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Otis R. Anthony African Americans in Florida Oral History Project  
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**Sherri Anderson:** So I'm sitting here with Mrs. Ruth McNair at her home ... and again, it's November 4, 2005. And here we are in West Tampa. So, let's just start out by you stating your name, where you were born and when you were born, basic information.

**Ruth McNair:** All right. My name is Ruth McNair. I was born in *Marianna, Florida, which is Jackson County, on April 3, 1931. I live at ... now.*

*SA: So tell me your parents' names and where they were born, a little bit about your parents, or your stepparents or whoever raised you?*

*RM: Well, my father was born in Marianna, which is Jackson County—my mother also, too. But my mother and father separated when I was like four or five years old, so I was (inaudible) from one family to another. So my great-grandmother is the one taking me in until I was about fifteen. And I stayed there till I was fifteen, then I came back to Tampa when I was sixteen years old to live with my stepmother and my father. So, that was in 1946.*

*SA: And what were their names?*

*RM: My father was named Willie Fritz Smith. Willie Fritz Smith was his name. And my mother—my birth mother was named Ruby Lee Neal; that was her maiden name. My stepmom was named Henrietta Smiths, that's my mom now.*

SA: Yes.

RM: She's in the nursing home with the Home Association; she's ninety-six years old.

SA: You go and have breakfast with her?

RM: I go to watch her and feed her breakfast. She's ninety-six years old, and so then you have to feed her. But she's sweet, I love her, and I go just about every day to see her.

SA: Well, she's very lucky to have you go and see her, and I'm sure that she loves having your company.

RM: Yeah, she's in a nice place it's the Home Association that she lives in, and it's a historic place and it's a very nice place. I like it very much. And she's been there nine years.

SA: And what did your dad and your stepmom do for a living?

RM: My stepmom, she done maid work for families. And my father worked in I.W. Phillips, a hardware company. That's where he worked until he retired.

SA: Okay. And your great-grandmother, who raised you, what did she do?

RM: She farmed.

SA: She farmed. And she farmed—that was here in Florida, you said, in?

RM: In *Marianna, Florida*.

SA: *Marianna, Florida*.

*RM: In Jackson County. She was a farmer; she raised crops and stuff, that's what she done. When I was a little girl, I had to work in the field a lot. I worked very hard. I picked cotton—*

*SA: Tell me about that, yeah.*

*RM: Picked cotton, drug cotton sacks on my back and worked for other people, for five dollars a week.*

*SA: Five dollars a week?*

*RM: Yes.*

*SA: So how long did you do that? How long did you work in the fields?*

*RM: From the time that I was—from seven till about fifteen years old.*

*SA: Till about fifteen years old. And your great-grandmother in Marianna County, did she own the land? Was she sharecropping? How did that work?*

*RM: I think she sharecropped.*

*SA: So then the landlord would have owned—*

*RM: Part of it.*

*SA: Right, and so she would work—*

*RM: Yes.*

*SA: —for housing.*

*RM: My grandmother didn't do very much, although she'd go and plow the mules sometimes. Me and my brother, we'd do most of the work in the field. And I was as smart as always, had to work hard. And I did all the washing, and we used to do the washing by rub bowls, like a pot that we haul our white clothes in. And so we had irons that you had to put to the fire—we didn't have a stove, we had a fireplace that my grandmother did all the cooking on. She cooked everything on the fireplace, and then we had to put the irons to the fireplace to do the ironing of the clothes. So I really had a hard time, hard time.*

*SA: So, how—and the landlord, did you ever meet the landlord? Or was it mostly you and your great-grandma?*

*RM: And my brother.*

*SA: And your brother.*

*RM: And my great-aunt. I had a great-aunt that lived with us. She would take us out to other people, to work for other people. So that's how we made our little money, going to work for other people. But we only, like I said, get five dollars a week.*

*SA: Right. What was your great-grandmother's name and your great-aunt's name?*

*RM: My great-grandmother's name was named Haddie Smith, and my aunt was named Milla Jackson.*

*SA: So did you ever meet the landlord?*

*RM: No, I didn't ever know who they were.*

*SA: Okay.*

*RM: I never knew that.*

*SA: So what brought you, then, back to Tampa, back to West Tampa?*

*RM: I was tired of the hard work that I had to go through, and I wanted to come back to better myself, or have a better life. I was looking for something better than what I was doing.*

*SA: Right. And so how did you—so you came here when you were sixteen?*

*RM: I came back to Tampa when I was sixteen.*

*SA: And how did you get back, then? So tell me a little bit about your story, your journey coming back here, I guess.*

*RM: Well, I went to—my grandmother did not want me to go come back to Tampa with my father. I don't know for what reason, but she didn't seem like they got along. So she says, "You're not going back to your father. I'm going to send you back to where I got you from, your mother"—which she did not get me from my mother, because my mother had abandoned us. But, however, she sent word for my birth mama to come and get us. She lived in Port St. Joe, which is—Port St. Joe, Florida, which is Gulf County. So she came and got us, me and my brother, and I had written my daddy and stepmom telling them don't come to Marianna to get us, to go to Port St. Joe to pick us up. See, I didn't know my grandmother found out that I had written them a letter; somehow she found out.*

*So we went to Port St. Joe, and so my father and my stepmama went to Port St. Joe to get us and bring us to Tampa. I decided that I had never lived with my mother, so I wanted to stay with her. My brother came back to Tampa with my stepmother and my father. I stayed in Port St. Joe, and it was a period of probably seven to nine months. And after school was out, that's when I decided I was going to come back to Tampa, because my mom—my birth mom was not what I really thought she should be. She was—she drank real bad and she and her husband would fight, and I was not used to that. So, I had to come back to Tampa with my father and stepmother. But the Lord sent me there. That's where I met my husband, in Port St. Joe.*

*SA: And what's your husband's name?*

*RM: My husband is named Joe Nathan McNair, and that's why I had to go to Port St. Joe; that's why the Lord sent me there, to go meet him, and I met him there. But then I left there and I didn't see him no more for six years. So he went to Korea, in the war.*

SA: *In which, in World War—*

RM: *Korean War.*

SA: *Oh, the Korean War, okay.*

RM: *And so we kept in touch occasionally, and then, when he came back from Korea, that's when we got married.*

SA: *My goodness. And how long were you married for?*

RM: *Fifty-three years.*

SA: *And he passed away in 1990—*

RM: *No, he passed away December 28 [2004].*

SA: *Just recently?*

RM: *Yes.*

SA: *I'm sorry, I think—*

RM: *Yeah, he just passed away.*

SA: *I'd love to see a picture.*

RM: *Yeah, he just passed away, on December 28.*

SA: *My goodness, I'm sorry. I thought that he passed away a little while ago.*

RM: No.

SA: He's so handsome.

RM: Thank you.

SA: Elder Joe Nathan McNair, West Haven Memorial Park Cemetery. That's beautiful. This is beautiful.

RM: Yes, thank you.

SA: That's very nice. I'm going to read it after.

RM: He was a sweet, loving husband and father and grandfather.

SA: Did he go peacefully?

RM: Yes. Yes. I had just left the hospital to go to the nursing home, because I had a meeting here with the care nurses, and my daughter had went there and she said, "You can go." So I left and told him I was going. So by the time I had got home, my daughter then called me and I need to get back to the hospital. And they wouldn't tell me that he already gone. So he had gone—when I got off the elevator, my daughter Anne told me that he had passed. We miss him so bad.

SA: Yes.

RM: I miss him.

SA: Wow, fifty-three years. That's incredible. I hope that I'm that lucky, that I can find a lifetime—

RM: You don't hardly find them too many, in these days and time. But he's kind of a one out of a million, because people don't—they don't stay together long these days. Even all my three daughters, all three of them separated from their mates.

SA: Well, let's talk about, then, your children that you and Mr. McNair had. So how many children do you have and what are their names?

RM: Okay. I have three daughters, and the oldest one is named Elizabeth Ann Waters, and my second daughter is Deborah Calhoun, and my third daughter is Linda Patrice Hernandez.

SA: Yes. And how many grandchildren and great-grandchildren do you have?

RM: I have four grandchildren, and five great-grands and one great-great-grand.

SA: Congratulations. That's pretty incredible.

RM: I have five generations of families.

SA: Let's just talk about what—okay, two questions. One, how far did you go in school? Like when—

RM: Not much.

SA: Okay, 'cause—

RM: About five, because I had to work.

SA: Up to grade five?

RM: Yeah, because I worked in the field. If I went to school two days out of the week, that was good. If I went three, that was a bonus. I had to wash clothes on Friday, couldn't go to school on a Friday. So most of the time I had to work, so I couldn't go to school. So, about to fifth grade.

SA: And that's—right. So when you came back to—when you came to Tampa when you were sixteen then, you didn't come back and go to school. You must have come here and worked?

RM: I did.

SA: So maybe tell me a little bit about what you did through the years for your work?

RM: Um, I worked on Davis Island for a private family for that period of time. Then later on, I worked for doctors and lawyers, doing ironing and work like that. And then, before I retired, I was working eleven years for the state for food and nutrition.

SA: Yes, yes.

RM: I worked with families that had children.

SA: You did home visits, right?

RM: Yes.

SA: So you were like a nutritional educator.

RM: Yes, with the families that had children. It was for the University of Florida.

SA: That's the University of South Florida?

RM: No, University of—in Gainesville.

SA: Oh, okay.

RM: That was our headquarters.

SA: Okay.

RM: But our office was out on 579 (inaudible). But our headquarters was out in Gainesville. So that's where I was hired, through there. And I worked eleven years part-time.

SA: You were proud of that position?

RM: Mm-hm.

SA: Yes.

RM: 'Cause I like people, and so that's how I was able to get that job. The Lord blessed me with that, and I was—it was—I enjoyed it.

SA: You—we watch a movie in this course, *Black Women in America*, at the university, and there's this one movie called *Freedom Bags*, and it talks about African American women who were domestics.<sup>1</sup> You know, who worked as maids, and what that was like and the rough parts about it, and also the good parts when people started not living in the homes but living on their own, you know, outside of the homes. And then they had more autonomy and could be themselves more. So anyways, that must have been—

RM: Yeah, it was—I really enjoyed what I done; it was better than working in the field with cotton sacks on my back. And that's what gave me, probably, a bad back, from dragging cotton sacks on my back.

SA: How about—so you didn't attend high school, then, right?

RM: No.

SA: Just grade five. Okay. Let's talk about—let's talk about your family. So, when you came to Tampa, you were sixteen, and you meet Mr. McNair six years later. What are you doing for that six years? And then, tell me about starting your family.

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<sup>1</sup>*Freedom Bags*, directed and produced by Stanley Nelson in 1990.

RM: You mean six years he was gone?

SA: Yeah, the six years before you met him. So, say—

RM: Before I met him?

SA: Right. So, say from the time you're sixteen until you're, what, twenty-two?

RM: Well, I had already met him, but he was in the service.

SA: Oh, that's right, and then he came back six years later. So what were you doing, then, for those six years?

RM: Just working and going to church.

SA: Working, just working. And so when he came back then and you got married and then you had children—

RM: Well, I had my oldest daughter; I had had her before he came back. I had her while he was in the service, but we didn't get married until he came back.

SA: Okay. And where were you living at that time?

RM: When she was born?

SA: Yeah, were you at this house or—

RM: When the oldest girl was born? I was in Hyde Park.

SA: You were in Hyde Park?

RM: Yes, on Orleans [Avenue].

SA: Okay, so—

RM: So we lived in Hyde Park. I lived there with my father in Hyde Park, and my stepmom.

SA: Okay. Where did they—

RM: Remember, I told you that I came back to live with them. So that's where we were living, in Hyde Park.

SA: Okay.

RM: On Orleans.

SA: So when did you move to West Tampa, which was then called—

RM: Forty-seven [1947].

SA: In 1947. And that was called Roberts City then?

RM: No, when I moved to West Tampa I moved—we moved to 1145 Union Street. There was the North Boulevard housing project.

SA: Okay, okay.

RM: That's when we moved to, my daddy and my stepmom and my oldest daughter. That was 19 Chestnut Street. So when he came from the service and we got married, then I went to Roberts City at 1714 Garcia Street [Avenue]. So that was about two years, or—no, that was about 1955 that we moved to Roberts City.

SA: Nineteen fifty-five. So you moved to Roberts City, and then when did you move to Nassau?

RM: I moved to Nassau in fifty-eight [1958].

SA: In fifty-eight [1958]. So, what was it like to raise a family here in West Tampa?

RM: Well, uh—

SA: The good and the bad?

RM: It was good, and it was—you know, you had to go—back in those days, it was—we called it the good ol' days. You could get along better than what you can now, because things has changed so much; they're not nothing like what it was when my children was growing up, because my children could walk through the (inaudible) at night to the Armory (inaudible). You can't do that now. It's just different. And then when we lived in the project, everybody kept their place nice and clean. I mean, they don't do that now; it's different.

SA: So why do you think things started changing?

RM: I wish I had the answer for that. I would like to know, because we've taken pride in where we live. Where we lived, we just—it was home. So, I don't know what's wrong with the generation of people, I really don't. I wish I had the answer. My children were raised different. You were taught to, you know, clean, be clean, pick up the paper, don't throw paper on the ground, and all that. So I don't understand why people are like they are.

SA: Again, I don't think there's one answer. I think that it's a very layered—you know, there's layered answers. I think it's really complicated.

RM: I really don't know, because—like, I have to go even on the streets right here and pick up trash and paper every day. And you know, when we came along, it was not like that. We were just different.

That's my daughter's phone. I don't answer hers. My phone line is different from hers.

SA: So what was it like to be a neighbor, then, growing up here in West Tampa? The projects here?

RM: We were nice, we was kind, we always spoke to our neighbors. Anything that we could do for a neighbor, we was there. If a neighbor needed something, we were there.

SA: What—

RM: We was friendly, we got along fine. It was just the good ol' days, good ol' days.

SA: So how were the businesses on Main Street, when it was—what was it like when it was hopping?

RM: Well, it was good, because—I remember right on Main Street, that's where I used to go buy my groceries; it's called Philip Grocery Store on Main. And I had ten dollars, that's what I had to go buy groceries with, and I had a lot of groceries with ten dollars. And the boy would deliver my groceries on a bicycle.

SA: On a bicycle?

RM: Yes, 'cause we had no car, so we walked to the store and ordered the groceries and then he would deliver it on a bicycle, even right here. He delivered groceries when I lived in Roberts City, and then when I moved here, and also on Chestnut Street. He delivered the groceries on a bicycle, and he owned a bicycle.

SA: And would you ever go down to Central Avenue? And what would you go down there for?

RM: Oh, to the singing, gospel singing.

SA: Really?

RM: Yes, to the Odd Fellows Hall.

SA: The Odd Fellows Hall?

RM: Yeah, it was a building there called Odd Fellows Hall, where they would have all kinds of entertainment. But this one that I would go to is to gospel. And the moderator used to be named Goldie Thomas and I remember him so well, but he passed on many years ago. But he used to give all kinds of gospel singing, come to right there. And that's why I liked it, 'cause I wasn't a person that went to nightclubs and bars and things; that was not my lifestyle.

SA: So you didn't do, like, the jazz clubs?

RM: No, no, no, no, no!

SA: Only strict church?

RM: Only gospel did I attend.

SA: So what church, then, did you—when you were a young woman and up until now, what churches have you attended and what congregations have you been in?

RM: Oh, I was—years ago, before I—I'm Pentecostal. I've been a Pentecostal ever since my baby girl was like eighteen months old, and she's forty-seven. I was a Baptist when I was like twelve years old. When I was twelve years old I was a Baptist up until—let's see, I was Baptist until, I guess, forty-seven, about forty-six years or so ago. And she was like eighteen months when I got to be Pentecostal.

SA: So what brought about that change for you?

RM: Hmm?

SA: What brought about that change for you?

RM: You mean in church?

SA: Yeah, like why did you—why did you change from—

RM: Baptist to Pentecostal?

SA: Or convert?

RM: I had a deep urging that I needed more than what I had.

SA: Spirituality. So—

RM: See, the Lord would talk to me and tell me what I—just like I'm talking to you. A lot of people might not believe that, but he would talk to me and tell me what I need and what I should do. That's why I made the change.

SA: And what congregation are you with now?

RM: Pentecostal Church of God.

SA: This one right here? And is this here? Is this here right in West Tampa?

RM: No. It's in South Tampa.

SA: Oh, okay.

RM: It's in South Tampa. We were—the church was down on Kennedy [Boulevard] and Oregon [Avenue], which is—I don't know if they call that West Tampa or not. But that's where our church was, where the Wendy's is down there. But we moved and they (inaudible) it. But we're in South Tampa, close to Bay to Bay Boulevard.

SA: Okay. Let's see. So, what was it like on Main Street on a Saturday, then? Say, let's go back to the fifties [1950s]. Saturdays and Sundays, maybe, what was life like for you down here?

RM: Well, it was quiet for me. On Main Street—I mean, everything on Main is much different from what it was then, because on this side of Main was just nothing but a lot of rows of houses and businesses. And right on the corner of—this is Willow [Avenue] right here. On the corner of Main and Willow was Molina’s drugstore.

SA: Right.

RM: You remember that?

SA: Um, Dr. [Cheryl] Rodriguez talked about that in her essay. She used to go to Molina’s.

RM: We went to Molina’s all the time, because it was right—’cause we lived on Union Street, which is on the same block. And it was a neighborhood pharmacy that you’d just go to, and then they had other stores all along Main Street. Like I said, the one that I traded to was called Philip Grocery Store, and then they had the Floridan Grocery Store. They had a lot of stores there, and then they had—in between, there was houses all along.

SA: And of course, this was during Jim Crow. We’re still in segregation until, like, the like the late fifties [1950s], I mean, and beyond that.

RM: Yeah, it was bad because we couldn’t—just imagine you walking up to a fountain and it says colored and white. You have to drink water out of the one that says colored. And then the bathroom, you go to the one said colored. Those were things that I experienced. And I also experienced taking my two girls, ’cause the older one wasn’t—she was older—to the pediatrician and was told I needed to go to the back door. I was told this, right here in Tampa.

SA: I’ve heard a lot of those stories, yeah.

RM: I have to pay the same amount of money, now, but yet it’s still—I was not supposed to come in the front door. So I was going to take my children’s—I was going to ask for my record to take them from here. But they sent me my records and said my kids was no longer—get me another doctor. Now, how do you think I felt?

SA: Let's talk about the Clara Frye Hospital, right, 'cause—

RM: Well, that's the only hospital we could go to.

SA: Right, 'cause I remember you talking about how you had given birth there.

RM: I gave birth to my last baby, the one that's forty-seven years old. She was born April 16, right there at Clara Frye Hospital, which is the only hospital that we was allowed to go to at that time.

SA: And what was it like at the hospital? Like, what were the facilities like? Of course —

RM: They was not—you know, they a long ways from being up to par. But that's all we had. We had to accept what we had. Because my oldest daughter was born at a maternity home, where the midwife, you know, delivered your baby. And my second daughter was born at the Lily White Hospital. Now, they had a Lily White Hospital that only black people was—that was a black hospital on—I think it was on 29<sup>th</sup> [Street]. They probably tore that one down years ago, but that's where the second girl was born. But the Clara Frye Hospital is all we had.

SA: Right.

RM: Couldn't go nowhere else.

SA: And how did you feel when they tore it down? And why did they tear it down?

RM: I guess it was—kind of old, you know, it had got—it was old and outdated. And it was torn down way before—there was nothing there since they built Blake [High School], but that was years later.<sup>2</sup> I think Blake was built in—but you know, that's history to me, because as I look at Blake School every time I go by there, I think about, “This is the place where my baby was born.” Even though I don't see the hospital, I can remember in my mind what the hospital looks like, and it means a lot to me.

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<sup>2</sup>Blake High School was built at its current location on North Boulevard in 1997. This is the former site of the Clara Frye Hospital. Before then, Blake was on Spruce Street, where Stewart Middle School and Just Elementary School are now located.

SA: And what—the schools that your children went to? They went to Carver?

RM: My two—my last two girls went to Carver Elementary School. My oldest daughter went to Dunbar; that's right up there on Main, off of Main and Union. So they all went to school in West Tampa.

SA: And Carver might be torn down, right? Is that what we were talking about?

RM: Yes, it's going to be torn down.<sup>3</sup>

SA: Let's talk about—

RM: I got to take a picture before they tear it down.

SA: Right, and let's talk about those kind of changes here in the neighborhood.

RM: Kids went to school there.

SA: Right, so your kids went to school at Carver, and I'll have to go down and check out the streets and see where they are.

RM: Carver is on Laurel.

SA: Laurel.

RM: And Dunbar is on Union Street.

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<sup>3</sup>This refers to the previous location of the Carver school, now called Carver Exceptional Center, where it was opened in 1909 at Laurel Street and Willow Avenue. This building was torn down in 2006 to widen Interstate 275, and the school moved to a new building at 2934 E. Hillsborough Avenue.

SA: And Dunbar on Union. So with the expansion of [Interstate] 275 right now, is the Carver school then—is that threatened because the highway is going to be widening—is that near?

RM: Say that again?

SA: With the highway that's going to be widening, is that going to affect Carver School?

RM: Carver's going to be torn down; won't be no more Carver.

SA: Right.

RM: They're tearing that down. The principal there said now they have to be out there by the end of the year. Just going to tear that school down. And that's when I will cry.

SA: Right, you said that.

RM: Yes.

SA: Yeah.

RM: That's history to me, because my children all—they went to school there and to see it torn down is just going to be hurting. I'm going to take a picture, but it's going to hurt.

SA: Especially since you've been in this neighborhood for almost fifty years now.

RM: Yes.

SA: So when did these changes start happening? Like this development, you know, coming through the neighborhood, when did that start?

RM: You talking about the first?

SA: I think the first freeway.

RM: When they first built it? Oh, I don't know. I guess late fifties [1950s] or sixties [1960s], I guess, when it started. I guess.

SA: And how did it change the neighborhood, whenever that first came through here?

RM: Well, it didn't do a whole lot on this side. I think way down farther, that's when a lot of people were destroyed, because none of the people up here had to move. This is the only one that has really affected everybody, this last one; all the people had to move. Imagine all of the houses have to go off a whole street. That's the one that was really affected.

SA: Right.

RM: But now the noise that comes from the interstate, because the people, especially the closest—even I can hear the noise from here, where I live. And just thinking about the people that the streets right there by—it affects them more.

SA: And they're thinking—they're going to expand that several more lanes.

RM: I think it's going to be worse, because it's already noisy now. You can hear the cars and things go by there now, and I'm down here. So that's going to be the thing.

SA: Right, and you said that you've been—that you've been making some phone calls to —

RM: The DOT.

SA: To the Department of Transportation to try and get some answers—

RM: Answers.

SA: —as to how your community is going to be, I guess, compensated. You know, how—what are they going to do for the community?

RM: Exactly.

SA: You know, when they put this through, and you've said that—

RM: Particular noise and beautifying and history.

SA: And history. So what would you like to see—tell me about history in this neighborhood and how you would like it preserved. What does history mean to you here?

RM: Well, history is very important to everybody, and we would like to see as much history preserved as we possibly could, because I'm sure everybody loves their history. And when it's destroyed, we don't have it anymore. So I would love to see the things that we could look back, you know, years later and see is this a—'cause some of it we've already lost and forgotten.

SA: Right. And would you—

RM: And as we get older we don't remember everything, but if we had something that we could see, it brings back all your memories.

SA: So what would you—if you could have—if you had to choose, of course, between, you know, a museum or a historic site, which would you prefer? You know, if you could preserve—I guess that question answers itself. If you could preserve the Carver School and make it a historical site, you would do that in a heartbeat.

RM: Oh, yes.

SA: And all the institutions like that, like Blake High School and maybe even the Clara Frye Hospital.

RM: Clara Frye Hospital.

SA: Even though, I mean, the conditions were so bad; but that was because the city didn't put in any money into it.

RM: Exactly, exactly.

SA: Because it was a black hospital, African American. So, yeah, historic sites.

RM: Would have loved to see Clara Frye and Carver both preserved.

SA: So when they tore down Blake High School—

RM: They haven't torn down Blake High.

SA: Remember the original Blake High School? Or did they just make that into a junior school?

RM: Junior school, middle school, Stewart Middle School.

SA: Okay. And so when they built the new Blake High School over here, what did you think about that?

RM: I'm happy for it, because at least it preserved some memories of history, because it's Blake, and we had a Blake, you know, already over here. And so I felt good about it.

SA: Right. Okay, that's for the community so that students can, you know, go there.

RM: So I like the school, and like I say, it says it brings double memories to me, for the school as well as Clara Frye Hospital. Because every time I go by and look at it, I always—I see the school, but I think about this is where my baby was born. This is where Clara Frye Hospital was.

SA: So it was right where Blake—the new Blake—is now?

RM: Mm-hm.

SA: I didn't know that.

RM: Yes.

SA: That's exactly where it was?

RM: Right. And so it brings memories to me, you know, every time I go by, and I go by there so many times. And I look at it and it brings all the memories back to me: this is where my baby was born. I see the school, but also see that this is where the hospital was. You wonder why I don't see the hospital.

SA: It would be very different the buildings would have been preserved and, you know, you have that sense of history that you can connect with the new generations.

RM: I would love to do that. I would love—I did have a picture of that hospital, and I'm hoping that maybe I can find it somewhere stuck in a trunk or somewhere, I'm not sure. But once upon a time it came out in the paper about the hospital and I had a picture of it.

SA: Right, there are actually a couple pictures. I can show you one.

RM: You do?

SA: Yeah, there was—

RM: Of Clara Frye?

SA: Mm-hm.

RM: You do?

SA: It was just the inside of one of the rooms; it was in, like, a history of Tampa or something, and they had from the thirties [1930s], I think. It was a picture of it—not the actual outside, but the inside.

RM: I had the picture of the outside. I don't know what I done with it. 'Cause it came in the newspaper, you know, they ran an article about it for some reason. I'm sure somebody must have to have this picture somewhere.

SA: Yeah, I'll bring—I think I have like one picture. I'll bring it by; I'll bring it by.

RM: Somebody should have this whole picture. It was ran in the newspaper, 'cause I got it out of the newspaper.

SA: Out of the *Florida Sentinel*?

RM: I think it was in the [*Tampa*] *Tribune*, that's what I was taking at the time.

SA: The *Tribune*?

RM: I think so.

SA: Okay, well, I'll see if I can find something. Let's see. What are some of your best memories living here in West Tampa?

RM: Best memories. You mean good or bad?

SA: Good.

RM: Good memories?

SA: If you have some bad memories—I mean, that's history, too. You know, that's important, too.

RM: Well, the good memories is that I just liked the location where I live. And everybody seems—you know, in my neighborhood gets along fine and everything. So those are good memories. You know that you live in a neighborhood that everybody gets along.

SA: It's a community, right?

RM: It's a community.

SA: It's where you belong?

RM: Right. And we bond together as a neighborhood—you know, the members meet together and everything. So, it's just a good feeling that you have neighbors that bond together and care for each other.

SA: And just to go back for a second, when you were a young woman and coming up with your family—'cause West Tampa wasn't just African American, but also Italians and Hispanics.

RM: A lot of them used to live in those big houses, on, you know, the rows of houses all the way down that way. Huge houses, 'cause they had large families, so they lived all mixed with people.

SA: Did you ever—were you ever able to mix with them?

RM: No, I didn't ever go mix with them.

SA: Was it—it was separated then? Was it Howard where—Dr. Rodriguez said her world ended at Howard.

RM: Probably so. (laughs)

SA: Which was the main African-American—

RM: Yeah. And they moved out fast, too, eventually after the thing ended, segregation ended.

(knock at the door)

***Pause in recording***

SA: Just the last thing that you said, and it's taping now—

RM: Now, which one was it?

SA: But the last thing that you said about your great-grandma and why your great-grandma had brought you to—your great-grandma Haddie had brought you to her place, but you had to—but you had to work, you know, for your money. Just that sentence, you know, that you had said, 'cause that's important.

RM: Okay, my Grandmamma Haddie wanted some children to work in the field, and so Grandmamma Mathis was old and she wasn't able to take care of us, and so she sent word for Grandmamma Haddie to come and get us. So Grandmamma Haddie came and got us, and we had to take care of ourselves because she said she was old, and we had to work and get money in order to help buy clothes and take care of ourselves.

SA: And this is when you were seven until you were?

RM: Seven years old, till I was fifteen.

SA: Oh, goodness.

RM: I had to work in the field, because we didn't have very much. We didn't have nothing and my father did not send us anything, and so we had to—what little we got, she would buy me three dresses to wear. All I had was three dresses to wear to school. I couldn't have—didn't have but three. And now I have more clothes than I can even get into my closet.

SA: That's very different now.

RM: Yes. But it was—we lived through some hard times by not having parents that really cared for us.

SA: Right. What were some—what are some of your best memories? Looking back then, when you were—

RM: Looking back, my best memories is that I met my husband and he was good to me and made things much better for me. And now I'm happy, because I wasn't at the time because I didn't have anybody seemed that cared. But after I met—the Lord gave me a good husband and children and family, and those are my best days.

SA: Those are your best days, right?

RM: All of them, my best days, because I love my children and my children love me, and my husband loved me. And so these are my good days.

SA: Absolutely. Just forget about—talking about, you know, life, your later life in West Tampa, but what you went through as a child, you know, with your parents and then going to your great-grandma Haddie's and working the fields and then working as a maid. So you were a domestic for decades.

RM: Right.

SA: And what that's like here in the South and being African American, you know, and all that—all of that, I mean, that is some serious history.

RM: Exactly.

SA: You know, right there.

RM: Exactly, 'cause I remember doing the domestic work I think it was like for five dollars a day. That was not much, either. Now you get five dollars an hour, right?

SA: Probably about \$6.85.

RM: Well, I had to work all day long to get the five dollars.

SA: Right. So what were some of your—some not so good memories that you had about domestic work? Like, for example, did you—well, I mean, that can be kind of a personal question. But just reflecting, just going back to whenever you worked as a maid, what were some of the difficult things, difficult times that you had encountered? Like, depending on the families, I guess, you worked for.

RM: Oh, I worked for some good families.

SA: And did you live in—you didn't live in? You were just—

RM: Just go there. I only did, like, probably three days out of the week or something like that, part-time. I never really went full-time because I had the children, so usually I would like to be with the children, 'cause I stayed with the children anyway when they were little, real little. So after they grew up and I put them in nursery, then they were bigger children. But I always was fortunate enough to be with some good people.

SA: That's great. What nursery did the kids go to?

RM: Um, they went to—let's see, what is it? Let's see. Ms. Geraldine; her little nursery was up on Main Street.

SA: The Helping Hand?

RM: No, it wasn't the Helping Hand, it was—I think she headed the Fairy—I got some papers when it was Fairy. I know the name; the teacher was named Ms. Geraldine Hall. Because her little nursery was right up—you know where the barbecue place is on Main? Well, her nursery was on Main Street just before you get to Howard. That's where—they went to nursery there.

SA: We'll have to find out the name of that, and I'll tell you—if I come across it, I'll—

RM: Yeah, it was on Main. I think it was Fairy something. But I knew the teacher. Ms. Geraldine Hall was their teacher. And she's a (inaudible) now because she moved; when she moved from over there, she went over—had a little daycare on 30<sup>th</sup> Street.

SA: On 30<sup>th</sup>?

RM: Right across, by the railroad tracks. But I don't—I think she's retired now, of course, because that's a long time.

SA: Yes.

RM: That's a long time. And let's see, my granddaughter—no, my baby daughter, she went to Ms.—she graduated from Ms. [Marie Haynes] Wimberly's kindergarten. You know Ms. Wimberly? She's passed on, but she was a hundred years old, or close to a hundred. Wimberly's Preschool right there on Albany [Avenue] right there. There's a library [Dr. Walter L. Smith Library] round the corner on Albany, not too far from the library. Right off of Cypress.

SA: Is it still there, the nursery? The preschool is still there?

RM: 'Cause she's got other people that are carrying it on, but she passed on, I think last year. And she was close to a hundred.

SA: So let's talk about what you're doing now, what kind of work you're active in now. 'Cause you talked about—for like eleven years you were an educator, like as a—like, for parents and nutrition. And so, just tell us a little bit about what you're involved in now. You're involved with the Crime Watch Association.

RM: Yes, I am the coordinator of the West Riverfront Crime Watch Association, been there since ninety-three [1993].

SA: Thirteen, almost fourteen years now.

RM: Yes.

SA: Tell us a little bit about your work in the Crime Watch Association, what you're working right now for the association.

RM: What we're working on? We're working on projects that—with the developers trying to come into our neighborhood.

SA: With the developers?

RM: Yes.

SA: And tell us a little bit about what's going on right now, and what you're doing about that. What you're trying to—is it—?

RM: It's about the interstate, I think. (laughs)

SA: It's about the interstate, right?

RM: Yes.

SA: Like we had already talked about this?

RM: Yes, we already talked about that, because that's one of the main things that's going on now.

SA: And whenever you're contacting people, you're contacting them as the West Riverfront Crime Watch Association. Okay, so that's the body, like your organization that's connecting people.

RM: Yeah, we have monthly meetings every month, just had one last Thursday. And then every fourth Thursday we have a meeting; but our next meeting is going to be the seventeenth because Thanksgiving comes early.

SA: Okay, right. And how many members are in the association?

RM: That's hard to say, because we got some members that pay dues and don't go and then you count those too, and we have what you call active membership. It's maybe thirty-five or forty or something like that.

SA: That's pretty strong? And what is—

RM: It's a very strong neighborhood, so section of the city recognize it very, very, very, very highly.

SA: Yes. So what is—so you have people from all different backgrounds in the Crime Watch Association?

RM: Um, yes. Now when you say background, what do you mean by that?

SA: I guess—I mean you can say race or you can say cultures? Like if you have whites, Hispanics?

RM: Well, the thing about this is we have one white that's on this street, and he lives in the block where my other member just passed. We have—this neighborhood now is getting a lot of whites coming in. There's four houses on the street, on the next street to me right there, new houses there. I put flyers up, but I haven't been able to get anybody to come out yet, I don't know why. So we were working on those. So we're trying to find out, you know, if they're going to want to participate with us, being a neighborhood. But they haven't—they've been here quite a while, but they haven't been to the meeting. So, it's open to everybody that will come.

SA: So what does it mean, now that more whites are moving into the neighborhood? What might that mean?

RM: Means they're trying to get close to their jobs and they like where we live.

SA: Like where we live, so it's kind of like an encroaching—

RM: It's in the center location, center location of the airport, stadium, downtown, Westshore. It's in the center. Everybody wants to come here now.

SA: Right. And then—

RM: And we are getting calls and people and signs that are looking—I go out and pull the “We’ll buy your house.” They want to come in and buy us out.

SA: Right, that's what that means.

RM: Yeah. So, everyone wants to come here; it's the place—it's the location that everybody wants to come.

SA: What are the boundaries of the Crime Association? What do you represent, what areas?

RM: I represent from North Boulevard to Rome [Avenue] and from the interstate to Cass. But shortly, a few years down the road, the city has added us all the way to Kennedy, which we was not given that when we organized. So most of that is businesses, and we just—our boundaries, we just stop it at Cass Street.

SA: So you stop at Cass. So how does the city support your association? I mean, if the city is in part funding the expansion of the interstate—

RM: It's not the city.

SA: It's the—?

RM: It's the state.

SA: It's the state.

RM: State of Florida.

SA: So the State of Florida is funding the interstate, but the City of Tampa is supporting your association, right? Like, how does the city support your association, I guess, is—like, financially or they give you the space to meet?

RM: No, no. They don't give us a place to meet, and they don't give us the money.

SA: What does—does the City of Tampa then—how do they support the association? Or—I don't know if they do?

RM: No, they don't. I don't know. You know, they don't support us as far financially, no. I guess what you're trying to say, they have something like where you go and ask for projects to be given to you, because I got a letter yesterday about that. If you got a project that you want them to fund, then you ask for it on this paper.

SA: Right, then you apply for grants. I guess the money that they would then maybe award you.

RM: Yeah, it's called a CBG or something like that, because I guess—I got the letter yesterday.<sup>4</sup>

SA: Community Block Grants, maybe?

RM: Community Block Grants.

SA: Community Block Grants. Okay, so that's how they would support you. I apologize; that's my not knowing the exactly the right question to ask.

RM: Yes, they—I just got the letter yesterday that they talked about that.

SA: Right. And how much—

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<sup>4</sup>CDBG, or Community Development Block Grant.

RM: But they want someone to volunteer, and they need several more volunteers on their committee; they have twenty-seven committees. And I am stretched too wide to get any more things, because I go to a lot of meetings. I go to our meeting, which is once a month; and I go to a planning meeting, which is the train station. That's on the (inaudible) of all the neighborhoods. I go to that one. Then we have extra meetings, like town hall meetings, which we just been to. So usually, you can only go to so many meetings.

SA: And are there—are you seeing younger people who are also getting involved, like people in their thirties and more—

RM: Well, not a lot, which I would like to, 'cause when we went to the neighborhood park or so on we see young people like that, and that's we would love to see here, with more young people getting involved. I don't know why they're not interested in getting involved, but I would love to see that.

SA: So you went to Lakeland for a conference last week for the association. So, tell me a little bit about why you went there and what that was about.

RM: I went there to get other ideas from other neighbors. Other people come from all over Florida, and we was into workshops and things that give you ideas as to how things are being done and what they accomplish. So it's, like I said, the young people that I saw there: it gives a lot of ideas that, you know, how we can try to see we can recruit more young people in to the Crime Watch Association. And let's see, what else did I—? And to train more leaders because we do need more leaders, because, you know, maybe we can't keep on going; somebody else needs to take over. So we need more leaders that are willing to lead. Leadership training, how to train more—how to be leaders. So, we need more leaders, 'cause people, they're—they either don't think they can do it or don't want to do it or want you to do it. And so, really, that's what I got out of there, too.

SA: Wow. Do you know the name of the conference? What was it called? Do you want to put that on?

RM: It was just Florida Conference, or Neighborhood Conference. Let me see if I can get a book.

SA: Sure. Okay. Oh, I see, the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Florida Neighborhoods Conference.

RM: It was great. We had a ball.

SA: Oh, my. So they—

RM: They had the red carpet out for us and they welcomed us there, and they took pictures of us when we went. It was great!

SA: Wow! I wonder who this was funded by? The 2005—Celebrating Florida’s Great Neighborhoods, Lakeland, Florida. Wow, this is great!

RM: It was great.

SA: Florida Neighborhoods Conference.

RM: It was great!

SA: Wow, you must be—[Tampa Mayor Pam] “lorio hears worries—”

RM: It was great.

SA: So how do you feel about our current mayor; you feel like she’s supporting?

RM: Yeah, she’s pro-neighborhoods.

SA: Yeah, she’s for neighborhoods and she’s for history, keeping history alive—and accurate history.

RM: And she’s the best one we’ve had so far, one of the best. Sandy [Mayor Sandra Freeman] was good. I guess all the ladies must be the best.

SA: And Mayor [Dick] Greco?

RM: (laughs)

SA: Right. I don't know the specifics, but I heard that—

RM: He had two terms; you know, he was on two terms. You know he was there thirty years ago, right?

SA: I think so.

RM: Yeah, he had another—he went away and came back after he stayed out a long time. But mercy, Lord.

SA: Um—

RM: Mercy, Lord have mercy. You don't have the tape recorder on, do you?

SA: Yes, ma'am—oh, yes, I do.

***Pause in recording***

SA: All right. And this brings our interview to a close, so I just want to say thank you so much for sitting down and answering the questions that I have.

RM: Thank you for coming, and I enjoyed it very much.

SA: Thank you, Mrs. McNair.

***End of interview***