

RobinsonLillian\_20180825

CHARLOTTE NUNES: OK, so my name is Charlotte Nunes. The date is August 25, 2018 and I'm here today in Skillman Library at Lafayette College with Lillian Robinson to talk about her life as a resident of Easton, Pennsylvania and her inspiration to undertake an oral history project exploring the legacy of a migratory stream of African American families from Cuthbert, Georgia to Easton that became during the 1960s. So, Lillian, thank you so much for speaking with me today and can you please state your full name and birth date?

LILLIAN ROBINSON: My name is Lillian June Robinson. I was born on July 28, 1962 in Easton, Pennsylvania.

CN: Great. Can we begin by having you talk a bit about where you were born, your early childhood memories of Easton, your family, where you grew up?

LR: Sure. I grew up in an area of Easton called the West Ward, south of 6<sup>th</sup> Street. It was a dead end street, [01:00] mostly with minorities. African Americans populated that area of Easton at the time. My mother was a very young widow with five children. We were all born in the midst and the aftermath of civil rights and early on I knew the changes that were occurring in the country. It was both scary and enlightening. For me in my experience here, was sort of an outsider for the most part

because I was separated from that community. I went to Catholic school and I experienced different things than let's say my neighbors did going to public school. But nonetheless it was a great experience. [02:00] I enjoyed it immensely. Learned about both cultures, very young, and so it gave me a broader view of the world.

CN: Do you have early memories of -- do you remember like when your consciousness was first raised about what was going on with the Civil Rights movement? Because you said you became aware of it very young. Do you have a memory of that recognition?

LR: I remember the sadness my mother felt when Dr. King was killed. You know, I didn't ever want my mother to be sad and I knew that really hurt her. It piqued my interest as to, number one, who the man was and, number two, why they killed him. And, number three, I realized very young the impact that Dr. King's movement had. And then, of course, there were other changing things going on in the country. When they killed Bobby Kennedy. I remember when they killed [03:00] -- it might have been Medgar Evers at the time. There were a lot of people who were speaking out against what was happening as far as civil rights went and it seemed like they spoke out and then they disappeared. And, of course, there were certain groups that formed, like the Black Panther movement, that I was aware of because my cousin was involved. And I knew that that could have been a problem for

some people. It wasn't a problem for me because I thought it was, well, if you're fighting behind the scenes nonviolently, just organizing, that that can't be a good thing. Excuse me, it can't be a bad thing. But I do remember my mother expressing concern. Because there was, I think, a state cop at one time that came to the house and asked my mother about Gilbert Johnson.

That was my --

CN: [04:00] This is your cousin?

LR: That was my cousin, yes. He's passed on now.

CN: And he lived in Easton?

LR: Lived in Bethlehem.

CN: OK, yeah.

LR: But he and my mother were very connected. I would see pictures, of course, of Black Panthers and to me they were really cool [parades?] and I thought, wow. So there's a movement. So it's like a military movement, a fighting back.

CN: Yeah, resistance.

LR: Resistance indeed.

CN: Yeah.

LR: And I was very aware of that very young, first and second grade. And then in the '70s there was a disturbance at Easton High School. It was a race riot. And I can remember the nuns telling us to go home from school right away. Don't --

CN: Dawdle.

LR: Don't... I don't know what they expected. I mean, there was indeed a race riot at the school at the time. Of course, it didn't affect the Catholic school [05:00] because my brother and I were the only minorities. So it would have been difficult for us to kind of rise up. But I do remember that very vividly because a girl up the street was arrested. I think she was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

CN: Wow, and she got arrested.

LR: Well, there was a problem. I don't know if you remember but in the '70s people wore afros and very big natural hair. And to comb it you needed a big comb. And I remember -- some of them were metal. Actually, they were cake cutters, as they were so called, because I think they were originally cake cutters.

CN: Yes.

LR: Had a dual purpose. She lashed out at a police officer with -- because, you know, they were coming towards the group she was in so she lashed out. But I think they settled that. I think [06:00] it became like a civil matter. I see her today and I'm always reminded of that incident.

CN: It's really stayed with you?

LR: It did because I thought, well, she was young and she had to face that. To face, like you said, that resistance. And she did it the only way -- I mean, I don't condone that. Of course not. But I think when you corner a rat, the rat will lunge. I think

it's just a basic instinct. I mean, I've never been faced with that. But those are probably my earliest moments.

CN: So you're probably about ten-ish around then, you think?

LR: Probably.

CN: Yeah.

LR: No, no, no. A little earlier. I had to be like eight. Seven or eight.

CN: And you started going to Catholic school right away? For your earliest schooling? You and your brother?

LR: I did. Well, my whole family did. My whole family. I mean, my mother wanted, of course, a good education and she thought at the time Catholic education more single -- [07:00] the smaller classroom ideas, of course, appealed to her. And the religious component appealed to her the most. So of course we were given, you know, a dose of religion at the time.

CN: Right. And you're still a practicing Catholic.

LR: I am practicing.

CN: Yeah. So --

LR: I am indeed.

CN: -- what were your kind of like traditions or how did the sort of family practice Catholicism when you were growing up?

LR: Well, my earliest moments were... Because my mother was born Baptist and my grandfather was a Baptist minister. But for some reason she always talked about how she had an affinity toward the

Catholic church and it was something that intrigued her. She would walk by this church in South Bethlehem and feel a peace that she couldn't explain. So she thought it was her calling to be a nun.

CN: Wow. Boy.

LR: But thank God she didn't join the convent. [08:00] I wouldn't be here. I think I was five or six when we joined the Catholic Church. I remember our baptism at St. Bernard's, which is now Our Lady of Mercy. But yeah. I do remember that. And there was, of course, a while where -- I mean, there was a long time when I kind of rebelled the Catholic Church. You know, you become conscious of what's really going on in the world and the fairness. I'm not what you call a super Catholic. I mean, there are some agendas I'm not there. I'm not there. Especially the ones based on my uterus. I'm not there. Am I a Catholic? Am I a believer? There's no question. This is the basis of my growth. It's not going anywhere. But there's certain things that I'm not onboard. [09:00]

CN: What was it like being one of the only minorities in your school growing up?

LR: Well, for me I was just being me but I guess you'd have to ask them. But I never had any problems. I mean, my best friends were an Italian who was Sicilian. We basically had the same skin tone. Not that it mattered, but now looking back. And a Chinese

girl. The three of us who were very close. But I never had any problems as far as anyone, you know, calling me out, my name or - - because we knew each other, of course, since kindergarten when I started. Excuse me. For the most part. But I don't remember any problems with the kids. I think there were some lay teachers [10:00] that probably looked at me to do some very -- I'm not really sure what their expectations were of me. I mean, I was somewhat, I'm not sure, maybe a little bit precocious. But I was just always curious.

CN: Hmm, not surprised.

LR: I was always curious about, you know, everything and I probably, you know, went outside the norm just to test it basically. You know, I've always been a lover of the arts and theater and there were probably moments where, you know, I probably shouldn't have been singing Broadway musical show tunes. There were probably moments where --

CN: There's always a place for show tunes.

LR: So I did have some problems on that level. I mean, again, looking back and my treatment [11:00] as far as myself and the way the other kids were treated. I mean, I was precocious but I wasn't disrespectful. But, I mean, I can remember one teacher in particular, [name redacted], who had a real problem with my... You know, I'm not really sure what kind of problem he had with me but I can remember some instances where he was very abusive to

me. But, I mean, I guess at the time I just thought it was a part of the whole disciplinary structure that, you know, Catholic school had set up to -- I'm not really sure why. Maybe just to oppress. I speak to a lot of people who went to Catholic schools and they had similar experiences with the abuse. I mean, sexual abuse is another whole story. But the physical abuse, of course, is a lasting -- [12:00] abuse is abuse. It stays forever with you. I mean, I'm in my fifties now and I still see him and think of those instances where he used to smack me and I couldn't really understand why until I spoke to my friend Grace Lynn who told me years later how much it bothered her when he did that. Like it just -- "To witness it," she said, "there was no words to explain the hatred I felt for him." I'm like, wow. I personally put that into an area of my brain where I had to look beyond it. I can't let it control my thoughts or my feelings about the world. I compartmentalized that instance, that period of time. But then when I see him, because he goes to my church, I am very [13:00] -- these emotions, of course, flood forward. But it's fine. I mean, I don't wish him harm. But I understand that if I dwell on that area when I was 10 or 11 years old, it could cripple who I am and I can't let that happen. And I understand that as an adult. As a child I did not. As an adult I have to. So that's where I am with my Catholic school education.



CN: OK. So can we talk about how you became involved in the Easton chapter of the NAACP? You know, what was your kind of first interaction with it? How you came to get involved? When?

LR: I've always been a member off and on throughout the years. Of course, my mother was a very active participant.

CN: OK, yeah. So even as a child you probably were --

LR: I think so. I probably was involved. You know, because my mother, of course, wanted to stay at this [14:00], you know, religious education but she also wanted us to be involved in the community as far as -- because my mother did a lot of volunteerism in the community and she's always been a lover of the NAACP because, you know, it's the oldest civil rights organization in the whole world. So I can remember, of course, my mother going to these banquets. I remember as a child she would get very dressed up. They were very formal. Very formal. I remember my mother -- she was very excited. She was just very excited to go and be amongst... I don't have any biased feelings but it's always good to be around people who are like you. And not to say that being around a lot of different people is bad, because I love that the most. But when the whole room is filled with people who have had the same history as you, that feels really good.

CN: Yeah, really powerful.

LR: It really is. It really is. [15:00] But I became involved on a more, how do you say, administrative level a couple of years ago when Benita Crow asked me to help out with some things as far as the press and publicity, the organization, the local chapter. And I didn't know what I would offer. You know, I do a lot of photography and I didn't know what I could contribute. But then, of course, I attended, of course, all the executive board meetings and found out I could contribute some things, you know, as far as, you know, getting word out about different events or about different... The NAACP was involved via social media about promotion. Basically I'm involved with [16:00] brand building of our chapter. So that's how I'm involved with our local chapter of the NAACP.

CN: OK, great. And I want to talk about what inspired your interest and the story of migration from Cuthbert from Easton. I want to have you talk a bit about that project. But I thought first what brought your family to Easton. Because I know you have a kind of interesting kind of family history. What brought you guys to the Lehigh Valley?

LR: Well, my father lived here in Easton. My father was an Eastonian. My mother grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. But, of course, when she met my father he had a house here so we moved to Easton. But his family were from Virginia. My mother's family also. My grandfather was from Lynchburg, Virginia and my

grandmother Lillian was from, excuse me, North Carolina. Oh, the name is escaping me right now. Stony Mount. [17:00] That sound right? Anyway, I mean, local areas in North Carolina that my grandmother met my grandfather. They came to the Lehigh Valley in 1920 because of the steel, the steel, Bethlehem Steel. There were jobs there that needed to be filled. So he worked in the coalmines in West Virginia. He migrated to the Lehigh Valley. But then my mother, of course, met my father in the mid-'50s and married and moved to Easton. We moved to South 6<sup>th</sup> Street. Well, I wasn't born yet but I think they moved in '57 there. They lived on West Street and then they moved to 6<sup>th</sup> Street. That's what it was. I was born, of course, on South 6<sup>th</sup> Street. There were people, like next door, were a family from Florida. [18:00] Across the street were a family called the Pratts. They were from Cuthbert and two doors up there were an in-law of the Pratts and, of course, she was from Cuthbert. And then there were another family on the corner. They also were from Cuthbert. My mother used to tell me like most of the people were related somewhat and had migrated from this little small area of Cuthbert. I always knew that. Which I thought was interesting. And, again, I felt like that outsider because I wasn't from Cuthbert. But, you know, they were beautiful people who shaped who I am. To me I look at these people that were on my block growing up and they were like big and very powerful people who I

know didn't have an easy time. But like through it all they became [19:00] these bigger than life characters to me. Iconic figures to me.

CN: Do you have any sort of specific memories of your impressions of them?

LR: Well, there was a woman two doors down. Her name was Ruby Walker and she was, of course, the matriarch of her family. And I kind of remember some difficult moments in their lives where she was looked at, of course, to hold the family together. And she did it flawlessly and they all respected and loved her, just as all of us in the neighborhood did. She was an amazing woman. She truly was. I would walk home from school and she would always, of course, say hello and always give me a little bit of advice about life. She always had these little bits of advice on how to maneuver and I always remember that. And I always was thankful [20:00] to her because I always knew the love and respect everyone felt for her. She just passed away a couple of years ago. Yeah, I remember Ruby Walker.

CN: I remember a story you told me about drawing Angela Davis in shock. How old were you when that story took place?

LR: Well, on the other side of the street was a girl, Phyllis Harris. And I've always been involved in the visual and I used to draw. I didn't have a lot of paper so I used to draw in like that little page in the book where it was blank and then the book

began. There's a lot of books in my house right now with that page.

CN: Oh, wow. Yes. Maybe we could digitize a couple of those.

LR: Oh. Oh, oh, oh, oh. I mean, it's just an expression. But when Angela Davis was arrested and I can remember -- there were so-called adult conversations where I really wasn't a part of [21:00] but trust me, I was listening.

CN: Yeah, you were observing everything.

LR: And, of course, I can remember the news about when Angela Davis was arrested and the whole theme was to take it to the streets, to take the protest to the streets. And in my mind, you know, I thought that I needed to take it to the streets. So I got chalk. Phyllis Harris. You remember that Phyllis. I drew, because I was slightly a better artist than she was. I think she colored in her earrings. But it was a pretty big homage even to Angela Davis and her movement because Angela Davis was arrested and in the news she would throw up her fist in this huge afro. So I'm like, "I know what she looks like. I can draw her from memory." So I did in the street. Until my mother looked out and saw. Because it was a dead end. It wasn't like cars were coming [22:00] back and forth. And my mother looked out and was running this bucket of water with this brush. And then Phyllis ran home. And, of course, I had to clean it. Angela Davis -- it didn't come up right away. Like it was just smeared chalk at that time.

But then the rain, of course, washed it away. But in my mind I thought that that's what that statement meant, to take it to the streets. I didn't understand that what it really meant was just protesting getting your voice heard. And as a child I did. I did.

CN: What did you think or feel in response to your mom asking you to scrub it away?

LR: Well, I felt, oh, my gosh. I knew it was wrong at that point because I had defaced the street. To an extent. I mean, that's [23:00] how she looked at it. People saw me out there because I wanted to make the proportions, you know, the earrings and just, you know -- and they knew it was me. And she didn't want me to be involved in this kind of graffiti, I suppose, on some level, you know, with her child defacing the block. But I can remember the cleanup. Then I felt, well, somewhat accused, like, "Oh, no, this is wrong. Let me scrub this away. Let me erase my expression." But it didn't matter because I had already expressed it.

CN: OK. So yeah. So when did you start kind of conducting research about, you know, the story, this migration from Cuthbert to Easton? Can you kind of narrate, you know, how you've been exploring this topic? [24:00] [unintelligible].

LR: I've always thought about it. I've always thought that there are African Americans who I've known whose stories to me were very

incredible. But I think the saddest story never told is the saddest story ever told, at the same time. Like people in my family who were very, very highly intelligent people and couldn't get to a level of excellence based on some oppressive laws in place or whatever. But I just think everyone's life is important and everybody is part of this whole experience, even if you don't think they are. I mean, those people on that dead-end block where I lived, they all had a part of building who I am as a woman, as a black woman, African American [25:00]. I was in the library a couple of sum-- it's been like two years now. A public library.

CN: Our public library in Easton?

LR: Right. I'm always interested in other photographers. Because everybody sees everything a little differently through the lens and you can understand how different people are. Like they could see the same square cinderblock and on a certain angle see a triangle. To me, I wanted to see different perspectives of different photographers in the imagery, black and white photography. So I went into the Marx Room and I asked the woman who was in charge of research about looking at some photos and I distinctly -- and sometime I speak a little soft and people don't understand what I'm saying. So I said to her, [26:00] "May I please, you know, look at the black and white photos?" But in her understanding she thought I meant black people. So it became

an apologetic conversation, that she didn't feel that there was enough compiled history of families here in Easton that I could be exposed to. And I never really corrected her as, no, I didn't mean that. What I meant -- but then it piqued an interest in, "Huh, well, maybe I can help you with this. If there's an historic gap..."

CN: Do some intentional filling of the gap.

LR: Exactly. The mistaken conversation piqued my interest in putting together and compiling some stories of local people. Purely [27:00] by accident or lack of hearing, I guess. I'm not really sure how it worked. But it was a revelation. Because I never really stopped her and said, "No, that's not what I mean." I never did see the black and white photos.

CN: So what are your hopes and plans for this oral history project?

LR: I want to get these stories documented. I think the people I plan to speak with are very important for shaping the African American community here in Easton. Very iconic figures. I think it's very important again that their story is not untold. I'm going to do what I can [28:00] to make that happen.

CN: Excellent. Is there anything we haven't spoken about yet that you'd like to touch on today?

LR: I think we covered the birth of Lillian Robinson up until...

CN: Yeah. Until the present.

LR: Until the present.



CN: Any other kind of big milestones? You know, especially pertaining to kind of, yeah, anything to do -- you know, how your personal story kind of interacts with the history of Easton.

LR: Honestly, I never loved Easton until actually after the passing of my mother. Then I started to settle in. Because I always had hopes to get out. Like I always needed a little more than what Easton had to offer culturally. So I was, you know, [29:00] back and forth a lot to New York City. Plans and hopes of being in a more culturally giving area. But then with the passing of my mother I kind of settled in and now I have a love for Easton that I never expected. I never really expected it. And when I hear people talking bad about it, I'm, "What are you talking about?"

CN: What is it that you love about Easton?

LR: I like where we're situated, right here in the base of the Poconos. I like that truly we can get to two world major cities. We can get to New York City very easily. We can get to Philadelphia very easily. And we can also get into Washington, DC very easily. I think this part of the northeast, Pennsylvania is -- I like the location. I like again the mountains in Pennsylvania. I think everywhere in the world -- I mean, this may sound kind of [30:00] cheesy but I think there's beauty in so many places that you wouldn't even think are beautiful until you relax and really look at the world. And that's what I see here in Easton that I never saw before.

CN: Yeah. That's a beautiful note to end on. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me today, Lillian.

LR: Thank you, Charlotte, for taking the time --

CN: I'm so excited for this oral history project.

LR: Trust me, it's --

CN: I think it's going to be phenomenal.

LR: It will. I think so, too.

CN: Yeah. So thank you for your work on that also.

LR: You're welcome. Indeed.

END OF AUDIO FILE