—I mean, did you say anything to anybody, or—?

ER: Well we went to some meetings; they had different ones of us out of our community, I been over here. I had a group of ladies, Miss Frances (inaudible), Frances (inaudible), Jenibelle Chambers, Jenibelle Marshall, her sister Mattie Wilder. We all went and we listen. Earl Shields was our manager and he had stock in the Pyramid Hotel. And we went and we talked, but they didn't want—we was just really talkin' in vain, 'cause nobody wanted to hear us. They didn't want to be bothered.

CR: Uh huh, they had already made up their minds.

ER: Yes.

CR: And what was your understanding about why it was going to be leveled?

ER: Well, my understanding was that blacks was in it to get the money they could get for their own selves and their families, and could give a damn about the people who stayed over here. That was my feeling then, and since I got almost sixty-five I still feel the same way. There's some blacks I really wouldn't give the time of day. And that is no lie, that is definitely true, 'cause I know when we went to them to ask about helpin' us with anything, they didn't want to be bothered. And when we went to some of the meetings and was saying about the problems that the senior citizens was havin' in public housing, and they was in a position—'cause they knew everybody, they come around and campaign funds—you go to talk to 'em and, oh no, they can't do this or that. And they tell you this stuff and run out and you give 'em your vote, and they didn't do nothin'.

But see, new kids came on the block like me and some of the other people came up and we started tellin' our people, "You don't let nobody pimp your poo snap. Sell it and keep it yourself." So if I'd tell 'em any other way they wouldn't understand it, but when I say about pimpin' and poo snap, that lets ya know. And I do that and I instill that in my daughter. I don't instill it in nobody else's daughter but everyone of my daughters will tell you right now, when I get ready to sell, I'm gonna sell, collect the tax and everything else. Ain't nobody gonna get the taxes from it but me. See, that's the way you have to go.

We have people calls us now and want us to go do this and do that. They'll raise hell about they made Scott Street a one way. A man called—and he don't even live in the projects—but he came sneak in here and (inaudible) and sneak out, and if you do you're gonna be seen, because you don't know where to go out. Oh, you'd be surprised, you'd just be surprised.

CR: The things that people want from you that don't really have anything to do—benefiting you.

ER: Uh huh, we told 'em. We had two hundred and seventy three-members at our meeting, and when we got up on the city by block and the people—those people, there might have been two or three in there that didn't agree 'cause if you do it illegal, doin' somethin' wrong, you ain't gonna (inaudible). And they disagreed, but those other people we had in there said, "Oh, yes," and we want it and how they want it blocked off, and that's how we did it. That's exactly what we did. The people wanted it 'cause they couldn't sit on their porch and stuff without all this here, all of them people runnin' up and down the street, (inaudible) little children come across. This is what they wanted and that's what we wanted, and if it's too much trouble for you, don't come in here. You don't live in here.

What we asked for was fences, but the mayor we talked to at that time was Curtis Lane, and he said his offices would have too hard a time. So he wanted them to have it you could only come in one way and we would have somebody that you gotta tell where you're going and we call those people and if they didn't want you to their house, you couldn't come in. That way we kept the drugs out.

The way we got it (inaudible) made it now is healthy, 'cause they can't run in and out, 'cause the duty officers there—that's the only way you gonna get through them. And the people, they got 'em like guards, and some people come in and raise hell and say, "My mother's stayin on with coke, and you got them fences there and she can't get out." If she wanna get out she get out. Ain't no fence that'll stop you from goin'. And we just had a guard that when they didn't come—they didn't even come to visit the people over there themselves. And we had to take and go get guards and stuff, because people was comin' in and tellin' some of them old people they had to give them their rent, (inaudible) if they could get them to pay their rent, and all that stuff. You'd be surprised.

CR: And then they go and take the people's money.

ER: Uh huh; you'd be surprised what go on. But see, when this left from down here, that stole all that stuff, then we didn't have no restaurants around that you could walk and get to, like go out to eat or somethin'. You have to walk down there three or four blocks to catch the bus, get off and wait all them hours to where they could walk there. And to the [grocery] store—the nearest store for us—the nearest store that you wanna ride to, is out on Nebraska [Avenue] to U-Save or the Winn-Dixie out on Hillsborough [Avenue]. Well, a lot of people, they buy at the Blue Ribbon, but if you want some quality meat or stuff, you have to go out.

CR: Yeah, you gotta go far away.

ER: But when Joe Polara on Central Avenue was there, you could go and get quality stuff. So this is what it was. And both stores hired young men and women from this community. So they was puttin' somethin' back. But even then, it was a hardship. It was a very hardship.

CR: Well, you've told us a lot today.

ER: I hope so. (laughs)

CR: You have. We've been talking for about an hour now, so I'm gonna let you rest.

end of interview