

Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and
Hoboken Historical Museum
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: SHIRLEY DENNIS

INTERVIEWER: LAURA KNITTEL

DATE: 19 JULY 2010

Laura Knittel: We are here today on Monday July 19th, 2010. My name is Laura Knittel and I have the honor of interviewing today Miss Shirley M. Dennis for an oral history project sponsored by the Friends of the Hoboken Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum. I would like to say hello and welcome to my dear friend.

So, Shirley, I'd like to begin right away and maybe you can share with us when you were born and some family history.

Shirley Dennis: Well, I was born on July 22nd, 1948, which is coming up this week on Thursday, in Baltimore, Maryland. My parents was Rufus Dennis and Lillie M. Miller. We moved here when I was very little; I've been here almost 58 years.

LK: And what brought your family to Hoboken?

SD: I think pretty much probably job-wise for my aunt. My aunt Isabel was the first one to come. And then my grandmother and my uncle Freddy came; shortly then after that my uncle

James brought myself and my brother up and my parents followed later on. Their first job was in the Tootsie Roll factory.

LK: Where was the Tootsie Roll Factory Shirley?

SN: It was up by 15th Street in the Hudson Street area at that time. Way up there. I don't think it's even there anymore.

LK: And who worked for the Tootsie Roll Factory?

SN: My mom and dad. My aunt worked for a laundry up on Ferry Street in Jersey City for many years.

LK: I guess you got a lot of Tootsie Rolls?

SN: Did we get Tootsie Rolls! We ate so much they were coming out our ears. Still my favorite candy to the day.

LK: Were there any other products that the Tootsie Roll company made aside from the actual Tootsie Roll?

SD: That's all I know of, in all shapes, size and form. The biggest one was the real big one, like a foot long. We loved those.

LK: And did they have Tootsie Pops back then too?

SD: Tootsie Pops, yes. The little tiny miniature tootsie rolls, and the little slender ones. They had them all shapes. And Dad and Mom, they brought bags home.

LK: Wow that must have been a real treat?

SD: Hallelujah!

LK: So what brought your family to Hoboken was pretty much work.

SD: I think it was work. Coming north it was much easier to find a job than in South Carolina at the time or Baltimore.

LK: They came in the 50's, right?

SD: They had to have come around that time, as I was about three or four when they came.

LK: Gotcha; thank you. Okay, Shirley, could you describe for us a little bit of your childhood and what the neighborhood was like relative to Hoboken and growing up here?

SD: I would say everyone was family. 653 First Street and the house right down the block. Still stands. We used to play from morning to night. I remember that. The neighbors were just great. My cousin lived in the building on the second floor. Mom and Dad lived on the first, Grandma and Auntie lived on the third floor and we would go up there for dinner every so often. I remember I was asthmatic so it was a sick time in my life because I was born with asthma. But my neighbors would protect me. I remember many times when I would get asthma, Aunt Mamie, my next door neighbor, she had asthmas too and she would call me over and made me coffee and gave me a Prametine. That's what it was called: Prametine. I don't think Prametine is around anymore. But it was an asthma medicine back then; she would give me a half of one and a cup of coffee. And then her husband Uncle Sonny, he played the guitar, so he would serenade me. They were awesome people, awesome people.

LK: These were the neighbors.

SD: They were my neighbors. It was a tenement so we lived on one side and they lived on the opposite side and those were the times that the bathroom was in the middle. The tub was in the kitchen. You had a deep side of the sink that was the tub for bathing; and you had the regular side of the sink for dishes. Those were the days. Yeah those were the days.

LK: And how old were you?

SD: Well, Back there it was kindergarten all the way to junior high was 653 First Street, 8 is third grade, 10 is fifth grade. I graduated at the last eighth grade to graduate. And then we went to Demarest for a year, for ninth grade.

LK: Kindergarten through junior high you said you lived in the same place? And the house is still there?

SD: And the house is still there. A lot of time I want to knock on the door to see what it is like. I know they changed it over it to Condos now. But there was the Thomases and my cousins' name was the McClouds. That was the house you would go to where all of the parties were. The men would be in the kitchen and the ladies and the children up in the living room. And my aunt she always cooked. Good times! Good times!

LK: That was what was special about your neighborhood at the time.

SD: And I remember especially Miss Ann. Miss Ann Wood. She lived on the first floor. Miss Ann was like the watcher. We called her the watcher as she would sit there many hours and watch as we played outside. You know what? She gave me my first birthday party. I get teary-eyed even now. Miss Ann called me in her house and she had made me spaghetti and meatballs, pretzels and potatoes chips and of course we had to top it off with Kool-Aid. She surprised me with my first birthday party and I'll always remember that.

LK: Miss Ann Wood was her name?

SD: Wood was her last name.

LK: And was she a mom?

SD: I don't ever remember Miss Ann having any children. It was her and her husband but there were no children. I guess she sorta' adopted us as her children.

LK: Wow, that's a great story of your first birthday party. And how old were you at that party?

SD: I had to be about 11 or 12.

LK: Wow, that was a beautiful memory.

SD: Yes, it was.

LK: And spaghetti and meatballs?

SD: I remember what she served isn't that amazing? All these years I remember! What a lady she was. I can hear her now saying "Get off the street. There's a car coming!" We didn't have no playgrounds back there close by. The street was our playground. We played tops, which I was the champ at, thank you very much.

LK: And what was tops?

SD: You had to hit the other person's top out of the box. I don't know if they still play that. It's a big square they made with 1 through 10 and then you had the home plate in the middle.

LK: Did you use a bottle?

SD: No bottle was safe with us children around.

LK: That was called tops.

SD: Tops. And you would put the tar in there to give it the heaviness so ya' knock the other top out of the box.

LK: And where would you play these games?

SD: Right in the middle of the street.

LK: Middle of the street. So traffic was different then?

SD: Traffic was a lot different then. Well, we were right down First Street so it wasn't that bad. Nowhere near like now. I don't think I would even hit my top now, there's so much traffic coming down.

LK: I'm so surprised to hear.

SD: But that was our playground, the street.

LK: Wow. In terms of the neighborhood, any particular places that you remember?

SD: Well, right next door to us there was a, guess a storefront you would call it. And one of the members from our church, we called him Brother Mitchell, he had a fruit store and every Sunday he would make us ice cream. Homemade ice cream.

LK: Wow!

SD: Yes. And a block down, about half way down, there was a candy store on the other side where you could buy penny candy. 'Member the days of penny candy? And the little red with the corns.

LK: Candy Corns?

SD: Candy Corns. Yes, yes. Two for a penny. Can you imagine?

LK: And that was on First Street?

SD: That was on First Street, in between Monroe and Jackson Street. Then you go further down on the opposite side, the right-hand side, was Patsy. He was a fruit store. Mom would say "Go down to Patsy and get me an onion" and further down was Louie's supermarket.

LK: The supermarket. Can you describe it? The size of A&P or the size of Shoprite?

SD: No. It was more like a big deli. Then the supermarket was two blocks down. The IGA Supermarket. It was a real big place. In fact my uncle worked there as a driver.

LK: Where was that located? IGA?

SD: IGA was located in between Madison and Jefferson. I think it was in that area. It was a supermarket. We used to be sent to the store. That's how you earn your money to buy your candy.

LK: And you said your Uncle Freddy worked there. What did he do?

SD: He was a driver. A van driver.

LK: Delivery?

SD: Delivery, yeah. He was one of the first black drivers that they had.

LK: And where did he live?

SD: With us. Same house. He came up with Grandma. In fact I remember when I got here, the first night I got here. Can you imagine how you can remember things so vividly? When I first got here my uncle brought us into the house and Uncle Freddy was there; he had to be about 16. Uncle Freddy was younger than that. Then he must have been 11. And I decided that I was going to sleep with Uncle Freddy and my brother. And my aunt said I was going to sleep with Grandma and her. And I put up a protest. "I wanna' sleep with my brother and Uncle!" My aunt just picked me up and dropped me in the bed. She never had a problem with me any time since then.

LK: And this is your Aunt?

SD: Isabelle.

LK: Where were your mother and father at this time?

SD: Mom hadn't gotten here yet; they came later. Much later.

LK: And did you keep in touch at all during this time?

SD: Yes.

LK: And did you do that through phone or letter?

SD: That had to be through letter. Phone? What phone?

LK: Well, you had to get a phone at some point.

SD: Much later.

LK: And when you got your letters, did you read them yourself? Or did you aunt Isabelle read them to you?

SD: That would be auntie.

LK: Is there anything else you wanted to share with us about the neighborhood before we move on?

SD: I was thinking about we didn't have to leave the neighborhood because there was Mickey Finn, the clothing store, John Department Store for everything else you need. And then Miss Helen was there for when you want to get fancy with her dress shop. Then Benny's. I remember Benny was on First and Willow; it's now a real estate office. We used to go in there and they used to call down. He'd give you a price and you'd have to bargain. "Benny, I'm not paying that much for that. That's too much money!" He did it on purpose because he liked to fight.

LK: He liked to negotiate.

SD: Negotiate. I would say. Okay, let's not go through all of this nonsense. Just tell me what the price is.

LK: And what did he sell?

SD: He sold lingerie and we'd call them work clothes, khaki pants stuff like that.

LK: Casual.

SD: Casual. More casual. If you wanted a solid foundation that's where you would go, to Benny's.

LK: And that was the name of the store, Benny's?

SD: Benny's, yeah.

LK: Did you know anything else about Benny?

SD: Not very much about Benny other than that. Little short guy. Very very community.

He loved people and people loved Benny.

LK: Do you know how long the store was around?

SD: Until I got grown, so I would say quite a bit. Til' I could shop on my own.

LK: You came with Uncle James. Can you share with us anything else about him?

SD: Uncle James was a sharp dresser; he also was a manager for many years at a linoleum place on the corner where Curves is now. They'd go to your house and put the rugs down and the whole nine yards. We called him the funny one; he was always the jokester.

LK: Was a he a musician also or a singer?

SD: No. Just Uncle James. Uncle James was a hard worker.

LK: Great. Now, At this point are you still living at the same address? Up until your teenage years?

SD: Teenage years. Then we moved to 69 Park Avenue.

LK: And you would have been a teenager then, right? What was that like, growing up a teenager in Hoboken? I guess this would be the early '60's for you.

SD: Yes, because I graduated in '66, so '62, '63.

LK: What was it like growing up as a teenager here in Hoboken in the sixties?

SD: Well, for me I was a homebody. I was sick more times. When I was up, I was up and when I was down, I was down. But it was a good time.

LK: Were you able to study? Did you go to school or were you able to study at home?

SD: I went to school. I would slip by my grandma when I had asthma because I loved school. I would go to school in a blizzard. That's how much I loved school. I remember especially when I got to school they would be watching for me at the door. And I would make like everything was fine; you know you hold your breath and say, "Good morning." And the nurse would sit right at the door and say, "Shirley, come here" and they would send me right back home. Mr. Fine was the principal. As I said we were the last eighth grade to graduate. What they did was put all of my classes on one floor so I wouldn't have to go up and down stairs.

LK: Oh, that was nice. Because of your asthma?

SD: Around October through January was my worst months so they would put all of my classes on one level. And I remember when I got to high school Mister Ascolese was the coach and he also taught driving. I got past my grandma; I couldn't get past the nurse. And she would send me home with Mister Ascolese because back then you used to get examined by a school doctor and he gave me my first asthma pump. And I was able to go to school on a regular basis.

LK: And this was a new type of medicine for asthma at that time?

SD: I guess so because I remember I would have to get examined to see if I was okay to take it and they gave me the asthma pump.

LK: And how did it work for you?

SD: It worked. I got to school more often with less stress. Yeah. I remember that.

LK: What was it like, Shirley, during the '60's considering the civil rights movement? What was that like as a black American young lady going to high school?

SD: We didn't really know anything about it here in Hoboken, to tell you the truth. Every time I hear that question I think about the one time a white mother moved in on Monroe Street right across from Number Nine School, where I went to school. Her daughter's name was Helen.

Helen's mom was upset because Helen got in a fight with some black girls and she thought it was a racist thing. They were new to Hoboken. So she decided that we had to be separated. Six black mothers got wind of it and I remember these black mamas came and they just stood on the corner. Three stood there and three stood there. And that was the end of that. We never had a problem after that. They never said a word and I think the principal probably just schooled the mother, told her it was not a racial thing because we didn't have that. And Helen and I became best friends. That was the only episode back then.

But I experienced much later up on Washington, at a loft candy store with all of the rioting and all of that was going on.

LK: And what year was that?

SD: It had to be the early '60's.

LK: Early '60's?

SD: No, no, no it had to be 70's.

LK: And you said there were riots.

SD: Because I was already out of school.

LK: You would have been 19, 20?

SD: In my twenties because I worked for Welco Industry until I was about 20.

LK: And what industry was that again?

SD: Welco. My first job I got here in Hoboken I started working when they first came out with the work-study program in high school; you would work a half day and got to school a half day. I was 16.

LK: You were 16. And could you describe that again for us?

SD: They called it the work-study program. You went to school in the morning and went to work in the afternoon. At 16 I was looking for a job in the summertime. I was looking all over Jersey City and everywhere. I would just have to go across the street to 221 Clinton Street. After Park Avenue we moved to Clinton Street. And I remember saying, "Do you have a job?" and they hired me right away. I worked as a clerk; I used to walk from school, go upstairs, drop off my books and walk across the street to the job.

LK: And this is Welco Industry?

SD: Welco Industry was a glass company; they were pretty famous. I think they were national and international.

LK: Were there other companies doing the same program?

SD: I'm sure there was; I just happened to be working for this particular one. Welco Industries. And after I got out of school I worked for them an additional two years. I was about 20 when I left them. I went to collect unemployment. They laid me off so I collected unemployment. But back then unemployment gave you jobs. But I went for unemployment and they sent me on a job interview for American Shop Cap Company. At 222 Washington Street, right over Quick Chek. Top floor. I was there for two years.

LK: Thank you. Before we move on, can we go back for a second to the 1970's? You talked about riots and you wanted to share with us an experience on Washington Street when you were in your twenties.

SD: Loft Candy Store. I worked for American Shop Cap Company at the time; I was in my twenties and I was asked by one of the members of the staff to pick up some candy. I was getting in line and the lady that was serving was taking everyone until she got to me and she looked over me and said, "Next!" And I said, "Woah! What was that about? What was that

about?" And everyone in line said, "She's next." But she didn't want to serve me. And I remember I was really unnerved by it because I never really experienced that thing. So when I got back to the job and I told the one who sent me; he was furious. He was so furious and I just said to him, "Wow, that was different." And I just let it pass. There's certain things you just don't blink your eye. And that was one of them.

LK: And you mentioned the word "riots." Were you talking about throughout the country?

SD: Throughout the country. That was the time they burned down Newark and what not. In fact I remember my boss asking me—his name was Al; I guess if I think about it, I never considered it a racial thing—but he said to me one time, "Shirley, what do you think about these riots? Because they burned down Newark. Burnt Newark down." And I said to him, "I really think they are crazy. Pretty Stupid." He said, "Why do you say that?" and I said, "They didn't fix my house when it was a shack. You think they gonna' build me one? What I would have done was gone uptown and burned your house down!" He never asked that question anymore. That was Al.

I heard him one time on the phone talking to his daughter in-law and he said, "You come work for me and I'll start you at \$100 dollars a week." And that was a lot of money at the time. I was making \$50 a week at that time. And he said, "Shirley, you are just like family to me." I said, "That's why you're willing to give your daughter-in-law \$100 for what you are giving me \$50?" So that ended that conversation.

LK: And did you ever get a raise? This gentleman, you mentioned the name Mike. Was this someone you worked for or worked with? And what was his last name again?

SD: Worked with. Mike Mietti. And this was with American Shop Cap Company. I was a Gal Friday. You ever heard of Gal Friday? And I remember doing the payroll and doing the books and stuff. I would be finished in two weeks. Everything was balanced and figured out; all of the bills were sent out and the whole nine yards and they said to me, "It took the other girl months to do this." I would go in the back and learn how to sew the caps, press the caps, fold them, and pack them because I was so bored.

LK: And what kind of caps were these?

SD: You know, the paint caps.

LK: Oh the paint caps. For painting.

SD: And people would order them with their name on them all of the companies with their name.

LK: Silk screening.

SD: Then remember the railroad caps. The checks and stuff and the stripes and stuff I did all of that.

LK: And where was that located? On Monroe?

SD: Right here on Washington Street. 222. Above Quick Chek.

LK: Let me ask this while we are still around the 70's period in your life. Your family when you would go home and all of this was occurring. The riots and all of the issues that we were facing at the time. What was your experience like with your family and your home and how they dealt with some of these things? Can you share a little bit about that?

SD: We didn't talk about it.

LK: Didn't talk about it.

SD: Didn't talk about it.

LK: Anything else you want to share about that time period with us. Historical?

SD: We didn't talk about it because it was nothing that we were proud of. You know? I remember when I was a kid. Life Magazine. That was the highlight. If you were able to buy Life Magazine, you were someone, you know? And that was the one magazine that my grandma ordered was Life Magazine because of the articles. And I remember one day, as we were talking about race, and there was a black man buried with his head out and dogs was eating his face. And I said, "Grandma, what is this?" And she just said, "Close the book, gal, close the book". And that was the end of that. And I still remember that. Pictures like Roots or Boycott, I have a difficulty watching those things.

LK: You choose not to.

SD: Yeah, I have a really rough time watching that.

LK: Okay.

SD: Roots was on. I went to the office and I said to my white co-workers, "Don't talk to me." And they said, "Why, Shirley?" and I said, "I'm not particularly sure I like you anymore." Since we were so close as a family they knew what I was talking about. I said, "I was watching Roots and I don't really know how I feel right now." And they gave me the space. And it was like a respect thing. And I always remember that.

LK: Where were you working then?

SD: I was working for a CDA.

LK: And for the record, CDA stands for?

SD: Community Development Agency.

LK: Which had another name before CDA.

SD: Hoboken Model Cities.

LK: Hoboken Model Cities. And when was it founded?

SD: '69. Well they started in '68; I came in '69.

LK: And when they did they change to CDA, do you know roughly?

SD: Five years later. Because it was a five-year model program.

LK: Were they a non-profit organization or under the city umbrella?

SD: We were a department of the city.

LK: A department of the City of Hoboken. Thank you.

While we're still in the 70's in your life: what family members were important to you?

Can you speak a little bit about your family experience? The time you spent. The different social factors that influenced your life? Perhaps speak about social factors, cultural settings and traditions that you shared with your family during that time and the importance of that to you. Could be church, school, work.

SD: While living in Hoboken with family we were mostly church oriented. As a member of Emmanuel Pentecostal U.H. Church, at that time located on Jefferson right off of Observer Highway, off Newark Street. The pastor was Reverend Allen.

She was a lady pastor. She was stern about teaching us the Word. She taught us the Bible not only to know it but to live it. My aunt was the secretary; my grandma was one of the mothers of the church.

LK: When you say aunt, you mean Aunt Isabelle?

SD: Aunt Isabelle. She was a secretary of the church.

LK: And there was another family member?

SD: Grandma Elizabeth she was.

LK: And what did Grandma Elizabeth do?

SD: She was one of the mothers of the Church. Their job was to prepare communion, pray and care for the children and stuff like that.

LK: Aunt Isabelle's, for the record, last name?

SD: Dennis at that time; now it is Calderon.

LK: And your grandma?

SD: Elizabeth Dennis but they called her Babe.

LK: Is she alive now or . . .?

SD: No, Grandma died when I was 18.

LK: And her last name would have been Dennis.

SD: The family name of Gibson and she married a Dennis.

LK: Growing up in Hoboken, what role did God and the church play in your life? Maybe you can give us an insight into the community's relationship. Did they have a relationship or was it important at that time? Maybe with your neighbors or the people around you, school? However you can share with us, the importance of church throughout Hoboken. Can you speak to that? Let me rephrase. The church was important for you and your family. Did you find this was something that was running throughout Hoboken?

SD: Back then, yes. Many people were church oriented. No matter what faith you were. Sunday everything closed down.

LK: Business did not open on Sundays?

SD: Absolutely not.

LK: This was through the 50's and the 60's and the 70's?

SD: Part of the 70's, yes. I guess even all the 70's, as they started opening in the 80's when Sunday was just another day. Sunday was special. Even if you didn't go to church. Dad

didn't particularly go to church; cousins and my uncles didn't go to church. But they dressed up to go sit in the car and talk. Sunday was your dress up day!

Grandma and my brother and I, and my aunt and my younger uncle, we went to church. I was on the choir; my brother on the choir as well. At 16 years old I was a Sunday school teacher teaching an adult class. I was very inquisitive. I would always ask questions. I remember my younger Sunday school class, I used to ask my teacher so many questions he asked me, "Are you gonna' be a lawyer?" When we were given assignments I had to be number one. I wouldn't settle for anything less.

LK: So you were competitive?

SD: Very. Very.

LK: And even in church?

SD: Oh yeah. Gotta' give it your best.

LK: So you attended the Emmanuel Pentecostal Church from what age? Do you remember? You were a little kid and you grew up.

SD: I guess yeah. Pretty much. After my aunt got married, her husband opened up a church called True Gospel Holiness Church; his name was Fransisco Calderon. He opened a church in Jersey City.

LK: Did they meet here in Hoboken?

SD: That would be an amazing story.

LK: Okay. You don't have to answer that now. He was born here in Hoboken?

SD: No, Uncle Frank was born in Puerto Rico and he came over here by boat. It was a prophecy on his life that he was going to go to a country that he did not know the language of. Puerto Rico is only Spanish. And so when he got here that was pretty much all he knew. He

asked them, when he got off of the ship, where could he find a church and they directed him oddly enough to Emmanuel Church.

LK: In Hoboken?

SD: In Hoboken. And I remember he came down and I remember the evening service, as back then you had service all day Sunday: Sunday school, morning worship, afternoon service, YPHA and then night service.

LK: What is YPHA?

SD: That was Young People's Service.

LK: That was a full day.

SD: Sunday was just church day.

LK: And when did they open True Gospel?

SD: That was after uncle and auntie got married.

LK: And that would have been in the mid-70's or 80's?

SD: Early 80's, I guess.

LK: When did you start singing in the church choir? Five, six, seven?

SD: Earlier.

LK: Earlier than that? Three, four.

SD: After we came up here, that was the first thing they did was put you in the choir.

LK: Did they have a children's choir and adult choir?

SD: Children's choir, adult choir. After a while they had a director of the choir.

LK: Now let me ask you about the choir journey, since you love to sing and I know, as living in Hoboken for many years, I have heard you sing and thank you for that. In terms of the

choir the experience with asthma, how did you deal with asthma and singing in the choir? Did you want to share a little bit about that?

SD: Well, as I said to you, when I was up I was up and when I was down I was down. When I wasn't sick I sung. I used to practice singing all the time. My grandmother taught me before 10 how to clean house, wash clothes, iron, cook, the whole nine yards, and when I was ironing I would practice singing as low as I can go and as high as I can go.

LK: When you were ironing.

SD: When I was ironing. I ironed so well that my Aunt Mamie hired me to iron and starch her clothes at the age of 10.

LK: Wow. Who was that, your aunt?

SD: That was my neighbor, Aunt Mabel and Uncle Sonny. So my grandma used to say, "I am teaching you so when I am dead and gone you are gonna' be able to take care of yourself."

LK: What was your Grandmother's name again? Elizabeth, right?

SD: Yes. Elizabeth. And Grandma was a pray-er. Countless numbers of days I would be coming from school and Grandmother would be sitting at the table with a Bible open. Praying for her children, her grandchildren, praying for those who gave requests. Being asthmatic, I wasn't afraid of death. Because I figured I wouldn't die after a while because when you gasping for breath, death is no stranger.

LK: You had to face some fears about death and dealing with just breathing on a daily basis at times.

SD: I was so sick back then that I couldn't eat at the table with the family. Constantly coughing, and coughed so much that my insides would come up. And Grandma used to prop me up in the bed and fan me. Many nights I would be hanging out the window with subzero weather

because they didn't have an oxygen tank to bring home then and when it got really bad they would rush me to the hospital. She just kept saying "Joyce" because that was my nickname at the time. She kept saying, "Joyce come up here and watch me cook." And I would say, "Why do I have to learn this?"

And first of all, my aunt Isabelle got away with it when she was a kid. Because she always had her head in a book and Grandma would always let her read. So she said to me, "I promised the Lord that if I got another girl I would teach that girl how to cook and take care of the house," and I would say, "Yeah; and it had to be me!"

But I remember when I started doing Black History Month I began to think about Grandma, because when I graduated from high school in June Grandma went into the hospital in August. And the night before she died she said, "I can go home now." She said, "I prayed to Master, Lord, to help me see you grow up and your brother and that you will be able to take care of yourself." She died night that night. So at the age of 18 I became head of the household. My brother was 17; he was still in high school. And my uncle Freddy was 23. We just kept the house where we lived right there at that time, 222 Willow Avenue. Then we moved to 221 Clinton then we moved around the corner.

LK: And you would have been at that time 18.

SD: I was 18.

LK: And you hadn't been working yet.

SD: I started working at 16 at Welco Industries.

LK: And were you still working at Welco Industries?

SD: I was still at Welco, even after I got out of school. I worked for two years after I graduated, for Welco.

LK: Tying this back to choir and singing and ironing

SD: I started then singing and practicing all the time. Singing is in my bones.

LK: Did anyone else as role models sing? Your grandma, your aunt?

SD: Not really, other than singing in church. I was the singer.

LK: And what part did you sing? Soprano? Alto?

SD: I sang it all.

LK: All parts.

SD: When you said that, I remember singing so high one time. We had this group, Gospel Crusades. When you said about community and friends and stuff like that: you used to go to each others' houses and have parties just among the kids while the adults were in the other part of the house. The kids most of the time was in the living room and the adults would be in the kitchen around the table. Our pastime was singing.

LK: And singing what kind of music at the time, Shirley?

SD: Gospel.

LK: All Gospel.

SD: All Gospel.

LK: And we are looking maybe in the '60's, '70's we're talking about?

SD: Yes, as teenagers we sung. In my twenties we sung. After I was out of school when my girlfriends would come over, someone would come out with a song and we started singing. It was my uncle Freddy when, I guess we were still on Willow Avenue and they had come over and they were just singing around the table, and they said to us, "You ought to start a Gospel group" – just like that. And I looked at them and Gospel Crusade was born that Sunday. He even came up with the name, he said, "Call yourselves the Gospel Crusades."

LK: And how old were you?

SD: In my twenties, early twenties, because I was out of school already.

LK: Can you share a little bit about the events or the things you held?

SD: As Gospel Crusades, there was five or six of us. Five girls and one guy: he was our trainer and our organist, Kendall, who happened to be Malcolm's godfather; my best friend Janice; her sister, Ruby; then Thelma and her sister, Gloria, and myself.

We went from as far as Connecticut down to Virginia singing. We sung with the Mighty Clouds of Joy [a male Gospel group] right there in Jersey City. We were known as the group that you could understand when they sang. Because many groups was out, but they used to do a lot of screaming and what not but we used to sing very mellow songs, songs with meaning. One song that they would not let me *not* sing was "Holding On, I'm just holding on, and I will not let go my faith."

I'm shy. I don't talk. But put a mic in my hand!

After a year we had an anniversary concert and all of the Gospel groups came right up on Washington Street [to Mount Olive Baptist Church]. And I remember we were the first Gospel program that Mount Olive had. When I asked for the church, they said, you can't find parking over there. But I knew that was the place. All of the groups we had ever sung with came and the groups had the habit of singing and then leaving. But not one group left the concert that day. My aunt and uncle never saw me sing out in public and they came to the anniversary and they put the mic in my hand and I began singing, "I'm holding on... and I won't let go my faith" and after they told me, Auntie said to my uncle, "Is that Joyce?" and he said, "I think so."

We had offers to sing on Broadway in New York. After we did so much training and photographing, the girls got scared and backed out and we didn't go any further.

LK: Now when you say they were scared, of commitment or?

SD: They got just pain scared. They said, "We can't do this." I was the only one for it.

"Yes, we can! We can do this." No, we backed out.

LK: And the choir was made of all different races or?

SD: Choir was just the church choir. Most of the choir was church members.

LK: And how long were the Crusaders around?

SD: I think we had a really good two years. And then, as I said, we were in our twenties and things. So we scattered, some moved, some got married and what not. My sons always asked me, "Ma, if they didn't want to go on, why didn't you?" And you know, Laura, back then it was all of us or none of us. That was the thought then. I believe a lot of groups could identity with that because it wasn't until much later that people began to pull apart from their group and do solos and stuff like that. But if you were a group, you were a group!

LK: So it was all of us or none of us.

SD: All of us or none of us. Yeah.

LK: You still keep in touch?

SD: Oh yeah. Janice, she died, but Thelma and I and Ruby, we still do keep in touch. Thelma's in Virginia. Ruby's in North Carolina. Kendall is in Jersey City, though. But yeah, we still keep in touch. I call everyone now and then right on the cell phone.

LK: That was a wonderful story.

SD: A good time.

LK: Okay. How many brothers did you say that you had?

SD: Just one brother, Rufus.

LK: Can you tell me a little bit about Rufus?

SD: Oh Rufus. What a guy. Loved his family. He was the first boxing champion of Hoboken High School. He played football, basketball but he went into the Hall of Fame as a football player. He's in the Hall of Fame.

LK: What position did he play on the football team?

SD: Why do you ask me that? You know I don't know nothing about no sports!

LK: But he was a champion boxer.

SD: When the high school first came out with boxing he tried out for it and he became the champion of it. In fact, someone just reminded me of it not too long ago. They remembered him as a boxer.

LK: And Rufus' last name was also Dennis, right?

SD: Dennis. Rufus Ernest Dennis.

LK: And he is no longer with us.

SD: No, he died early.

LK: And how did Rufus die?

SD: Complications.

LK: Health complications?

SD: Health complications.

LK: You said that he died too young. Did he have any children?

SD: One girl. Kisha. He married a girl right from Hoboken. Her name was Porter. She lives now in Jersey City and they had a daughter. Rosemary Porter was his wife's name and they lived on 2nd and Monroe, right across from Number Nine School. Rosemary and I was friends before she and my brother. And so when they met, they got married and Kisha graduated from

Hoboken High School. Full scholarship to Trenton University. She became a nurse; she's a nurse now.

LK: She is enjoying it?

SD: She loves it. She said, "Auntie, I love dissecting mice." I said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "I like to see the little heart." I said, "Don't talk about this thing anymore." She always loved that.

LK: When you became the head of household, do you want to share a little bit about what that was like? Given that time and that responsibility?

SD: It was rough. What I say to people now, don't think an 18-year-old knows how to be on their own for real. I mean, they play the role because they had no choice. But at 18 the money ran out many times. But Miss Ann had a grocery store right across from us right there on Willow Avenue and those were the times you could go in. It was hard to go in there, though. And the very first time was very hard, when you didn't have any money for food. And I went over there and I said, "Miss Ann, would you trust me to give me some food and I'll pay you when I get my paycheck?" You know what she said? "Shirley, you can have anything in this store." Wow.

LK: And she was the same neighbor that gave you your first birthday party?

SD: No, this is another lady. And you know; I never connected that until you just said that. Her name was Ann too. I guess Anns would follow me in my life. She was a grocery store. She was a white lady that owned the grocery store right across and her name was Miss Ann. And she told me I could have anything in that store. Miss Ann fed us many a time when we didn't have any money. Yes, she did.

LK: What was your relationship with church at that time?

SD: Always church. I never stopped.

LK: So when you were going through these rough times, did you have any support with the church? Did they know what you were going through?

SD: You don't talk about it. No, you don't talk about it. All they knew, everything was fine.

LK: Did they have a pantry at the time? Food pantry?

SD: We didn't know anything about that. That came much later.

LK: So your support came pretty much from . . . ?

SD: Myself. We worked and Uncle Freddy also because my brother was in school; so the two of us shared the rent. I became the household person who did the cooking and the wash and kept the house clean. But we got through it. And I remember asking my aunt years later, "Why didn't you ask me to come live with you after Grandma died?" and she said, "Well, you guys seemed like you had it together". And we did. We had it together because we had to have it together.

LK: Alright; let's move on. We covered that you worked for the American Cap Company, then you moved on to Model Cities. Can you share with us that journey and where it led you to where you are working now?

SD: I was walking down Washington Street and Ruby Praylow, one of my friends, worked for Model Cities. And she said to me, "Joyce, I'm leaving Model Cities but go down there and get my job." I thought Model Cities was 76 Adams Street so I went to Adams Street to ask for the job. And at that time Mrs. Jackson was the head of NAACP. And I remember her saying, "You gotta' get on the list." I said, "Oh okay, I don't mind getting on the list." She said, "Because when there is a job opening I send out different people." I said, "I don't have a problem with that; I'll wait my turn." Then she said to me, "You go ahead. You go ahead and

apply anyway.” So I went up and applied for the job. Norma Carrera at that time, she is Guzman now, Norma Guzman was the secretary. Michael Coleman was the director, of Model Cities. She gave me the application and what not and two days after I filled out the application I was hired.

LK: Two days after.

SD: Two days after, I got a phone call saying, “Come on in.”

LK: And how old were you then, Shirley?

SD: How old was I? 22, 23, 24? Let me see how old I was. Because I’m 62 now and I have been there 41 years. Wow – I was 21 years old.

LK: So explain to us: it was Model Cities and then later it was named . . . ?

SD: Community Development Agency. I started as a clerk typist there. And that was the time we were doing all of the plans. We typed from nine a.m. to nine p.m.

LK: And plans, can you speak to that?

SD: The applications for HUD for monies for certain grants to do certain things back then. Back then they’d have laughed at Hoboken because Hoboken was dying.

LK: This was in the ‘60’s, ‘70’s?

SD: ‘68, ‘69, ‘70.

LK: And you say Hoboken was dying.

SD: It was dying. There was nothing for children really that was happening.

LK: Did something happen from the ‘60’s to the ‘70’s that we should know about?

SD: I really didn’t know. But I know every time you mentioned Hoboken, people would laugh because it was like a town people never heard of. Yet, Hoboken was always community. Everyone knew everybody. I guess we were closed. Nobody knew about us.

LK: You mentioned Hoboken was dying.

SD: Well, nothing was going on. Nothing really.

LK: Now, Model Cities – was this birthed to help that situation?

SD: Exactly. That came in with the housing, improving the housing. We had a home improvement program where you got grants you didn't have to pay instead of loans to fix up your house. Originally they earmarked this area from Harrison up to maybe Willow Avenue, I think was the first "downtown." They called this part "Downtown Hoboken." It was geared for that. But it was hard to get developers to come to Hoboken because it was so condemned. Broken down. They said it would have taken a lot of money to really fix it. They couldn't get the developers to put money in this area at the time.

LK: And whose vision was it, this Model Cities? Was it the mayor? Activist?

SD: That I really don't know. But Michael Coleman was the first director of it.

LK: And did you say he was born and raised in Hoboken?

SD: No. He was from the west somewhere. But I would guess because they had neighborhood preservation back there and all that stuff going on, I would guess the mayor's office and all somehow brought that into this area. I think Model Cities started in Hoboken.

LK: And who was the mayor at that time?

SD: Pasquale.

LK: Pasquale? Then it changed its name to Community Development Agency and Department of the City of Hoboken.

SD: But the Model Cities brought in housing. It brought in recreational development. The city started getting a lot of articles started going out. And we used to make books that thick, applications and posters and stuff to get the money flowing in for different things to bring Hoboken alive again.

LK: To redevelop.

SD: To redevelop. Reinvent. But when they couldn't do this area, they made it city-wide. So all of the money started coming in to fix up your homes and stuff. More uptown than downtown but that's how it began. I have to say, though, that downtown felt cheated because they were promised that all their homes were going to be renovated and built up and I found out much later the reason we didn't is because we just couldn't get developers to invest because they said it took so much money to redevelop this area at the time.

LK: Do you happen to know, because you said uptown did get funding and downtown didn't, do you happen to know why the developers would have stayed away from the area? Would it have been flooding issues?

SD: I'm sure that was it. Because we did have floods and we still do!

LK: How was the flooding back then?

SD: Well. We had a hurricane. The water was so high that there was a fruit stand across the street that on the first level, where dad was, we reached out the window to pick up apples and stuff like that. That's how high it got.

LK: You would have still been on First Street.

SD: That was 663 First Street. So I guess that was a part of it because the developers said it was just too much money to redevelop that area at the time. I see they found some money lately. But back then, in the '70's, they just didn't want to invest in that part of town.

LK: And where was church located?

SD: Church, at first, was on Jefferson Street between Newark and First Street and then they moved to 304 Monroe Street; in fact that church is still there. The building is there but the church has since moved to Jersey City.

LK: So tell me a little bit more. You are still working at the Community Development Agency?

SD: The clerk typist, and then went on to the payroll department, then I became head of the finance department and stuff like that. I also was a planner for awhile.

LK: This would have been now and into the '90's?

SD: The late '80's and '90's.

LK: What was it like in the 90's?

SD: Hoboken very much alive. The activities going on. I remember that they had a program where they had the Charm School come in for the teenagers and all of the girls were walking around with books on their head. How to walk and stuff like that. A lot of programs came.

LK: And this was in the '90's, Shirley?

SD: The Recreation Department continued and they had a lot of things that they didn't have before. And then the housing just boomed. You know that. And it is still booming.

LK: From the '90's until now.

SD: So I went from there to the finance department. The '90's, I'm still there. We came up to City Hall. Our first place of Housing was 84 Washington Street. And then we built a multi-service center and we moved on.

LK: 84 Washington Street, now that was a center where you were located?

SD: When Model Cities first came about, they lived at 84 Washington Street. Then we moved from 84 to 80 and we had a whole building. That's how big Model Cities was. They had an office by where Wachovia Bank is. We had a career development program and over 40 people worked there. We had another office for the planners over the McDonald's at 234 Washington

Street. And then 80 Washington Street; we had the whole building – the planning, the housing, the payroll departments.

LK: Now you said it was under City Hall. Was there a reason they weren't located in the building of City Hall?

SD: We started in the '70's as a department but we were independent. We did all our own books and stuff at the time. You know we didn't move to City Hall until '94.

LK: And so the Human Services existed, of course.

SD: Yeah. Back then, yeah.

LK: And so there was Human Services but your organization was separate from Human Services.

SD: Well, Human Services came out of Model Cities. It came out of Model Cities and then Community Development. The multiservice center is at 124 Grand Street, funded from the DOL grant that we received. Model Cities built that building. DOL – we had about a hundred people working for it. DOL, you had the Recreation, Housing, Health, Family Planning, the senior program.

LK: For the record, what is DOL?

SD: Department of Labor. Back then they had a grant called DOL.

LK: And the grant was coming through Model Cities?

SD: We were like the funnel of all this grant money coming to start these various programs in town.

LK: And how many people do you think worked for Model Cities?

SD: Back then? Three hundred or more. Had a really big staff. There was five floors at 80 [Washington]. Then you had Wachovia, then you had 234 Washington Street, over McDonald's, so we was pretty big. Then after awhile the programs ceased and we got more compact.

LK: So you were very active in community development?

SD: The financial department.

LK: The Finance department. You went in the '90's, right?

SD: Even before that. Because I started as a clerk typist and then I went on to Payroll, which is a part of Finance. In fact I became at one point the head of the Finance department. I had a staff of six people.

LK: Now, what drew you to the Finance department? Was it interest? Or was it opportunity?

SD: I always loved numbers from school. I always liked math, because you know why? Numbers don't lie. I always had that model. So when I was in Model Cities I was the head of the Finance department for a while. I remember there was this firm coming in, these young auditors just getting out of college, and we had to do an audit in 30 days of 11 million dollars. And we did it.

LK: Shirley, tell me some dates, as we are sitting in July 2010 and so much has transpired and can you talk about our financial crisis that the country is facing and has faced the past few years and where is Hoboken? Has its own issues. But, for the record, can you speak to – you say numbers don't lie and so forth – is there any words of wisdom that you wanted to share with the community moving forward and/or anything you might want to share around the idea of finance. Us getting over the hurdles of what we have had to face living here in Hoboken and dealing with our city-wide financial crisis? From once Model Cities came and all this history had transpired

and here we are today. Any words of wisdom or insight you would like to share about numbers, about finance? Budgeting? In all your years of experience how we could, moving forward, prevent what has happened or be mindful? Are we heading in the right direction? So on and so forth.

SD: This present administration seem as if they tighten up the belt and I guess that's what it's gonna' have to be. For so long certain things didn't happen because people didn't – I don't know how to put it – but the cost of living go up, then other things to pay for this cost of living should have gone up and that didn't happen. So they got hit hard. But I believe it's gonna' level out. I do believe that. Because the whole thing is, you have to tighten up your belt; you can't keep spending. Overall.

LK: Throughout the country.

SD: Throughout. Overall. Even in Hoboken and in the country. When money was free, I mean money was free, Laurie. You didn't worry about tomorrow because you had money.

LK: And what year would you say that? '70's? The '80's? Maybe after the '80's?

SD: '80's. I guess the '80's would be the most freeing time, because you never worried about it. You'd get your paycheck and you would go buy whatever you want to buy because the job was there, the opportunity was there. I don't think anyone worried about not finding a job because they found a job. But when the '90's came, things began to get a little tighter. And when the 2000's came, they started to get even more tighter.

But I think sometimes now, if I had the money that went through my hands – wow! When you're young, when you get your first paycheck and you say I'm going to the store and I'm gonna' buy two pairs of pants and three dresses and you put all the stuff on the counter and it's three times more than you have in your hand, and you realize with your first paycheck it don't

buy as much as you thought it would buy. And I think that what happened is that our spending got caught up and surpassed what we actually had before we realized it. And so we have to always be mindful of our spending. Keep tab of your money. Follow your budgets. If it is on a dollar, don't spend three; you don't have it. People keep thinking that I can do this thing; I'll catch up later. But why catch up? Just don't do it. Stay within your means and you'll be far happier in the long run.

LK: As far as where we are now, Hoboken 2010, do you feel that we are on track?

SD: I think we are getting there. We have very conscientious people; they fight all the time on the [City] Council. But they all got the same at heart. They want to save Hoboken.

LK: And when it comes to development, since we have been talking a lot about that from uptown and downtown, do you think each community is getting their fair share at this present time?

SD: Same story.

LK: Any insights or suggestions or wisdom you wanted to share with us about that?

SD: Laurie, we don't want help. We want to help. And we constantly being mistaken as people who want help. We want to be a part of the equation of helping. Does that make sense?

LK: And when you say "we," are you talking about human beings as a whole?

SD: Downtown. Especially in a certain area of the housing. Someone asked me one time, "How do you feel about the Housing Authority"? They are people just like anybody else in the whole town. It's not Hoboken and... it's Hoboken. And it's always the needy people that... they're not needy. They want to help. I think they've got the wrong concept and still it's concerning in that area. They are hard-working, dedicated, loving folks. Downtown the same as the hardworking, dedicated, loving folks uptown and I wish we'd get past that.

LK: Do you feel the churches are tuned in to that particular concept of the uptown, downtown? There is somewhat of a divide. Do the churches play an active role in maybe shifting that? Being more helpful in the community? Do the churches make an impact in Hoboken?

SD: Some do.

LK: And your church that you currently go to: are most of the church members from Hoboken?

SD: From Hoboken, yeah.

LK: And are they from downtown?

SD: All over Hoboken. But most of them are from downtown. But we are a community church and that makes me feel . . . my pastor is very community oriented. And his motto is “Meet the Need of the People” and that’s a good thing.

LK: And in some way they want to help and they are living that consciousness.

SD: We do the shelter; it’s not just for members only. It’s a community thing. We have the motto here that the kids don’t pay for anything that we do. Just adults. And you don’t have to be a member. Shelter: we have gone into the shelter and even served and what not and brought our kids too so they know how blessed they are. Our food pantry, we are part of that.

LK: And where is the shelter?

SD: It’s on Third and Bloomfield. We participate in that. And we do veterans; we a part of that. The Interfaith Services where all of the churches come together in Hoboken, it is an awesome, awesome group of people that helps out the food pantry and the shelter.

LK: And what is the name of the group again?

SD: The Interfaith Coalition.

LK: And how long have they been around?

SD: I don't know how long they have been around. But we have been participating in the last six years or so.

LK: It sounds like they are doing a lot of work.

SD: They do a lot of work bringing in the community and tying in.

LK: And Shirley, we skipped over family. We didn't talk about your children.

SD: I've been blessed with two fantastic boys.

LK: And their names?

SD: Malcolm Warren Cummins and Jonathan Dennis Cummins. Malcolm is a husband, father and I jokingly say that he went away to Indiana to get an education and came back with a wife. But he is a pastor of Go Ye Therefore Ministries. He is full of compassion. A love for the people. And for the Gospel, getting the good news out there. Jonathan is a veteran of the U.S. Navy. He's also an IT man for the city of Hoboken. He's a singer; he has some kind of voice on him, which I discovered one Christmas while he was in high school when they were singing "White Christmas" and all of the girls were screaming and hollering! Fantastic singing voice.

LK: So you passed on some of the talent there?

SD: Yes, he can sing. Malcolm, too. Jona, he was a drummer and a singer and an event planner and Malcolm is a pastor, singer, organist, drummer. And then he has his little son Malcolm II; we call him "The Duce." Malcolm is now 8 but you should see him play that drum. I'll tell you, he has a passion for that. Malcolm as a baby used to take pencils and play drums with. So it's down the line.

And you know what I want to say, Laurie? I have been super, super blessed and favored by God through Hoboken. And that favor has spilled over to my sons. And I am so grateful to God. Johnny has this knack of compassion that he shows. He used to come home saying, "Ma,

this lady stopped me in the street and told me her whole story.” And I used to say, “Did you stay there and listen?” He said, “Yeah,” and I said, “That’s why she told you the whole story.”

Because he has that compassion. He has such an understanding mannerism when it comes to the older folks. I just admire how he just takes so much time with the old. And you know, Laura, he was for the underdog. The ones that people wouldn’t choose or pick. He would lean towards them and make them feel so special. Jona is amazing. He would say, “Oh, it’s not true” but this is what I remember. Now he has my maiden name, if you noticed, Dennis, because I realized that my brother and my uncle was the last of the Dennises. So Johnny right now is the only one that carries that name.

LK: And your husband?

SD: No husband.

LK: Do your boys know their dad at all?

SD: Oh, they know him now. They have a relationship.

LK: So did you raise them as a single mom?

SD: Wasn’t supposed to but it happened.

LK: So, single mom. What to share about that experience? Was it easier in Hoboken than other places?

SD: My aunt and my uncle were always there. Aunt Isabelle and Uncle Frank was always there. They would take care of the kids while I worked. The father was in my life in the early ages. I was known as “Minister Cummins” back then “and the boys.”

LK: And the boys. Okay. And the grandchildren; you said that you had an 8-year-old?

SD: That is the second one; the oldest one is 11, Jeane. Malcolm II is 8, Trevon is 7, and little Miss Brianna is 4 going on 24.

LK: And these are all Malcolm's children?

SD: All Malcolm's. And they are expecting another in August.

LK: Anything else in terms of family? We covered everything?

SD: We covered everything, yes.

LK: I wanted to ask you quick questions about the community parade. Can you talk a little bit about Cultural Affairs when they started? I'm familiar with how it's been for the last 20 years so maybe can you go a little further back?

SD: I remember the first festival we had was up there by the piers when it was all dilapidated. And Jamie Figueroa was the head of that festival back then. Jamie lives down here with a house and a dog and he did the very first cultural festival and I can remember a picture it was, the old piers with the old bars and stuff. But it was so becoming at that time of the year in the '70's. Like it belonged there.

LK: And that is when the first festival took place, in the '70's. And Jamie was affiliated with Model Cities?

SD: I don't know if he actually worked for us or got funds for us to do it but he was connected with Model Cities.

LK: And what was the festival like? Was there music, art?

SD: It was a music festival.

LK: All types? And was it one day?

SD: I remember one day.

LK: And what about the parades?

SD: We had the Veterans' Parade. The Veterans' Parade was off the hook. Memorial Day parades. They are good now. But when we lived on Park Avenue they used to line up on Park

Avenue, all of the armed forces, the Navy, the Air Force, the Army, all of them. They had awesome bands, I'll tell you!

LK: So it sounds like they might have been larger parades?

SD: Large. The tanks used to come. I mean it was unbelievable parades back then.

LK: And this would have been '60's, '70's, '80's, back then?

SD: Early '60's. They are nice now, but they are nowhere near what they used to be as a kid.

LK: And they were put on by Community Development?

SD: I think the veterans did it. They still hold onto it. They still remember to remember.

LK: Thank you for sharing. I think you mentioned that to me in passing and I wanted to cover that with you. Also, in knowing you over the years, you mentioned you used to hold Gospel concerts. Where was that?

SD: John DePalma started the first concert in the park. He has since died; he worked for City Hall; he was a deputy city clerk. They used to have them on Wednesdays by the Church Square Park. Back about nine years now I approached them and asked them if we could do Gospel music in the park. There was Tim Calligy, who was the director of the parks at the time. And John and Mayor Russo at the time gave us permission to start having Gospel concerts. And we started right there in Church Square Park. On Sundays. And then we moved over to Pier A when Pier A was finished, and then Sinatra Drive. We did it for about six years, Gospel concerts in the park. They had different choirs come in, soloists, mime singers and stuff like that.

LK: Who coordinated that; was it you, Shirley?

SD: That was me.

LK: You and your church or solely you?

SD: That would be me. Pulling together different groups.

LK: And did you enjoy that?

SD: Oh, did I enjoy it! I remember one incident. See, my idea is to get the good news out there any way you can. And sometimes they won't hear the preaching but they will hear the singing. And people need to know that God loves them. He really does. And so this concert was my way of giving them that news. And I remember a girl who came up to Church Square – we were singing there – and she said, “I missed church this morning and oh, wow, I feel so bad. And can you imagine? I got church in the park?”

LK: That's great.

SD: It was really great times.

LK: Was there any particular reason that you stopped doing it for awhile?

SD: It just phased out. As everything else. It just phased out.

LK: Would you be interested in bringing it back?

SD: In fact, I was thinking about it just this year. I sure was. I said, “Why don't we go back to Church Square where we first started at”?

LK: And who were you talking to?

SD: My pastor.

LK: And what is your pastor's name?

SD: Malcolm Cummins. My son.

LK: And what did he say?

SD: He said, “Ma, we got enough on the plate right now.”

LK: Well, I know the Gospel concerts, they do one at the Prudential – the Pru – Center. Yeah, and it's big in Newark. I think it's on the weekends.

SD: Oh yes? There's the McDonalds Gospel Fest. That was June 16th.

LK: They have a big turn-out.

SD: They have a big turn-out. The church we were affiliated with, Gethsemane Baptist Church. They have been a part of McDonald's Gospel Fest for years.

LK: Now what about Mount Olive Baptist Church? They were a part of these Gospel concerts and that kind of thing.

SD: I heard they have a new pastor now. Pastor Williams. He's been doing Gospel concerts there as well. We do work together on various things.

LK: If you could do it again, you would bring it back to Church Square Park?

SD: I would go outside.

LK: Outside?

SD: I did Church Square but I also did the Housing Authority; I did as I said Pier A, Sinatra Drive. Anywhere outside. Because, Laura, you have to come out of the four walls. You have to come out to where people are. And many times they won't come inside so you have to go outside.

LK: Have you worked with Geri Fallo?

SD: No. It has always been independent of the other ones that they had. I don't know the reason; it just happened.

LK: I know we've had a lot of concerts all over the waterfront so somewhere in the calendar we can squeeze it in.

SD: And the timeframe, too. Because most of the festivals are done on Sundays but Sundays are not good for me.

LK: Do you only have to do them on Sundays?

SD: No, that's when they have their festivals. If you noticed, they had changed to the morning time.

LK: I meant there are also music concerts throughout the week, in the evening, all along the river. Maybe they can squeeze you in on the calendar there.

SD: We will see what next year holds. I know this year is out.

LK: I don't want to also forget that I heard you have done a little acting.

SD: One of my friends is a playwright. Her name is Co-pastor Almarie Winn Taylor. So she writes plays and I said to her one day, "Make me a star!" Months went by and one day she came to me and said, "Did you really want to be in one of the plays?" and I said, "I don't mind," so I started as a substitute for her Harriet Tubman play. The lady that played a spinoff into her own company. Incidentally, now, I just joined her group. I'll be in one of her plays now. It's called a "Child to Lead Them." Her name is Rose Haggert.

LK: And she lives in Hoboken?

SD: She [Almarie] lives in Jersey City and she is a playwright. She has since moved to Jamaica. Her and her husband. But I played Harriett Tubman and then Almarie was a co-pastor with her church that did a Kenya fundraiser. And they asked her if she would write a play about Kenya and their lives down there and I played the mom in that. "To Kenya with Love" was the name. And I played the mom whose husband died of AIDS and I promised my daughter that I would always be with her and I found out that I had it as well and had to break it to my daughter.

LK: And you mentioned you were a shy person. How did you break through that?

SD: Just put a mic in my hand! I could become a different person.

LK: So you enjoy the stage?

SD: I do enjoy doing it.

LK: It sounds like you are going to continue as long as they are having these shows and stuff.

SD: As long as they want to make me a star!

LK: Thank you for that. Okay. We did touch a little bit about your contribution and your stories about sending a positive message to the community and maybe you can speak a little bit more into it, creating a positive contribution for blacks in the world. I don't know if I am misquoting you.

SD: Yes because, Laura, for 40 years of my life I knew only negative when it came to blacks. I didn't want to be black. I tell the kids that even now. And one of my co-workers, Carol McLaughlin, set up a display board one year, I guess going back about 10, 12 years now. And for the first time I learned about black history. We never had black history. And all of the contributions that African Americans and blacks made, not in a certain area but to the world, was an eye-opener for me.

And I said to Carol, "Is that for real?" and she said, "Yeah, Shirley" and I said, "We made the traffic light, the ironing board – for real?" She said, "Yes, we went even back into civilization in a positive way." And then I started collecting stuff about black history and the contribution and then I wanted everyone to know. So I went to the mayor and asked if I could start doing it the following year, as in '94 we moved to City Hall. I asked if I could start doing a black history display in February, which is Black History Month. And it was Mayor Russo at the time, he gave me permission at the time to do black history in City Hall. Like you see here in the church, I started with the boards and what not. And then, wow.

LK: When you say Carol McLaughlin, was she involved also in black history?

SD: At that time she was the director of Human Services. And one of the things she did that particular year was black history stuff. We were down in the multiservice center then. And that's when I found out even about black history. I just wasn't familiar with it. Not that it wasn't there. I'm sure that a whole lot of other black people probably knew about it, I just didn't know about it. But after I started doing it, Liz Falcon, the principal of Number Nine at the time, she told me she did it all the time, not only in February, but that she had something displayed all year round about a positive message. She was principal in a school that was predominately black in Hoboken, Number Nine – my old school (I graduated from the 8th grade right there on Monroe Street). She was the principal there for many years. She started with the posters. She gave me my first set of posters on black history and one was Michael Jordan. I had to guard it with my life. Someone stole the original! And Laura, it was on the top. You needed a ladder! Someone got up there and took it down. So I knew from that point on to put up the copies, not the original.

Mrs. Falcon was very instrumental in my coordinating Black History Month. Then from there the staff of City Hall they all just joined in, black, white, everything; they were just as excited as I was. I would find books on my desk, records on my desk. Jude Fitzgibbons gave me this big poster on baseball. So, it's been quite a journey.

And then I asked them – I was sitting at my desk and I wanted to know, I had so much information, so many books – how do I say thank you? And I thought, feed them. We'll feed them. And so I asked them if I could have a luncheon, an appreciation luncheon for the employees. And so for several years I would do soul food cuisine. The last Friday in February, which was Black History Month. And I remember Carol told me one year, "Shirley, Shirley!" dead serious, she said, "Let me bring the antipasto." I said, "No! This is black food." She reminded me of that today. We didn't want pasta – that's Italian. Get your own day. But we did

that. There was the three-man band that used to come in and from 12 to 2 we served lunch with music for the employees to just come and relax during their lunch hour.

LK: Where was that held?

SD: The first time I did it was right there in the lobby. And then I moved it into the Court Room and from the Court Room we moved downstairs in to the conference room. Just in time for them to get away.

LK: What kind of music was it?

SD: Jazz music.

LK: Local musicians?

SD: That particular guy, he was from the charter school in Jersey City downtown. Somebody had given me his name and I reached out to him. And then there was a stand-up bass, keyboard and a guitar.

LK: Is he still around?

SD: He's still around. He's the director of music in the charter school downtown in Jersey City-Lafayette.

LK: Do you know his name?

SD: I can't remember it now but I can find out.

LK: It's been 16 years; you have been doing this Black History Month from 1994 to 2010. Long time. So if I may, we talk about Barack Obama being elected into office. You think upon 16 years of dedicated service to celebrate Black History Month; do you want to share at all what it was like for you when he was nominated into office? And what that was like relative to Black History Month? Words escape me because I certainly cannot walk in your shoes, seeing that I am mixed-American, never identifying as a black American but a human being who grew

up learning tolerance in my childhood. I know that there were many sacrifices and paid large prices so that I could experience. But we're here to maintain and preserve history so some mistakes are not repeated. President Barack comes to my mind and people such as yourself have stayed strong and held on and remembered to celebrate, whether it be hanging photos and having lunch and so on and so forth. Is there anything you would like to speak about?

SD: And you said "hanging photos." I remember somebody was coming down the stairs as I was hanging these photos and they said, "There she go again with that stuff." I said, "They don't have a clue," then one of the guys came down one day and said, "Shirley, you should let the kids do this." I said, "You guys do not understand." I was gonna' turn it over to someone else one time and Nancy [a co-worker] said to me, "Shirley, no one else can do this because you have a passion behind it." Laurie, I didn't just hang pictures. There were themes every year. There were messages that I wanted to get across.

I remember when my co-workers hung up a poster of "Roots" and the actor had the chain around his neck. And she hung that up. And that would not have been my choice to hang that up but she hung it up. We were having court and when I came downstairs a young man was looking at it and he said to me, "Do you think we'd be proud to have that display?" and I took it down right away because I knew exactly what he meant. So I didn't just hang pictures I did not just celebrate world history, I celebrated Hoboken history, because I spoke at the Hoboken High School one year and I said to the children, "Your heroes is your mom and your dad. Your heroes is hardworking people right in your own neighborhood. And the most important job is the one that's the least. And that's the garbage collector, because without a garbage collector the rest of us would be in a whole lot of trouble now, wouldn't we?" I got an email from a young man from high school; he said to me, "Thank you so much for opening our eyes, because it's great you are

reaching for the stars,” and I always say to kids, “The sky is the limit, but don’t shun the laborer. Don’t shun the factory workers. Don’t shun the garbage collector, because they’re more important than the executive at the top. Because without them, where would we be?”

So that was the message that was given out to them. All that we accomplished and thanked God for and our president now, very proud of the stuff, I’m glad about it. I don’t want to sound terrible when I say this but I can’t help but saying, we deserved it. We deserve. People approach you like it’s something that, I don’t know how to put it in words, “Aren’t you proud of what happened?” Are you any prouder once a white president is in there? So why would that be so extra special, that a black president is there?

LK: Not so much that it’s him, it’s just so much was done before him to pave the way so that he could.

SD: And that’s my point. He deserved to be where he is because all of the lives that it cost for him to get there. The whole thing. And that’s what I want to get across to children. When I say “deserve,” I mean we finally getting to that.

LK: Evolution.

SD: Exactly.

LK: Which should have been yours right from the start.

SD: You reading me right. Thank you. I am definitely grateful, definitely proud.

LK: Just part of the whole.

SD: Exactly.

LK: Sorry, I am putting words, but I get what you are saying.

SD: You are understanding what I am trying to say. The way they approach it is that we should be so proud that finally a black man got there. But I’m saying it cost 200 years that has

not ended. You are yet disrespecting. You don't give him the honor that you give somebody else that was there.

LK: But it was still monumental.

SD: Absolutely. The fact that it happened. Thank you, Laura. Thank you very much.

LK: Hoboken. If we go back to Hoboken history, Hoboken's contribution in your life as well: how are we doing through all of that in respect to tolerance, racism; how are we doing?

SD: A question was asked at Martin Luther King's celebration. And the question was, "Don't you feel that racism has ended? That we don't have that problem anymore?" and the mayor at the time, he stood up and said he would like to believe that we don't have that problem. And Laura, that was my fed-up year so I was praying they would not have called me up there, but they made the mistake of calling me. And I said to them, "Unless you're this color, you don't have a clue." It hasn't ended, it's just subtle. At least then you knew what was going on and you weren't shocked when something happened like, "Woah, what was that?"

Another one of my co-workers said to me, "Shirley, do you really believe that there's a race problem?" I said, "Well, something would help me to believe it when you put 41 bullets in one guy. Or when you tie another one to a truck and drive down the street." And this is happening now. Not 200 years ago. So, yes. I would think we still have a problem."

LK: So, Shirley, we'll be moving with this line of thinking. You were perhaps retiring from City Hall? Is that true?

SD: Hallelujah! 2011. I said to somebody, "I'm either going out or up, but I'm going."

LK: With that in mind, 16 years doing Black History Month in City Hall has had an impression on the city and people and the children from young adults to the young-uns. You're not going to be there. Who's going to do it, Shirley?

SD: Would you believe, my son?

LK: Wow.

SD: Jonathan promised to take it over.

LK: So I can quote you on that?

SD: Well, he told me. He said, “Ma, I’ll take it.”

LK: That’s good news. And I’m sure you’ll be by to visit.

SD: And you know, I said to him “You do you.” And there’s a lot of difference in there. So I’m sure the display he puts up will be totally different than what I did. But the information and the message will still be there and that’s the most important thing. He promised to carry it on. Thank God!

LK: Fantastic. That’s good news.

SD: That is good news!

LK: I do not want to forget this part as well: you are an ordained minister and for more than 30 years, is that right? Do you want to talk at all about the future beyond this moment what your vision is and where you see yourself next year? Five years? What you hope for. Maybe speak about that?

SD: Well, I always wanted to be in full-time ministry but when you have a family you have to put some things on hold. So I’m hoping that I’ll be able to do that and my heart desires to reach out to unwed mothers and to bring the message across to them that your life don’t end with the baby; it only begins.

LK: It only begins.

SD: It only begins. It’s a new phase in your life that you can conquer.

LK: Okay. And when you say working with, do you mean forming counseling, or church?

SD: Counseling. Be of help to them any way that I can. Educational-wise, which I believe is number one on the hit parade. Because I think a lot of the time we get ourselves in to the situation because we're just not schooled enough. And what's out there and what we can do and where we can go from that point.

LK: Do you see that operating from your current church here in Hoboken? Or do you have another vision about another group?

SD: Right here. This would be the beginning. This would be the base, I'm sure, because my pastor also feels the same way, because I've been talking to him about this all his life as well. So probably it would begin right here. In fact, in some cases we have already began as we have reached out to various ones that was in need or wanted help of any sort.

Another thing I had hoped and spoke to you about: I would like to have a black history gallery. I really can see that. I walked past the Hoboken Reporter and that mid-week paper that comes out has all of the galleries. That's where the idea came from.

LK: So, a black history art gallery?

SD: Yeah! Art gallery, if possible, to even use the information I have collected for 16 years to put it on display.

LK: You talked about every year you had a message. Each year you had a theme, right? So maybe you could have a timeline of all those themes. At least to make a larger gallery.

SD: That is what I would like to do. Something on that end. Not only just February; people could come in anytime and view. I think our children need to know what it cost for them to have what they have today. Because I don't think parents talk about it.

LK: In terms of history?

SD: In terms of history. History in terms of Rosa Park, who got tired and didn't need to get up that day. In terms of the marches and what not. Like Al Sharpton, his delivery is not so great but the man tells the truth. With the marches and stuff like that. In fact, when I did the display, we did Barack Obama into the presidents seat, I put the march "It goes on."

LK: Maybe you covered this already, but how important is this history?

SD: Without your history, you can't appreciate your present or know your future. You gotta' have the history. I was in the dark for 40 years.

LK: You say in the dark 40 years, meaning you ignored some of the facts?

SD: I didn't know anything. Not some of the facts, maybe I had some of the facts. Dr. King was the only good person that we knew of; we didn't know of nobody else.

LK: And this was through schools? Was it taught?

SD: Not in my time.

LK: In some of the Hoboken schools.

SD: I went to a Hoboken School.

LK: There wasn't black history?

SD: No. None at all.

LK: In high school?

SD: No.

LK: Wow.

SD: None. I graduated when I was 18. I didn't know nothing about this.

LK: Do you know if the schools currently are teaching black history?

SD: Oh, yes. They currently are doing that. In fact, I think about the second or third year we started doing black history in City Hall, I opened it up to the schools and the kids would bring in what they wrote about or made. And then we would put a display in City Hall; we did that for several years. So they are very avid about it now, which is great.

LK: With your retirement, would you consider going to the schools and speaking to them one on one maybe and share the history?

SD: I would love to. Absolutely.

LK: You could even reenact the Harriet Tubman monologue.

SD: I did that! I did that at the school.

LK: This year?

SD: Two years ago, they had black history and I did Harriet Tubman!

LK: That's great. You love to do that!

SD: Are you trying to say I'm a ham?

LK: Big ham!

SD: Put a mic in her hands.

LK: I just wanted to touch on one more thing. We talked about your vision, your major life themes, love and work, education, social factors. We covered a lot, and I do know that you shared with me that you'd like to thank Hoboken and so many people that you've talked about thanking. Certainly I will pass the information on to friends; and the people who will be transcribing the actual tape, or digital file that we are now recording on. Is there anything you would like to say for the record relative to that? To his gracious acknowledgement you shared with me, do you want to speak to that right now?

SD: I just thought, when I think about my life in Hoboken, I can only say I have been truly blessed and touched by a lot of fantastic people who made my life easier. Thank you, Lord, for giving me privileges. I remember from my childhood the different folks who played major roles in making things better. Someone said to me one time, “Shirley, you can’t save the world,” but I said, “We can make a difference. A positive difference in the world and in the places,” and that has always been my aim. And I always pray that when I sing or when I speak or even my smile, it would lift somebody, make a change in their life.

I remember Carol Marsh said to me one time when she came into the Jefferson Center, she said, “When you enter the room, the whole room lights up!” I said, “For real?” My son got married in Indiana and we had another ceremony here, and when I came in the church I was shaking hands with everybody and one of my friends said, “Are you running for president?”

Our pastor was walking out of work the other day and everyone was greeting him, “Hey, Pastor,” shaking his hand, and one of the visitors over there at the Cake Boss at Carlo’s ran over to him and said, “Are you the Mayor? Can I have your autograph?” He said, “No”. But the favor that God has allotted us in Hoboken has been really awesome. So when I think back to being honored by the veterans, that I got to ride on the bus with them in the Memorial Day parade, when they said, “Shirley, sing ‘Amazing Grace’ for us at the grand opening event.” It rained; it poured down rain; we was wet and they said every word they were gonna’ say. And it was awesome to be even a part of that.

To have Mayor Zimmer call me up and say to me, “Shirley, would you sing at my inauguration?” Wow. Awesome. Awesome things that happened to me right here in Hoboken.

LK: What is singing for you? What is singing to you?

SD: My life. George, my co-worker, picked it up. When I sing the most is when I'm the saddest. But I sing to lift myself up. Someone said, "Oh, you're awful happy today" and he said, "No, she not".

LK: Singing, it's fair to say, brings you to a level of joy.

SD: Joy. I still sing a song "I still have my joy." After all that I've been going through I still have my joy. Because the joy keeps you going. The joy is your strength. Thank God. So I sing because I'm happy and when I'm sad.

LK: Would it be too much to ask for either spoken first verse or first line of "Holding On"? Do you think you could muster up singing one line for the record?

SD: "I'm just holding on. I'm holding on. I'm holding on and I won't let go my faith. And I can't let go. I can't let go my faith. 'Cause it's what taps me on the shoulders and says, Get up."

But thank God for Mr. Fine [principal, Demarest Junior High School] that gave me all my classes on the same floor; for Mr. Gaynor that brought me my first asthma pump so I would be able to go to school. In that year that things were going rough for my family, even though Grandma was conscious of food in that time – I say that because Grandma used to go in the kitchen and I had already searched the cabinets and the refrigerator and I don't see anything – she would go in there and go, "Come on in here and eat!" "Eat? Eat what?" This particular Thanksgiving there was a knock on our door, at 653 First Street, I remember somebody from the school was there with a gigantic box of food and meats and stuff. "This is for you, Mrs. Dennis," and I said, "Wow, how did they know I had no food?" And come Christmas they'd do the exact same thing and I would say, "That's amazing." I remember thinking, "How did they know?"

They knew because God was whispering in their ears, saying, "Go to 653 First Street this year, that family can use this."

So many souls have touched my life. I remember when things got really, really rough that year, I had to explain to my sons that we had to wait until after Christmas to have Christmas because Mama didn't have any money that year. I tell parents, "Tell your children the truth, they really do understand." Laura, you won't believe this; yes, you will, you will believe it. I got a call from one of my co-workers, who said, "Shirley, they giving away Christmas trees down the block. Do you want a Christmas tree?" And my sons had told me that year they wanted a real tree and that's when I explained to them, Mama didn't have anything. We go down I said to the kids, "Someone giving away trees. Let's go get it." Well, of course they picked the biggest tree that was on the truck. Jona had asked for a hockey game, a table game. That same person came a week later and said, "Shirley, somebody's giving away a hockey game." I went just like this, "What!?" So Jona got his hockey game. Under the tree my kids had things they couldn't normally have. That Sunday before Christmas my church, we always made boxes to give out to different ones. That same Christmas I didn't have anything, they came in with all our canned goods and food and stuff and put it in the box and stuff and all this ham and turkey and all kinds and they said to me, "This is for you," and I said, "What?" Laura, I went home and I cooked everything. The ham, the turkey, I cooked it all. What an awesome thing. Right here in Hoboken.

A community-minded city and that's one thing I'm always reminded about Hoboken all these years: it has always been community-minded. It's the one thing that has drawn people from all over the world here. I hear people coming down the street saying, "This is such a nice town. I like the feel of this town." We called this town Damascus because it's connected to everything.

LK: It's amazing. That's what brought me here, too, is the small-town feel. We have currently the newbies and the "old-bies." And you've seen some of the rough waters and bringing the two together. But, in your opinion, Hoboken has not lost that?

SD: It has not lost the community. I don't think it ever will because it's the one thing that people are holding onto. Even with all of our differences, the community thing remains. One of my highlights of Mr. Russo's days is that he gave the high-school kids a parade when they won the state champion. That was like, awesome. I think I was more happier than the kids.

LK: Celebrating the youth.

SD: Celebrating the youth. Because sometimes the kids are forgotten and from that point on they have been, like, zeroed in more toward the youth. The STY program's another one geared toward youth. So it's really great when you see the baby carriage and the dog. (I don't know what that is about with the dogs!)

LK: Dog parade. So many dog walkers. More dogs than children. Speaking of youth, and I know you've mentioned some words of wisdom to the adults, is there anything you would like to leave in this oral history chapter for the youth? For a young child or a youth who may pick up your story from the library or the museum? Whether it be two years from now, 10 years from now, 20 years from now, because it's going to be there. Anything when they pick up this word or this discussion or whatever you see it as at the moment, anything you want to pass on to that young person?

SD: I guess what I always say to them: "Shoot for the stars because it's yours and you can have it. And keep in mind that you are extra special and don't let anyone, anyone, no matter who it is, speak negative in your life, ever. And don't celebrate anyone that don't celebrate you."

END