

INTERVIEW OF SUESETTA TALBERT MCCREE

Oral History Project of the WestSiders

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Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q First of all thanks for taking time out of your schedule to speak with us. I have been looking forward to this interview.

A Happy to do it.

Q Good. Just to begin, can you tell us a little bit about your parents, where they are from and how they got to Detroit?

A Okay. My father was a son of an African Methodist Episcopal minister. He was born in Albany, New York. His father traveled around as a minister of various churches. They ended up for a long period of time in Wilberforce, Ohio. My mother was born in Xenia, Ohio, which is a couple of miles from Wilberforce. As young people do, they got together with the people from the university and the people from the community in Xenia. They met and married in 1909. They lived in Xenia with her sisters at one point, and then they lived with Colonel Charles Young. He is the one who rode a horse to Washington to show that he was still fit to be in the service. Well, they lived in his house. Then when they began to have their family, they built a house and they had four children in Wilberforce. Well, my father had

the opportunity to be postmaster, but you had to be a Democrat and he would not say he was a Democrat; he was a Republican at that time. So anyway he was working for the university and not making enough money really to take care of his four children, his home, and his wife. They had a horse and a cow back then.

Q You mentioned about your father being a postmaster and about the move to Detroit.

A Yes, around the time that his father died in 1917, he had a brother that lived in Detroit, Wendell Talbert, who was a musician. He had an orchestra called, Wendell Talbert and the Chocolate Drops. He was married to Florence Cole who was an opera singer. At any rate, they lived in Detroit and they are the ones that started bringing the family here. He told my father, "you need to come over here so you can make some money so you can support your family." He came over here and he got various jobs. He didn't work at the factory. That is why people were coming here; I don't know why he didn't. But he eventually got a job at the post office here. That is how they came to Detroit.

Q Did he ever talk about his work at the post office, what that was like for him?

A I don't know if he talked about it. He worked at the post office with some of our neighbors. There were five gentlemen that rode together to work. There was a Mr. Paul Simmons, and he drove; there was Porter Dillard, Sr., Raymond Maynard, and J.R. Johnson. They all worked at the post office. Everyday at 5:15 he would arrive home and then we would sit down and have dinner.

Now, he was called a special clerk and I don't know what

that meant except when some of the churches had conventions or conferences here in Detroit, he could setup a mini post office at the site of their convention. He would have post cards and stamps and he would take their letters to mail. It was something that he enjoyed.

My brother worked at the post office too, after him. He said there would always be a Henry Talbert at the post office; but my brother's son decided that wasn't going to happen.

Q Your mother, what kind of work did she do?

A My mother was mostly a housewife and mother. She was very good with a needle and thread. When she did work, she worked for Bricker Brothers Fur Company which was at that time downtown. She did the fur finishing. She would put the lining in, put the pockets in, and put the hooks and things like that.

Q Now, how did she get that job or do you recall?

A I don't know because that was before I was born. She never worked after I was born.

Q Why not?

A I don't know.

Q That is fair enough.

A She was good at making ends meet. She was an extraordinary seamstress and she made all of my clothes. I never had anything bought until I was about 12.

Q That is what you mean by making ends meet? She was able to make clothes not just for you but for other family

members?

A Right. She made my clothes all the way up until I married the first time. Well she did the paintings here [points to a wall near where she was sitting] on the wall. She crocheted. She crocheted a bedspread and submitted it to the State Fair and won a prize for it; I think it was second prize.

Q My sense is that a lot of women of your mother's generation didn't work?

A Yes, that is probably true, because most of the mothers were home when you came home for lunch at school, and that kind of thing.

Q Is it the Roosevelt Post Office that your father worked at?

A Yes, he worked first at the Federal Building because they didn't have Roosevelt Park when he first started working. Then he worked at Roosevelt Park; he retired from there after 40 some years.

Q That is a long time to work at one place?

A Right.

Q Did he talk about any hardships they experienced or did he talk about the post office much at the dinner table or elsewhere?

A No. At the dinner table we usually talked about black history, school, and what you should strive for.

Q When you say "black history" can you say a little more

about that?

A Yes. You know Wilberforce was such that a lot of your scholars went through there like W.E.B. Dubois. Our Bishop Gregg, Ossian Sweet, went to Wilberforce and we talked about those people. We also talked about Carter Woodson, who started black history week, now Black history month.

Q What did he say about some of the people; do you recall?

A Yes, you know, that was 70 years ago. I just remember it gave us a sense of pride in who we were. We never had a question about what good people we were.

Q Now, one of the things I notice that you were from the A.M.E. denomination. How did your parents get involved in that, and why AME as opposed to Baptist or some other denomination?

A My grandfather was the A.M.E. minister.

In fact, this summer I went to a wedding in Cambridge, Massachusetts and it was in a church that he had named, St. Paul A.M.E. Church, in Cambridge. That was a wonderful experience for me. He traveled along with them, and then he eventually came to Wilberforce, and as you know, that is an A.M.E. school. He went to high school at the Wilberforce Academy.

Q Is that a feeder school that fed into --

A Well, it was a school, you know; there were not a lot of high schools that black people could go to. So people would send their children to Wilberforce to go to high school.

Q Tell us a little bit if you could about the A.M.E. church that you went to here: Trinity A.M.E. Church?

A Yes, my father had a close relationship with a bishop and he helped to start St. Stephen A.M.E. Church, which is on Cobb and Stanford. Then they asked him to help start another church. At Trinity my parents gave a house that they owned which was across the street from the house where we lived; they gave that to the A.M.E. Church. It was a mission, where the church was in the downstairs of the house and the minister lived upstairs. We lived right across the street. So our family was at Trinity A.M.E. Church almost every day. There was prayer meeting, trustee meeting, and choir practice. I went with them to all of those things. We went to Sunday School. I became an usher, such as it was. I had some very excellent Christian experiences there, especially with a Reverend Jackson. He required us to learn the Lord's Prayer, and gave us a little New Testament. I was only about 6 or 7 when I did that. My mother directed the choir and she also put on plays. She had Sampson and Delilah and Anna Gordy, Berry Gordy's sister was Delilah. It was quite a production in this little church.

Q Was it advertised to people from all over the community or just the members of the church who were going there?

A She had a big crowd. At that time, people knew what was going on in the black community, especially on the West Side, because it wasn't that big.

Q So it was word of mouth?

A Probably, I don't remember; I was a little girl then too.

Q So you say that you were in church every day. It didn't sound like it was all kid-related activities?

A Right, but I went with my parents. They had kid-related activities, too. I remember a Halloween party where we went in costume. I was Little Bo Peep. My sister was superintendent of the Sunday School at that time. She directed that party. Then in the summers they had ice cream socials. In the winter, they had chitterling dinners. People would come from the schools and from the post office and various places to buy these dinners.

Q I always heard about chicken dinners; I never heard about chitterling dinners?

A Right. They had chitterling dinners with slaw and cornbread and I don't know what else.

Q You would be at the meetings with your parents, at the trustee meetings?

A Yes.

Q What kind of things did you learn from attending these meetings?

A Oh, I probably schized out on those kinds of things. I was with them, because I couldn't stay home alone.

Q You came from a fairly large family. What was it like in a family that size?

A Okay, there were six of us. I had four sisters and a brother. Now when I was born, my older two sisters were in

college, one at Wilberforce University and one at Tuskegee Institute. My brother -- he was sort of in and out. He lived with us, but he wasn't there a lot. It was a happy family because with all of the girls, there were always a lot of boys around. My brother and his friends would go down in the basement in the winter time and eat the peaches and cherries that my mother had canned. When my mother would go to get them to make a pie, they would be gone. But it was a good time because there were always people at the house, especially for Sunday dinners.

Q Who all would come over for dinner?

A Well different boyfriends of my sisters; my brother would bring his girlfriends, his fiance, Helen, when they were going together and that kind of thing; aunts, cousins and uncles would be there too.

Q So it sounds like your family home was more of a meeting place as opposed to another family member filling that role?

A No, we went over to my Aunt Bessie's house a lot. They did exciting things like, make records. I am talking about sixty years ago. They could make records and we would sing and that was sort of fun. Then my uncle took movies and did other kinds of photographs. So he would have a good time at their house, too. They lived on Scotten.

Q It sounds like a close family?

A Very close. Very close. Very close. I had an uncle here who was quite a tenor. His name was Virgil Talbert. He was an identical twin and he could sing.

Q Where did he sing?

A At that time, he sang at church, at weddings and things like that.

Q Going back to your family: You said you went to Aunt Bessie's house, for example; did they all live on the West Side or did they live far away?

A All of us lived on the West Side. I had an Aunt Ruby, Uncle Eric, and a cousin Doris: They lived on Hartford. Uncle Virgil, Aunt Stella and cousin Constance lived on Hartford across the street from each other. Then on Scotten, I had two aunts and their husbands and cousin Roni; they lived together on Scotten.

Q How did your family decide on the West Side as opposed to some place else in the city?

A Well, my Uncle Wendell lived on 28th Street and he is the one who brought people there. They lived with him first and then they branched out.

When my parents first came here, they lived on Iroquois, which is on the East Side. They rented. Then they lived on Mount Vernon, which is the North End; and they rented there. Then when they purchased a house it was on Roosevelt, on the West Side.

Q Tell us about the leisure type of activities. Was your mother a club woman?

A No, my mother didn't join clubs. She was invited to join but she did not.

Q Why not?

A I guess she had a family to take care of and that the

kind of thing.

Q Okay.

A She was very sociable, though.

Q Your father, he was active within the Nacirema Club?

A My father wasn't in Nacirema. In fact, he was a Mason, but I don't remember any details about that. I do remember he had a pin. I don't think he was just a pin wearer, but he was very active with the church.

Q That was his main thing?

A Yes, and he would go to the Rogers Theater on the night when they had the midnight movies. You would go and see two movies and after midnight you would see two more movies. He would do that.

Q Did he take the family?

A No, that was something that he did on his own.

Q Did you go to the midnight show at all?

A No; no.

Q I hear other people talk about going to the midnight show; why didn't you go?

A I was too young, I guess. I had to go to school the next day.

Q When you got older?

A I went to a lot of movies. I may have gone to a

midnight movie once.

Q Okay.

A But that is too many movies: four movies and then you had the cartoons and the newsreel movie. That is where you got your news.

Q I assume that your father was associated with the Nacirema Club?

A My brother was. He joined as a very young man and they had a student membership. He would work off his dues. As I look at the Nacirema Club now, I see a lot of things still there that he did as he grew older.

Q Like what?

A The flooring and the bottom room. He laid that; its tile. He did paneling and sometimes I have seen the signs; he was good at printing and I see signs that he has done there.

Q How did he come to join the Nacirema Club in the first place?

A Well, it was where men joined, to go and have a good social time. They would have breakfast on Tuesday mornings at the Nacirema. On Christmas, they would have high noon where they would go and have eggnog and fruit cake and wish each other happy holidays. They would have a woman's bridge club where they would go. They had Nacirema Week, which I am sure you have heard about, where they have a woman's bridge party, picnic, fashion show and a Boblo boat ride. It was just a good place to hang out. You would go there and shoot pool, have a drink,

go there for Sunday dinner. My uncle Roy Morton, my Aunt Bessie's husband, was a founder of the Nacirema, which is American spelled backwards. He was president an unprecedented amount of time. I am sure that he had my brother to join.

Q Okay. Did the Rex and Reginas have different activities there?

A We were going to have a Halloween party. They wanted to know where they could have it. Usually we would have parties in someone's home. We wanted this to be special. I told them, "maybe I could get the Nacirema" because my Uncle Roy was the president. It was an exceptional party.

Q What do you remember about it?

A Well, the only thing I remember is that Jean Ernst was our Queen and Gerald Goldsby, who was just here, was the King. I remember that because we have that photograph. It was a good time.

Q Now explain what is the Rex and Reginas Club exactly?

A When the students from Sampson came to McMichael, they came in the 9th grade. I went there in the 7th grade. We met each other. The teachers sometimes helped us to get together as friends. Lois Huntington said "let's have a club" and we got together and decided to name it Rex and Reginas or Kings and Queens, because they were all in Miss Black's Latin class. Different people were invited to come and we would meet at each other's homes. We would have waistline parties where you would measure your waistline and that is how much you had to pay to get in. I don't think

we ever had a fashion show. We had dancing parties where you go to the home and then we just liked to hang out together.

Q You started talking before and then you went into another direction. But at some point your family left Trinity A.M.E. and went to Bethel. Why did you make the move from one church to another?

A That's when the highway came through Roosevelt and it took that church. I guess it took them a while to get it together. I had a sister that had decided to go to Bethel. They had gone to Bethel when they first came to Detroit, because we lived on the East Side at that time. It was a thriving church. I started going there when I was about 14 and I go to this day.

Q Was Reverend Peck there or was it Reverend Dames when you were there as a child?

A Reverend Peck had died when I got there, and the church was in an uproar. They would not have accepted any minister at that time. It was a hard time for Reverend Dames and his wife.

Q How so?

A The church was not very kind.

Q Why not?

A Because he wasn't Reverend Peck.

Q Okay. How did this manifest itself?

A Well, I wasn't in on that, but I just heard these things.

I really liked Reverend Dames and he had some good activities for us.

I was in something called the Veiled Prophet where they invited girls from across the city to be in this pageant. We never did find out who the veiled prophet was, but I became his bride.

Q I never heard of anything like that?

A It was a pageant and he came with a veil over his face and there were about eight or ten of us, and I didn't pay any attention when we went through our rehearsals because I knew I wouldn't be selected. I just sort of went to the meetings. When they announced my name, I didn't know what to do. We all wore white and I think we had some kind of veil on, too.

Q Okay.

A It was a pageant.

Q I understand his wife was very active with the youth in the church?

A Yes, she was. But she died. She died and then we had an influx of women coming to Bethel.

Q I wonder why?

A Yes, and he married one of them. Just before or just after he left Detroit. I think he went to Chicago.

Q Okay.

A Then we had Reverend Roberts who was wonderful.

Q When did Reverend Roberts begin?

A Right after Reverend Dames.

Q Do you know about what year?

A Reverend Roberts came around 1950, '51 or something like that.

Q What was so wonderful about him?

A He was just a good Christian man that ran the church the way it should be run. He didn't have a lot of fundraisers. You paid your tithe and they didn't bother you any more. We had a lot of good activities.

His son, Bobby, Jr., is just retiring now from Martin Luther King's Church, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. He married one of my very good friends.

Q The son did?

A Yes.

Q What kind of activity did they have there that you kind of remember?

A Well, there is always the choir. Then there was a group for young adults called University of Life. We would meet on Sunday evenings. People came from all over Detroit there and we would have programs of interest to people like us.

Q Let's go back just a little bit, to your singing. How did you get into singing?

A My mother always wanted a musician. I was number six. So I was the one that had to be it. Well, when I was three she taught me this song, "Daddy's Sweetheart." "Oh if mother hadn't married daddy /he might have married me." She taught me that. I sang it at a Delta affair. It was at the Lucy Thurman Y and that was my first experience singing in public. I always sang around the house. In that day, Shirley Temple was our model. I took dance so I could dance like Shirley Temple and I sang. I had Shirley Temple curls. That is a shame, isn't it? But at any rate that is what the **Bluest Eye** is about; that is by Toni Morrison.

Q Yes.

A Then I was always in the glee club at whatever school I went to. When I was around 12 my mother was taking a class in Choral Directing at the Detroit Society of Musical Arts. Dr. Ebersole, her teacher, asked if anybody had a young person they could bring in so she could do some demonstrations. My mother took me. That is when I got my first bought clothes. I got a new pleated skirt and a pink sweater, so that I could go there. Whatever the demonstration was, Dr. Ebersole said she should give me lessons. So I guess she had a method to her madness in the first place. Anyway I took lessons from her at about 12.

Then I sang at some of her recitals. I didn't like what I was singing. It was classical and art songs and stuff like that.

But at any rate, when I went to Northwestern High School, the teacher was Straucy Edwards and she was wonderful. She was a hard task master, and she decided I was a coloratura soprano. I took lessons from her. I appeared on the concert that she had singing Mozart's "Allelujah." I was on the radio. I sang for our study hall and in other concerts.

So she was pushing me to take music when I went to

college. She was trying to get me to go to Xavier in New Orleans or Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. But I went to Wayne because I liked it at home. I took more music and I majored in applied music voice as an Instrument. After a year and a half I said, "well, I am not going to be able to get a job with this." But, talking about singing, I was in the church choir at a very early age. I sang the solo to the "Messiah," the soprano, along with some prominent other tenors, bases, and contraltos. I did the solo to the **Seven Last Words**. I was invited to go to other churches and sing on Sundays and I sang in everybody's wedding. I sang at a lot of funerals, teas and what have you.

Q How did you get asked to sing at the different events?

A People knew that I sang, I guess, or they would hear me one place. Most of the people were friends whose weddings that I sang in. I also auditioned for the Ted Mack Amateur Hour. If when they came to Detroit they needed a classical singer, I would have been the one. When they came to Detroit, they already had a classical singer. They had a woman that sang "The Old Lamp Lighter." I didn't like the kind of singing that I did, to tell you the truth.

I wanted to be a lounge singer. Once in a while when I would go to the Garfield Lounge, which was on John R, when Don Raphael was there, he would have me to sing. I could sing seated at the table.

Q You enjoyed that?

A I enjoyed that.

Q What did you enjoy about lounge singing; what was it about that --

A It was just informal. I didn't have to try to reach high C and I thought it was more acceptable to my peers.

Q Okay. Did your aunt have any influence on your singing?

A My aunt, Florence Cole? No. She left Detroit. She was a lyric soprano. She sang Aida, but she got most of her experience in Europe. So she was over there and by then she and my uncle had divorced. Whenever she came to Detroit, she always stayed with us and she always sang; she made arrangements to go and sing at our church. She composed the Delta hymn.

Q Tell us something about Northwestern. What was that experience like?

A I didn't participate in as many activities there as some of the other students. I was in the a cappella choir, that was about it. I had my first boyfriend at Northwestern. He used to walk me home, carry my books and that kind of thing. I worked at the Norwester Shop, which was on Tireman. So after school at 2:00, I would go over there. It was like a confectionery; they had ice cream and potato chips and stuff like that. It was owned by Hutchins Coleman. He worked in the factory at night, and had the store during the day. So I would go there so he could go home and take a nap. He would come back around 6:00pm and then I could leave.

Q What kind of work did you do there?

A I was a salesperson. It was fun. When football practice was over, the team would come in and get their stuff as well as the basketball team. I don't remember too many ladies coming in there. At any rate, that was a good experience for me and gave me a little money. My sister

got me that job. She was always getting me jobs. In fact, I started working for her when I was riding my tricycle. I would take her a jar of ice. She had a beauty shop on the corner of Roosevelt and Hudson. She would call home and say "I want some ice or I want a Pepsi" and I would take it to her on my tricycle. I couldn't cross the street. I would call her and she would come across the street and get it and give me a quarter. That was my first work experience.

I went to all of the games with this guy that I was dating. My first date was to Midnight Magic, which was over at 11:00. It was a dance that the the lettermen had. It was at the school. I think we were probably the only black couple there.

Q How did you come to go there. Why did you go there?

A To that dance?

Q Yes, you being the only black couple?

A The guy that was in that group asked me. I don't remember any of the other black athletes going to that; I don't know why. Maybe they were there; I don't remember.

Q That kind of reminds me of the segregation in your life growing up. Are there any particular moments that you can recall that reminded you that you lived in a segregated society.

A Yes. I went to Mackinaw City -- Carp Lake -- with my parents when I was a young teenager. We were there three weeks. We rented a cabin. There were other young people in those cabins. Every day we would walk to the ice cream parlor and we would get an ice cream cone and come home.

So one day we decided, "let's play the jukebox and sit there at the table and have our ice cream." They wouldn't serve us. So needless to say, we didn't go back there again.

Q On the West Side did you experience any segregation, anything that reminded you that this was a segregated society that you lived in?

A They talked about we couldn't go to the Fisher Y. That was the men's Y; I didn't want to go there anyway. We had the Lucy Thurman on the East Side where you met people from all over and had such a great time with them. My voice teacher took me one day; she said, "we will go to lunch," and she had some friends. We went to Greenfield's that was on Woodward. It was a cafeteria. When I came home I told my mother, "Dr. Huger took me to lunch." She said, "where did you go?" I said, "Greenfield's." She said, "they don't serve black people there." I guess because I was with her, they didn't bother me.

The first study hall president that was black was Ed Turner; and that was during my tenure. Then we never had black officers of the classes until maybe about 1947. So they just didn't vote us in or maybe we didn't run or anything.

Q Do you remember when the first officers did get elected?

A Yes.

Q What was that like? Was it a big deal?

A It was a big deal. It was a big deal. We talked about it. I can't remember. I know that Doris Johnson was the treasurer of her class. I think that was the class of '47. I don't remember who our officers were to tell you the truth,

but it was a big deal.

Now, Straucy Edwards, the music teacher, would have parties at her apartment and invite us. She invited both black and white students. We did games and things together. I don't know that we danced. She always made arrangements for us to get there, and that was the only time that I remember that we mixed at all.

Q Was she a different teacher in that regard, someone that encouraged --

A Yes. Nobody else invited us to their home.

Q Not only that it sounds like she was fair, by having black and white students?

A Right. Like I said, I was a soloist sometimes. She had other black student soloists. She thought my boyfriend was lazy. She wanted me to go with another guy. She was always putting us together with the little skits and things; that was fun.

Q Tell us about the role and importance of education, or lack thereof, within your household. Did your parents emphasize education at all?

A Definitely. I would be on punishment if I got a C for the whole card marking. You didn't have a choice. It was just when you go to college, and all of us went. I was the last. My brother went to University of Cincinnati for awhile and took Pharmacy. He was living with my uncle there, but he came back home. He eventually finished from Wayne University. He finished in physical education around 1947 and wasn't able to get a job in physical education. So he continued working at the post office. He was an excellent

coach. He coached community basketball teams and they were always on top of whatever league they were in, but he could never get a job with the Board of Education.

My sister, Dora, finished home economics and could never get a job. She was a good student with good grades but could never get a job in home economics. Eventually, she joined the teacher's union and got a job teaching science in the lower school. But her certificate was for secondary schools. She eventually became a precision teacher; that means that she could teach reading, teach students that had difficulty. She was an excellent seamstress. While she was there at Wayne, they had an experience where you live in a university house for a month, I think. They wouldn't let the black students live in that house. My two sisters that took Home Ec didn't get a chance to live in the house. So my sister, Dora had her own house. So they came and evaluated what she was doing there. It was a gorgeous house she had at that time. My sister Vivian was still living at home. She did slipcovers or something and they had to come and evaluate them. She said she took the teacher through the worst parts of the city to get to our house. But at any rate, that was her revenge.

Q Do you recall the 1943 riot at all?

A Very little about it: I remember the rumors. I was at McMichael Intermediate School at that time. My mother was visiting a sister of mine in Boston at that time. Different parents were coming to school and getting their children. I thought nobody is going to come and get me because my mother is gone and my father is at work. I looked up and my brother and two sisters came and got me. I went home.

It was a sunny day. I remember going outside and playing. You heard all of the rumors but that didn't affect me.

Q What kind of rumors did you hear?

A "Somebody threw a baby off the Belle Isle bridge," and that kind of thing.

I do remember that my brother-in-law was in the area of Wayne University. There was a white mob and he got down in his car and drove it to get away.

Q Wow. You went in to the field of occupational therapy after giving up music. Why did you choose occupational therapy?

A I hadn't given up music when I did choose occupational therapy. I spent a summer with a sister of mine who was living in Cleveland. Her husband was doing a psychiatry residency over there. There were different things around the house: craft-type things. "We got this in occupational therapy." I said, "that sounds interesting. What is it? Her husband took me to the hospital and I met the occupational therapist. She took me on the tour of her department. At that time, there were 27 schools of OT; one of them was at Wayne. As soon as I came back I made an appointment with Barbara Jewett who was the department chair at that time; it was located at Grace Hospital. I went there and the rest is history.

Q What kind of position within occupational therapy have you had since you made that decision?

A When I finished all of my work -- my internship and everything -- I still had to go back and take a physics class that I had taken before, but didn't do too well in. So I got a

job for Friends and Relatives of the Disabled of South Oakland County. I worked eight hours a week. I started this program for severely disabled and retarded children. It was in a church in Royal Oak. So that was actually my first job. Then when I finished the physics class, I worked for a short period of time at the Detroit Society for Crippled Children in a new building. I was there for about a year. Then I was having a hard time getting a job and I guess Ms. Jewett, who was the chair of the department, told me “we have a temporary position at Wayne, and we would like you to come and fill-in for these few months.” Well, the few months turned into three years.

Then I left there and went to the Rehabilitation Institute as a supervisor in the Occupational Therapy Department. I did leisure activities there with the patients because they were there for anywhere from six months to a year. Now they go in and they are there six days to ten days. I had an exemplary program there and while I was there I also worked with blind teenagers and adults. I left there after I got my master’s degree, and came back to Wayne as an assistant professor. First, I was research associate. I came back as assistant professor. That is where I spent the rest of my time. At Wayne you have an opportunity to do clinical type things. I helped to start the Center for Independent Living, which was located in the Bicentennial Towers; that was in 1977. I was there while teaching at Wayne and I would bring my students in there so they could see what that was like for the severely disabled to learn how to live on their own.

I also was a faculty scholar and associate for the Gerontology Institute while I was there.

Q Okay. This might be the last question, we will see.

A I eventually became chair of the department.

Q I am glad you got that in.

What is it about the West Side that resulted in so many prominent people such as yourself and others, John Conyers, Damon Keith, Elliot Hall and many others to be nurtured and become what they became?

A Back then because of segregation everybody lived in your neighborhood. You had doctors, you had lawyers, you had dentists, you had teachers, you had people that worked at Ford's, you had people that did day work. You had people that owned businesses. In all of these, they all had an excellent work ethic. They did not mind giving you a full days' work for a full days' pay. We saw that. We saw people going to work on the streetcar, coming home at a designated time. In all of the houses there was somebody there during the day to be there when the students came home for lunch or when they came home in the evening. I would say that everybody had a church home, and that was important. Our values were similar and this is something that I have learned since I have been in the WestSiders. I always thought my parents were the most strict people in the entire world. I find that the other people in the WestSiders had the same rules that I had. They couldn't go past their house. They had to be in at a certain time. They had to go to church. They had to get good grades.

Q Okay.

A You couldn't have a baby.

Q You couldn't have a baby?

A If you weren't married.

Q How was that idea communicated?

A They would tell you: "If you get pregnant, that is your problem; you are out of here." My parents said they didn't visit anybody in jail or in a TB Hospital. TB was the scourge at that time.

Q You mentioned something before about the highway coming through the neighborhood, that that was the reason why your church went away. What did that do to the community?

A That ruined the community. I-94 came right through the middle of our West Side neighborhood. So what does that mean? That means that the neighborhood is torn up for several years. Then you can't walk to the store because the highway is going through there. You have to go a roundabout way to get to the street that goes across the highway, to get to McGraw, to go over to Warren or to Milford to do your shopping. The businesses were affected by this. The homes were. It was just a terrible thing to happen. My parents were set for life in that house. They had to go into debt again when, at a time, they should have been able to relax and travel and that kind of thing; they weren't able to do that.

Q Was there any protest against the coming of the highway?

A Yes.

Q What do you recall about the protest? What kind of protest was it?

A I just remember them going to meetings probably of the Council and that kind of thing, but to no avail.

Then my parents thought they didn't get the money that they should have gotten for their home. My brother bought the house from the State of Michigan and moved it several blocks away to Hartford.

Q Physically moved it?

A Physically moved it. That was the way for him to become a home owner. He had lived in the Brewster Project. That is what he did. The house is still where he moved it. It was not brick. He put brick on it and put a beautiful basement in and a fireplace.

Q It is still there?

A Yes, it is still there. He is gone but the house is still there.

Q Did other people move their houses?

A No, I think that was the only one and that was sort of hysterical, historical, and, I guess, hysterical, too.

Q Where is that house located right now?

A It is on the corner of Hartford and Scovel.

Q Hartford and Scovel. Okay.

Tell us about Joe Louis. Did you listen to the fights? Did you family listen to the fights?

A Oh, yes, we listened to the fights. He was an icon among our people. I do remember one fight where my aunt Bessie had a television, but it was a little screen television. Everybody had gathered at the house to watch the Joe Louis

fight. Well nobody locked the doors back then. There was a man that came in, he watched the fight and when it was over he left. Everybody said who was that man? It wasn't the Lone Ranger, but nobody knew who he was. I don't remember going out in the street. I remember the horns blowing and that kind of thing. Our family had a bank of Joe Louis, which was from the waist up, where he has got his gloves on. It was a little bank that sat on our piano. That was a gift from somebody. That was somebody we treasured. I met Joe Louis when I was working at the Rehabilitation Institute. Whenever anybody came in town to entertain, I would go and ask them to come and meet our patients. Sometime they would come and entertain. Joan Rivers, Sammy Davis, Chico Hamilton, and Myron Cohn. At any rate, Joe Louis was appearing at the Flame Show Bar with Freda Payne. They both came to our Rehabilitation Institute and met the patients. They didn't have a lot of black patients there, but all of the patients were so happy to meet Joe Louis. He was quite a charmer.

Q How did that come out, the charming part?

A Well, he just shook hands and talked with people. He was just a kind and gentle man. I have heard otherwise, but that was the way he was that night.

Q The Depression, do you have any particular memories about the Depression?

A I don't have a lot of memories about the Depression.

What I remember is my mother always saying that my father never missed a payday during the depression, in that he worked for the federal government.

Q Did you notice any change in their lifestyles as a result

of the fact that they were not able to afford different things?

A Nobody afforded much back then anyway. We didn't have any fancy tennis shoes, sport shoes. Everybody had the same coats. You had a Sunday dress and everyday clothes and that kind of thing. I didn't pay any attention to that. I was busy trying to get my education and so forth.

Q Okay.

A I remember going to people's homes and they didn't have rugs on the floor. They didn't have couches or stuff like that. But I didn't think that much about it. They would have a straight wooden chair in there. I didn't think that much about that; I guess that was as a result of hard times, period.

Q Now, you have an organization, the WestSiders. How did it form?

A Karl Young looked around and saw the way people were accomplishing things.

He got with Jerry Blocker, who was the very first black anchor person on a major news channel, and Stephen Clark.

They invited people to come. You paid one hundred dollars. You were on that first videotape that they had; and that videotape was to make money to publish a book on the history of the West Side. That was supposed to be all that we were going to do. We keep finding things to do like this project.

Q Okay. That is a wrap, as they say.