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RAYAH LEVY: I am Rayah Levy here with Robin Stanley to talk with her for an oral history project titled Voices from the African Diaspora, the black experience of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As part of the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are here at the Bethlehem area public library on Saturday May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Robin Stanley thank you for your willingness to speak with me.

ROBIN STANLEY: You're quite welcome.

RL: Can you please spell and state your full name and what is your date of birth?

RS: My name is Robin Stanley, S-T-A-N-L-E-Y. My birthday is March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1958.

RL: Robin, [00:01:00] please tell us where were you born.

RS: I was born at St. Luke's Hospital here in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

RL: And approximately what year.

RS: Nineteen fifty-eight.

RL: What year did your family move to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania?

RS: My grandfather located here in 1932 and my grandmother

somewhere in that same time period. My grandfather came

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from Fredericksburg, North Carolina, and my grandmother came from Virginia.

RL: Why do you think your family moved to Bethlehem?

RS: I'm pretty certain it was because of the racism down south and the limits on job or work [00:02:00] opportunities and up north there were more opportunities and so they came up here looking for more opportunity for a better life.

RL: Could you please tell me your grandparents names and what they did when they first moved to Bethlehem?

RS: My grandfather came when he was 18 years old, and he got here, and he initially just joined a church I guess praying for something to happen. And it was also church would be place where you met people who could lead you places, and if there were opportunities anywhere then the church would be the place to go and meet somebody to learn about opportunities. And it was only a year later that he was fortunate enough to get the job at the Bethlehem Steel where he was a burner and he worked [00:03:00] there for 42

years before he retired from the Bethlehem Steel.

And my grandmother came here and she really -- her mother died when she was 12-years old, and so she had the responsibility of taking care of her sisters and brothers

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with her father. So her school, her education was limited because she was more like big sister/mom and so when she came here her experience for work was merely being a homemaker, and when she arrived here in Bethlehem that's what she did. She found jobs and she was a housekeeper/mother for white children and so she was a domesticated maid.[00:04:00]

RL: Tell me I'm sorry what's your grandfather's name again and could you tell me did he ever share stories about what it was like working at Bethlehem Steel with the family?

RS: His name was Samuel James [Pattillo?]. He really didn't talk about work too much, he enjoyed going to work because he knew that he was the provider and he also enjoyed doing farming, he learned that skill from my great grandfather, his father, who came from down south as a farmer. And he

taught him how to grow things, and so a lot of the foods that we had in our, my grandmother's home, were grown from his garden. He had a very big garden, in fact he owned a home [00:05:00] in Bethlehem near the Bethlehem Steel and he sold that and bought land and he used that land as his garden, gigantic garden, until he put his house on that.

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We ate a lot of fruits and vegetables and he enjoyed going hunting, and he hunted for he did rabbit, he did deer, he did a lot of fishing and so we ate a lot of those things mostly he could feed us. My grandmother had I remember two freezers and two refrigerators, and they stayed full because he was always going out, he enjoyed going to get it, or making it happen and my grandmother was responsible for jarring things and cleaning the fish and freezing them, and so but talking about work he very seldom talked [00:06:00] about it. I do know that like I said that it was -- he took pride in it, it wasn't a job that everybody got to have here, and him being a black man there were few,

only a few black people who ended up working at the Bethlehem Steel and he was one.

RL: Did you get a chance -- did he take you and the family as his grandkids back to the south so that you can experience what he experienced at any point?

RS: I married a person who was from down south and so with him I got to go down south. We had a couple of family reunions down there and I got the opportunity to go down and see for myself where they lived at and why they ran away. And so I get [00:07:00] it, I'm glad that they came up north because I don't know if I could have survived down there.

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RL: Could you -- let's get back to you personally -- what was it like growing up here in Bethlehem, and I want you to tell me a little bit about your school experience from elementary to high school.

RS: I grew up in the projects and that being said I lived around mostly blacks. We did have Portuguese, people from Poland, people from Czechoslovakia, and Italians, and a lot of them had jobs in the Bethlehem Steel as well. They had

housing [00:08:00] for them in the projects because it was close to the Bethlehem Steel and that is where they lived. But growing up I got to taste foods from different nationalities, everybody there treated everybody the same way because we were all in the same struggle, we were all in the projects together.

So there was really no prejudice there, but if you stepped outside that I found when you went to school that's where you picked it up, because during high school we got bussed there. That was in I believe in '73 or '74, they started bussing us to instead of going to Liberty High School we went to Freedom, and when we got there we found that we were, there might have been two blacks in the whole school, but they were blacks that lived near Freedom High School,

[00:09:00] which was -- we considered that rich. And for the people who got bussed there it was uncomfortable because most of the kids were not familiar with being around that many black people at one time.

A lot of the kids on our bus that took the bus with us from the projects found it so discomfoting that a lot of them just stopped going to school, and they ended up staying home and next thing they're having babies and then they continue that cycle of staying in the projects. Because as soon as you had a baby you can get an apartment in the projects, and so that's what they ended up doing, and a lot of them didn't finish school, they didn't graduate from high school. I never got to go to my prom because there weren't a lot of [00:10:00] black boys that would -- it just wasn't cool to go to the prom, from the projects that wasn't cool to do.

And then there weren't a lot of blacks who graduated from high school that could even ask you to go, and so we just didn't go, we couldn't go, that was something we never had the opportunity to do. I'd like to go back and relive the

prom one more time so I could have the opportunity to go

just once to see what it feels like, but that was it.

RL: I just want to go back to the bussing for a little bit,

it's fascinating because you know as I look at history and I look at down south when bussing took place it was tumultuous for the white community, it was tumultuous for the black community too, and the whites were very antagonistic [00:11:00] towards blacks coming into their community. Tell me did that happen in Bethlehem whereas you know the white neighbors were out there picketing and saying they didn't want blacks in the school, did you experience any of that when it came to bussing?

RS: No, we found there was no-one there at the bus stop because

it was only us there to get on the bus and to get off, because we all loaded on in the projects. When we got to school you would have -- there were certain areas that you'd hang out at before the bell rings and if whites were there and we got off the bus and went over near that hang out area they scattered. It was evident that they were not comfortable with us being there.



There were, I won't say all there were whites who were curious about who we are and how we act and [00:12:00] they wanted to get familiar and so my whole experience there wasn't bad. But I believe that with every year that it kept going on that we became more accepted. There was a time where you had blacks from the projects who were athletic and they would be on wrestling, basketball and so that was our opportunity to go to the pep rally and cheer on, but had that not happened that wouldn't have been an interest for us. I don't remember seeing too many black cheerleaders at the high school.

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Q2: Which high schools were those?

RS: Freedom High School didn't have a lot of black cheerleaders. Liberty High School was more diverse because that was [00:13:00] where most of minorities went to school. Had we not been bussed we would have been over there. When they would have their dances the minorities would go to the Liberty High School dances but not to the Freedom High School dances because certainly the music was

going to be different, the crowd was going to be different,  
and we danced different, and so it just wouldn't be fun.

Where if you went to the Liberty High School dance you knew  
and kind of expected like the *Soul Train Experience*.

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RL: What was it that made you different than the others who  
dropped out of school. What is it that grabbed you, that  
made you stay in high school?

RS: I believe that my church had a lot to do with it because I  
was raised up in the church, [00:14:00] and my grandfather  
and my grandmother and a lot of my family members came  
here, and they managed to get great jobs. And they managed  
to buy homes, and so I got the advantage of seeing home  
ownership and having things unlike some of my friends who  
were raised in the projects, who it was generational, their  
mother and father were from the projects and so what they  
knew is what they knew and there was nobody to show them a  
different opportunity. Where for me like I had the church family, and  
then I also had my own family, and I knew when

I got big I was going to have a home just like my grandmother.

And so it was [00:15:00] my mission, and I knew too that I wanted to go to college. So I knew what I needed to do was stay there, and then there were scholarships that were offered for us, and so it was those things, and knowing that there were only a few who were going to take the opportunity and it was there for me and I had encouragement from at home to keep me going, so I believe that's how I did it.

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RL: What college did you go to?

RS: I went to East Stroudsburg State College it's East Stroudsburg University now, but it was state college then.

RL: What was that experience like?

RS: It was new, it was me being out on my own and it was a challenge simply because there was no-one there to tell [00:16:00] me what I had to do or not do. And I kind of just enjoyed my newfound freedom and I'm believing that with then two and a half years by the second year in the

second semester I did not do so well, I was borderline to -  
- I was a D+ and you needed a C to keep your scholarship.  
And so I lost my scholarship and I could have gone, had my  
mom had the money to pay for me to -- but she would have  
had to pay for me to go and from the projects she didn't  
have the money.

So my idea was that I'm going to work and once I save my  
money up I will go back the next semester. [00:17:00] It  
was during that semester that I ended up I got a job at the  
Bethlehem Steel, now for me that was an honor because it  
was the place that everybody dreamed of working and here I  
am 20 years old in the Bethlehem Steel. And I believe that  
the money had me where I was almost committed to doing it  
and I wasn't -- once I got the job I wasn't going to leave  
it, and then through that I ended up I got married and I  
had my son and the rest is history.

RL: I want you to tell me a little bit about your experience

working at the Bethlehem Steel, were there other blacks  
working there with you, did you have a community of black

folks working there so you can identify with?

RS: In all honesty there were very few blacks there working in the Bethlehem Steel I had said [00:18:00] and it was a little difficult because here I am this young black girl working around these older white men, and them when I first got there they had pictures of naked women in the -- all over the place because it was a man's world and I got that. I wasn't there to give them a hard time I was just happy to be there and get the check.

And not really thinking I was hired because I was female and because I was black and those two points were something -- they had the affirmative action, I qualified for two things at one time, so instead of having two women that they would have had to hire they hired one person but got

two check marks. But with the affirmative action brought more women and more women meant that [00:19:00] some of the behaviors that the men were accustomed to in the Bethlehem Steel they had to change because away went all those naked pictures, you couldn't have them because women might get

offended.

The cursing and the harassment of all sorts had to go away or they were going to be held accountable or sued. And so they had to train people because the women came, they had to learn how to treat everybody fairly, and I think a lot of the men had a hard time with that, a lot of people retired because women came, and a lot of people didn't want to work with women. Sometimes they would have us doing tedious jobs move a pile of dirt, shovel it from here and shovel it over there. Tomorrow you come in, now move it back over there, and that kind of stuff.

They would make us go in [00:20:00] oil, we worked in the rolling mills and you had to have oil on the wheel to make it run so that the steel -- hot steel could run through it.

Well it would develop piles of dirt underneath the rollers, they would make us go in there and shovel grease from one place and move it to another. But for me I just looked at it OK this is what you have to do for a job in the

Bethlehem Steel not knowing at the time that they were really harassing us in a different way, because they weren't saying it, it was just the jobs that they were giving us that said it. But I was 20 years old, not wise about what was really happening, but ultimately the Bethlehem Steel ended up closing down and I got laid off, and that's how I ended up leaving.

RL: Do you remember [00:21:00] the strike in the 1970s?

RS: Yeah, they did have a strike there, but I was, I came in '79, I went there '79 I started there and by that time I know that there was striking going on because they were protesting foreign imports. And so I believe that that is how the Bethlehem Steel ended up closing down because of foreign imports and them doing the job and making the steel cheaper than we would do it here.

RL: So you weren't there when the strike was going on?

RS: No.

RL: So, again I want to clarify were you the only black person at that time when you first -- when you started working at Bethlehem Steel?

RS: I was not the only black person. I did see a black woman in the locker room when I would go change, but she was not in my department. The Bethlehem Steel [00:22:00] was a pretty big facility and you had different departments to it. And in the department I was in I was the black female.

RL: I want to go back to your neighborhoods and the places you grew up. Could you tell me about how the neighborhood has changed over the years, like for example Fountain Hill, Southside, and West Bethlehem, how has it changed?

RS: Well the Southside of Bethlehem being the projects and down Fourth Street, further down Fourth Street, closer to the Bethlehem Steel was known as the heights and there you would have diversity of well first Hispanic person I ever met was in third grade. She came from Puerto Rico and they introduced [00:23:00] her in the class and announced her name and all I remember was wow it's a Puerto Rican like I thought oh she's from some foreign place, and we couldn't wait for class to be over so that we could meet her.



And then we found out that she lived in the projects where we did and so we walked home with her and oh we were so excited about the Spanish food, and we got to be really good friends with her and still to this day we're still

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friends. But she moved back to Puerto Rico, but she taught us all about rice and beans. Then you had people who used to make fasnachts the donuts for Fasnacht day, the Hungarians would make halupkis, and there were just -- it was although I lived in the projects it was hard to believe that. I didn't see myself [00:24:00] as poor I saw everybody there as equal, we all were doing the same thing and just living and surviving. But we got to merge the different cultures and learn a lot about each other.

Meanwhile in Fountain Hill that was kind of off limits to us, it was a place we didn't go to because nobody we knew lived there, nobody that looked like us lived there, so if you went past Bronco High School and you went further towards Fountain Hill they would be looking and wondering

where you're going, or why are you here. Sometimes they would say things like get out of here N and so we knew our place, we knew that the only place we were going was either South Terrace or Pembroke [00:25:00] which is the north side projects, because if you went over there what you see in South Terrace is the same thing you're going to see over in Pembroke. And so we were comfortable there, but we didn't venture out too far.

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On Saturdays we would -- my one friend her mother would allow her to use her credit card which we found was a new thing, and we could go shop. And we would get on the bus and ride to Allentown on the bus, it would take you straight to Hamilton Street, and to be able to get in the store and just walk around and see like all this beautiful stuff that -- and her mother would allow her to shop and get one thing. And then we would have to work and pay it back whatever it was we would get.

Yeah it was totally different, if you stepped outside of

the projects, [00:26:00] but the projects was home and I am grateful for the experience because had I not had that I would have not known how to be able to deal with all types of diversity, everybody's not fortunate and everybody doesn't have it all, and you have to be able to relate to everybody. So the projects was great for my learning.

RL: So when did you see the changes occurring especially in Fountain Hill, because if you look at Fountain Hill it's not like that anymore, and you mentioned Puerto Ricans and I mean that is totally amazing. So are you saying to me

that there were no Puerto Ricans in your neighborhood at the time that you were growing up?

RS: When I [00:27:00] first started noticing different races there were not a lot of Spanish people, Puerto Ricans there, and you could know where they lived at. You could point the houses out because we lived in the projects and it would be very easy to point out who lives here, who is black, you knew the houses and you kind of -- the neighborhood was small, but big enough where we're all

comfortable in our little space. But, there were not a lot of Hispanics like I said when I was in third grade is when I start noticing Spanish people coming and then it seemed at one point I stopped looking. And then when I looked again the whole city's full. So I don't know when that transition -- a lot of people I believe not only came from Puerto Rico but they came from New [00:28:00] York, like once you got here and you got situated then your family would come and stay with you until they got set up in their own place and then they went to their own place. But that's generally how everybody operates, you in order to get a new town you have to come, and you stay with somebody until they help you get on your feet, and that's a lot of how it happened.

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RL: That's fascinating, and I want to talk also -- I want to

stay on the neighborhood just for a little bit longer.

Were you allowed to travel at -- like in the night you go

into a certain neighborhood or you knew that you couldn't

do such a thing?

RS: Well I had rules in my house and when the lights came on that meant that I should [00:29:00] be home. If the night lights, the city lights came on that was my time to go home. I didn't have a watch; I did not know the time I just knew if them lights were coming on I'd better hurry up and get home. But, if we stayed out and it was night we could play, like in the summer there was no such thing as air conditioning we were just hot, and so my mom would allow us to be out front in front of our house. And we were allowed to play because it was dark, but it was cool, but she could look out the door and see us out there playing. But we knew not to leave the area.

I would not dare dream leaving the area and being anywhere -- I mean it seemed harmless but there were people when we would [00:30:00] walk to school during the daytime you would have these people -- I remember this man who wore a trench coat and he would sit out in the car and be doing inappropriate things naked underneath that trench coat.

And we had to tell on him so that he could get in trouble,

although we didn't know what was going to happen, but you know that was the kind of stuff that was -- that didn't just start happening it was always going on. In our neighborhood we had a person who had an argument with his wife and the police came, but they came a lot of them because he was -- [00:31:00] (technical interruption)

RL: OK, so we were talking about the neighborhood and you were telling me about a man who was dressed inappropriately. Could you tell me about the Fahy Bridge and coming over into a certain neighborhood, and tell me about that - crossing the bridge.

RS: Crossing the bridge -- well at that point the Fahy Bridge, we didn't come on this side of town again like I had said. The Fahy Bridge how the Fahy Bridge got its name was because it was a gentleman by the name of -- well we called him Mr. [Bumpsy?] Wells and he had an argument with his wife, and I guess somebody called the police. The police came but when they got there they came pretty with a lot of numbers, and he apparently looked out and saw it [00:32:00] and he got his gun because they came and approached him

with guns. And so he got his gun, and somehow there was an exchange of fire and he got shot but he also killed a police officer and that police officer's name was Fahy. And long story short he ended up dying in jail because every time his appeal would come up it was denied.

The Bethlehem Police Force went to the parole hearings and was pretty adamant about making sure that he didn't get out. What happened to the family I don't know, and the only reason I knew this story was because I went to school with the daughter, her name was [name redacted by the LVEHC] and she ended up the day after this [00:33:00] happened she never came back to school again, so I was under the impression it was just not safe. Her name was the same name as the person who killed the police officer and I think that the family was probably uncomfortable with it and they relocated.

RL: It's funny you said you weren't allowed on this side of the neighborhood, so we're in the Bethlehem area public library, did you ever visit the Bethlehem area public library?

RS: We would go to the Bethlehem Public Library on the south side, on Fourth Street, across from the Holy Infancy School, and that was our library.

RL: So you never came to this particular library?

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RS: Not as a student, no.

RL: And is it because you felt that you weren't welcome?

RS: It was just because it wasn't what we knew. When we got to high school if we [00:34:00] were doing research we could come here but it wasn't as comfortable, we weren't as familiar because what we knew was from either the school library or the library on Webster Street.

RL: Let's move right along, about what year did you say that you come of age?

RS: Coming of age meaning grown or?

RL: Like 18 -- you know you went off to college.

RS: That was 1976.

RL: 1976, so the 1970s we had *Soul Train*, we had Alice Walker winning the Pulitzer Prize, you also



mentioned before about -- you did mention *Soul Train* a bit and dancing and so forth, tell me what did you guys live vicariously [00:35:00] through *Soul Train*, because you were living in a predominantly white community?

RS: Our opportunity to actually leave the neighborhood without leaving the neighborhood was through television. We got to see what life was like or what life could be like. I always imagined I would want to live in Hollywood because the television made it seem like it was the place to be.

You have arrived when you get to Hollywood. But yeah, *Soul Train*, we looked forward to coming on every Saturday. You did not want to miss it, you wanted to see who the Black stars were, you wanted to learn the clothing styles, you wanted to know the dance moves. Because if you knew all of that you were cool, and people were looking to follow you if you knew [00:36:00] what the *Soul Train* people knew. So yes we watched that, we watched *The Jeffersons*, we watched *Good Times*, and then we always watched Batman. I don't know why but we did, my brother's show, we had to share the

television.

RL: Being a librarian what kind -- Essence magazine came out around the 1970s too and like again *The Color Purple*, did you read that book, did you read Essence magazine?

RS: We did read the Essence magazines, people would order them and then we actually had to share them on the bus, like we would just pass that book around. Whoever could afford to buy it bought it and then once they read it we passed it around like every other book we ever had. But yeah that's how we got to know, and we would go to the library and the challenge sometimes would be that you had to read a book and then [00:37:00] write an essay about that book and generally I think that's how we ended up reading books. But we learned that there were Black books, not too often, but the Black book reading the story of Black characters actually let you leave and go into that place where that writer took you, where it wasn't home anymore, you actually got to go somewhere.

RL: I want to go -- so you became of age and so forth, I want

to go to you now as a grown person being married. Tell me who were you married to, what's his name, and do you have children?

RS: I married when I was 21, I married my son's father, his name was Wayne Watson, it is Wayne [00:38:00] Watson. And I had a son whose name is Lamar Watson, but we married young and believing that the right thing to do is to be married when you have kids. We married and had my son and found out really early that we were too immature to be married, and so when my son was maybe three I decided that I needed to just do this by myself. I never asked for child support. I felt that this was my child and I'm going to take care of my child, I don't want your opinions about what I do with my child. Sometimes when you pay child support you get to say things and he was OK with that because he didn't want to pay.

But anyway, long story short, we ended up, we got divorced and I stayed single until I [00:39:00] met my husband in the training academy for the Department of Corrections and he

lived in Philadelphia and I lived here in Bethlehem still.

We started dating and then before you know it he ended up moving here and the rest is history, and we recently celebrated our 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary. But he is the -- while he is not my son's biological he is my son's father and my husband. He worked in corrections like I did.

RL: Did you work in corrections after you left Bethlehem Steel?

RS: I left the Bethlehem Steel and I ended up at AT&T, which was Western Electric, at some point turned into AT&T and then it turned into -- closed up. [00:40:00] I got laid off from there too and it was because I got laid off the second time I heard that they were hiring at the County of Lehigh and I went up there and I put in and lo and behold I got hired. And while I never thought I would be in corrections I found that working in the prison I saw a lot of people that looked just like the people that I lived in the projects with. And my success comes from learning how to just respect people and people respect you, and that was one of the rules in the projects. You mind your business,

you don't mess with people, now if they mess with you and then you have to address the issue. But for the most part you follow the rules. These are the rules, and as long as you stay in your lane you don't have problems, and it had me [00:41:00] - I lasted 25 years.

RL: You know it's so funny because you worked in the correctional facility and you have a black son and when I think of those two things, I don't know if you've heard of Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow, but it's all about the penal system and how a high percentage of Black males are in prison, and Blacks in general, people of color. Tell me what was it, how was it raising a black son knowing that you worked at a correctional facility, you saw a lot of people that looked like you, what did you tell your son, what was it like raising a Black son in Bethlehem?

RS: I had to just teach him the first thing is just to respect people, and he needed to know the rules, like in everything in life there are rules. [00:42:00] And that if he stayed right, tell the truth, and if you do something be big enough to say that you did it. And he had to learn that

everything he wants he can't have because I was a single parent, I was able to pay the bills, and what he needed was what he got. He didn't get everything he wanted, maybe if we had a two parent household he might have been able to have more, but he understood that, and he respected that, and to this day still I don't have problems with him.

I had to teach him that sometimes he has to watch his mouth, and bite your tongue even when you feel like you're right sometimes. There's a time and a place for everything and [00:43:00] that you need to figure out what's the battle and what's the war, everything's not the fight. So, I don't have issues with him, we talk very openly. I explained to him as a child this is my check, these are my bills, you see how much that is and how much this costs they kind of line up, there's no extras. And so he understood that, and we were blessed we made it through, and he gets it, and he's much like me.

RL: Were you at any point fearful for him?

RS: When he turned 18 I was afraid because 18's the age to get

locked up, and then looking at people who were getting locked up in his age group he unfortunately had a friend, there were five kids here in the Lehigh Valley [00:44:00] that they were going out at nighttime and he was supposed

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to go with them and he didn't. They got in the car and they ended up going down by a park in Allentown, they were sitting on a wooden bridge and the bridge collapsed and all five kids in the car drowned in the car. And my son would have been in the car except at the last minute he told them he didn't want to go. And I told him that everything happens for a reason and that for their loss you have to live, like you have to live the life for them that they don't get to have.

And it was funny that even another child, kid his own age got killed in Allentown near the 7-Eleven and like it was just getting so close to him. It's natural that a mother get fear, you know, and I just try to [00:45:00] stay on top of him like I would the inmate in the jail. I almost had him like in a prison in our home, not that he was but I had to

talk to him and keep it real like don't make pretend about this, this is your life and it's the only one you're going to get. You're my only child and I need to keep you here with me and so I just would speak clearly, not hold punches about anything and it worked out for him like I said.

RL: That's good. Did he go away to college?

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RS: He actually got a scholarship to NACAG and after two months

I'm wondering why aren't you in class and he goes, "Mom I don't think this is for me." And I go, "Are you serious?"

We never -- I always had to work for everything I had always because I always worked, and I really resented the people who lived on top of me who paid \$14 [00:46:00] a month because they got Section 8 and I had to pay \$600 for my rent. At that time that was a lot and I marched down to the congressman's office and I needed to find out from them why is it - my mother always taught me that God helps those who help themselves. Now I'm helping myself, but the people upstairs aren't getting that, and they get to have it all for free.



And so anyway long story short he ends up getting the scholarship, I was so grateful and so proud I cried. And then two months into it he decides he doesn't want to do this, and I go "I thought that's what you wanted." He said, "No, mom that's not what I wanted, that's what you wanted for me." And so I go, "Wow OK you must be grown, time for you to go." But anyway he ended up [00:47:00] like probably five years ago going back and now he ended up getting his associate's degree and he's stuck with a loan for schooling when he had a free college pass, and I go but it's OK you know we learn. So now I have a 16-year-old granddaughter who's about to go to college she says--

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RL: What's her name?

RS: Her name is Aleah Watson, and she's about to go to school in two years, I'm praying, that is my prayer for her, and I just have to stay more on it. My son could give her a better lesson about how when you get a scholarship don't look the gift horse in the mouth.

RL: I want to move on to the next politics of 1970s again -

Nixon. [00:48:00] What kind of political climate was Bethlehem like during that time? You don't have to stay in the '70s because you became of age in the late '70s and so forth. But now let's go to the '80s, so what was the political climate like here in Bethlehem, were you involved in politics, were you -- are you a part of any political organization?

RS: No, I belonged to the NAACP, but I didn't really because I would listen to adults and I would hear them always saying that they didn't even vote. A lot of Black people didn't vote because they believed that their vote didn't count, and it didn't -- to vote and people are going to do what they wanted to do anyway. And for a long [00:49:00] time I didn't vote until Barack Obama had me vote for the first time, that was the first time I voted. Up until that point I just thought they're going to do what they want to do but I needed to, I believed that my one little vote was going to count to get this Black man in and I needed to see that happen in this lifetime. And so I voted and ever since

then it felt pretty good and I've been voting ever since.

RL: Oh my, and so you said you belonged to the NAACP at one

point, they really push people to be -- you know encourage

people to vote because they know the history of voting.

Weren't you ever a part of that, you know, community whereas

it's important for Blacks to vote because so many people

gave their lives?

RS: I understood that, I still understand it, [00:50:00] but at

that time I just didn't feel that it mattered, even if you

voted people were going to do what they wanted and that's

just how I saw it. And my struggle was still the same

regardless of who got in and so that's how I saw it.

RL: Did you feel discouraged because you live in such a small

community like Bethlehem? Where did you get your--

RS: That probably is it, that there was really the numbers of

Blacks who were encouraging that like Miss Esther Lee was

always active in that, and Sister Butts from my church.

The church was probably the place where it was more

encouraged, but I don't know I just didn't feel that the

vote counted, I didn't see it counting for me.

RL: You [00:51:00] keep speaking about the church, could you tell me the name of the church that you attended?

RS: My church is St. Paul's Baptist Church in Bethlehem and I've been a member of St. Paul's since I can remember, since the church -- this is our third church and when that church they built it I was part of the membership that went in the door to the church when it opened. I was a child then and I grew up in the church as I said, and I was the secretary of the Sunday school until I turned 18. Now I hold the position -- my grandfather was a trustee in the church and in 2013 they asked me if I'd be interested in being a trustee and I felt it was such an honor because it was something my grandmother did, I'm sorry my grandfather.

RL: Could you tell me [00:52:00] his name again?

RS: Samuel Pattillo. And it was something he did, and I thought it was to try to put my feet in his shoes is an honor for me, and I enjoy it, I love doing it.

RL: So, it's generation to generation, the whole church atmosphere that you grew up in.

RS: Yes.

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RL: Who is the pastor now at St. Paul's?

RS: At this time we don't have a pastor. Our pastor recently passed away and we are in the process of seeking a new pastor.

RL: What's his name, the pastor?

RS: His name was James Jackson and he was out of Philadelphia, but he traveled up here every week faithfully, a couple of times, or anytime somebody was sick he would be right here for us.

RL: Is that always the case where your pastor [00:53:00] is not living in Bethlehem but living someplace else?

RS: It seems that they relocate, or they travel back and forth to come here, and I don't know if that is because there are no pastors here that are interested in doing it, or I'm not certain but I'll find out now. I am on the board to seek out a new pastor and we'll find out very soon I hope.

RL: I was asking about the library but also I want to find out about other institutions in Bethlehem such as colleges and

universities, recreational facilities, restaurants, did you feel welcome when you entered these institutions?

RS: I think our position was always -- my position was always to go [00:54:00] in and hurry up and go sit down. I always looked for somewhere in the corner out of the way, I would not want to be out in the front of the place. And even now I find, and I believe it's because of working in corrections I position myself always to put my back to the wall wherever I go because I can always see what's in front of me, but I can't see what's behind me. So I always want to go to the back near the wall and look out and see everything that way. But I don't remember, I mean people weren't blatant about -- I remember going to the Woolworths over in Bethlehem on the northside used to be a Woolworths and we go there on Saturdays, my friend Sherri and I to sit at the counter and they always had the best grilled [00:55:00] cheese sandwiches. And we would look forward to go there and have that grilled cheese and a soda, and well I don't remember us ever going when it was crowded, it seemed

that we would go when there was hardly anybody there.

RL: And so they welcomed you, you never -- they welcomed you?

RS: No-one ever told us we didn't belong there, no.

RL: How about I know we spoke briefly about, you know, you being  
a correctional officer, how about the police department and  
landlords and so forth and banking institutions?

RS: I never had a problem with that, like I said I was  
fortunate enough to have a family who owned their own home  
and who did banking, and actually went to the bank and had  
bank accounts. So I learned how to do [00:56:00] all of  
that stuff and I believe it's in the way you carry yourself  
and the confidence you project, people learn who they could  
intimidate and who they could not. And as long as you  
showed up and you had your cards in order there was nothing  
they could do. Like I do believe that a lot of the things  
that happened for me worked in my favor because I was light  
skinned, that's what I believe. I believe that it was  
easier for the white people to accept me being around them  
because I was light, and it wasn't as hard to look at me or

to put up with me as it was for the darker skinned person.

RL: You said you were involved in the NAACP?

RS: Right, [00:57:00] well no I'm just a member. When I was younger we would go to the NAACP banquets as juniors, junior members and we would get to dress up, it was one of my pleasures in going to church. I didn't have much, but I would get my mother's sister's clothing, she had four sisters and I grew tall, so I was able to wear their clothes faster. I was growing out of clothes too quick and I would get like outfits from them and I'd get to wear them and go to church and feel special. And I really enjoyed going to church and dressing up, they kind of broke away from the dressing up part, they still dress but now you can wear pants but at that time it was pretty dresses and you couldn't wear them to school, it didn't look cool going to school with a pretty dress on too often.

RL: So [00:58:00] who were the voices, who were the black leaders in Bethlehem, who were the voices that stood up for Blacks here in Bethlehem, who fought for them?



RS: Miss Esther Lee, Miss Vivian Butts, I had two Black teachers from Bronco Junior High School, one was Ed Williams who was Vivian Butts' brother, and the other one was Wandalyn Enix and she was the social studies teacher. So they, to me, were important people.

RL: How about Black businesses, were there Black businesses when you were in Bethlehem?

RS: We did have a guy, Clyde Bosket, his name was Clyde Bosket. He owned three barber shops, one in Easton, one in Bethlehem [00:59:00] and one in Allentown. So to us, he was like pretty well established, he was the rich guy. And then we had, there was a gentleman Hemmons, I can't remember what his name was, Alfred Hemmons I believe. He was an attorney and he was the attorney for our church and also he was a deacon. But thinking about who I knew that was important were those people who had titles, had some kind of something going on, they weren't just the people living in the projects. I have to remind you that in the projects you had a lot of broken homes, you had a lot of

women that did not have their man, either the man was in jail or he left with another woman. There were always kids [01:00:00] without, always broken homes. And one of my I think my vow to myself was that when I marry I wanted to marry somebody who had a mother and father in their home because to me that shows that they value the marriage, the vows of the marriage.

RL: Were there any unique challenges you faced as a Black woman, whether [01:01:00] it was at work because I know working in a correctional facility as not just a Black woman but just us as a woman in general were there any unique challenges that you faced? And also think of the church did you face any unique challenges in the church also as a woman?

RS: In the Department of Corrections I believe that when I'm a woman first and when I took the job I wore lipstick, I have always worn lipstick and when I got there, there were three women working in the facility, and none of them wore lipstick. In fact they kind of were more masculine looking, and I think that I had a problem with them because I was not them and I imagined that they were trying [01:02:00] to

figure out how I was going to survive in this environment

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looking like I looked. Except they didn't realize that I came from the projects where those same type of people that I live around are living here in the jail.

So my survival skills were there to be not even threatened at all, in fact the more I was myself to them and I respected them, and they respected me, it was easier for me working there than them. The men thought that as a woman that I, most of my time, I have to say I worked around men, not women. And I believe that the men felt that if a situation happened and we would have to fight that I would be the one that would run away, except I come from the projects and it was you know [01:03:00] fight or flight.

I'm going to fight if I have to, you know, if you allow people to pick on you and you don't defend yourself you're going to spend a long and hostile life because people picking on you all the time because you did not fight for yourself. But it's all in your demeanor and I don't believe that I ever had a challenge, in fact I've had,

inmates would come to me and say that if something was about to happen, "hey move out the way" and then things would happen. And they would say that if something happened in

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there that who they were going to get, they would mention officers. So my time was not hard at all.

RL: Thank you for that question and also with the church, historically [01:04:00] there were men running the churches such as the deacons and so forth, so now you are saying you have a very high position in the church. Did you encounter any difficulties raising to that level?

RS: Well in our church we did have members on those particular boards that had been in the positions for 30, 40, 50 years. And so me coming in and them inviting me onto the board they always felt that there would be nobody who could do the job, but because I worked in a jail and I was a supervisor, and I guess they just recognized the strength and thought well if you worked in a jail I'm sure you can help us here in the church. And so here I am, but I don't believe I had any, they didn't give me resistance

[01:05:00] probably as a trustee and responsible for the facility and the maintenance of the facility and the finances.

And my position is the treasurer, I started out as the assistant treasurer and I'm now the treasurer, and I guess because of my skills with the computer and stuff I was able to put things in the computer and present reports that they hadn't seen, and so it demonstrated that I knew what I was doing and they're OK with me.

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RL: So you would say that the church has evolved from when you --

RS: Absolutely, even as far as the dress, there was a time that you had to wear your dress so long there was always like a mother of the church that would tell you that's too short. And [01:06:00] now people wear pants, people come as they are, and I think that that's great. A lot of people don't come to church because there's so many rules about it and the more you put those down the more you'll get your people coming, that's my theory.

RL: OK Robin so we're almost through. I want to wrap this up by saying when you look back all the stories that you've just shared with us, the 1970s and now here we are 2019, tell me what are some of the positive changes that has left an impact on you and negative changes that has left an impact. So start with the positive, what are some of the positives?

RS: Well I'm believing that just women advancing and empowering themselves is great, [01:07:00] that we're becoming equals, that everybody is treated the same way and fairly. I

believe that it would be hard to get behind my husband when he is my partner and that we are together as a team and no-one judges that outside where there was a time that the man was in charge and in control and you did what they said. I'm glad that that has changed not just in my house, but when you look around everywhere. Everybody I see is being treated equal and if they're not there's a place you can go to get that fixed.

RL: Where might that place be?

RS: There is [01:08:00] an advocate for everything, and so there's something everywhere for someone. I mean you need help there's some place you can go to get it.

RL: How about negative, any negative impacts that has impacted you in life? How about school did you regret dropping out of college?

RS: I did, while I was, I'm believing in 2001 I went to NAGAP and I went online and I got the specialized early ed, specialized diploma so that I could work in the daycares and be a teacher in the daycares and I thought that maybe that's what I was going to do but it just seemed like it never happened, I just got [01:09:00] stuck in corrections and just stayed there. But I thought that as things changed and I demonstrated who I was they realized that I was not just a woman, but I was somebody that was an asset to them and they kept promoting me, and I just kept going with the promotions. The money was great and the promotion and the status and my own office, and those were the things that kept me going. And I hope that after leaving that I

opened the door. I was the first female lieutenant in Northampton County and the prison had been open since the 1700s and I just found it amazing that I was the first female lieutenant. Now that's two hundred years later and I just [01:10:00] hope that I opened that door so that somebody else can come behind me, that I demonstrated that it can be done and a woman could be the one that can do it, and somebody is down there working in that capacity at this point.

RL: Well Robin this was great, thank you so much for your time and thank you.

RS: Thank you.

END OF AUDIO FILE