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SHOLOMO LEVY: Hello I'm Professor Sholomo Levy from Northampton Community College and I'm honored today to be with Dr. Sharon Gavin-Levy to talk to her for an oral history project, "Voices from the African Diaspora: The Black Experience in Bethlehem Pennsylvania," as part of the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are here at the lovely home of Ms. Sharon Levy on Tuesday August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Thank you for your willingness to speak with us. Can you please state and then spell your full name?

SHARON GAVIN-LEVY: My name is Sharon Gavin-Levy. S-H-A-R-O-N G-A-V-I-N L-E-V-Y.

SL: And can you tell us your date of birth or as close to it as you're willing to share?

SG-L: Thank you so much! [00:01:00] My birthday is June 25<sup>th</sup> and I'm a fifties baby.

SL: Fifties. OK, well that's good enough. Where were you born?

SG-L: I was born on Long Island, New York. I was born in a small town called Bayshore, New York.

SL: And where was your family from?

SG-L: My mother actually was a member of the Shinnecock Indian tribe, which is a Native American tribe out on the Eastern end of Long Island, in a place called Southampton. My mother was born in Bellport on Long Island. My father was originally from a small town called Prairie Point, Mississippi.

SL: And what were their names?

SG-L: My mother's name was Viola Eleazer Gavin and my father was Nicholas Gavin.

SL: And when did you or your family move to [00:02:00] Bethlehem?

SG-L: Actually, I moved to Bethlehem in November, 1976 and I moved here as a single young woman for a job.

SL: Well, what brought you to Bethlehem?

SG-L: I came here in 1976. I had been looking for a job during that time. It was difficult finding a job in New York. There was a recession going on at that time and so I had planned to just find a job and, being originally from Long Island, New York, I planned to stay there. However it was very difficult finding a job in education and so I decided to expand my search and I actually applied for a job that was posted in the New York Times. There was a section called "Careers and Education." So there was this community college, Northampton Community College, that was advertising a position [00:03:00] in the New York Times. So I applied for the position and I was eventually interviewed and offered the position, and that's what brought me here to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: a job at Northampton Community College.

SL: Why don't we step back and tell us a little bit about your experiences, although you didn't grow up here in Bethlehem, of your early life experiences, your college years, and then your decision to go into education and then coming here to Bethlehem.

SG-L: OK. Well, as I said, I'm originally from Long Island, New York. I grew up in a small town called Patchogue. Patchogue is about 60 miles from New York City and

so it was a small town. My father was a barber and had a barber shop. In fact, he had one of the first barber shops for [00:04:00] African-American men, for Black men, on Long Island and so people used to come from miles and miles around for my dad to cut their hair. And, my mom was pretty much a stay-at-home mom. There was times when she would do housework or day's work, but most of the time she was home with us. I have two older sisters and a younger brother. So, I kind of feel like my growing up years were kind of uneventful. My parents were hard working, working class Black people. They owned their own home and my dad worked hard, I never knew my dad to have fewer than two jobs. At that time it seemed seemed like all of the men, the Black men that I knew, worked a full-time job and had at least a second job. So, it felt like it was kind of an uneventful childhood. I [00:05:00] grew up in a family that I was taught values and I was taught that you had to work hard. I was taught that there was nothing that you couldn't do, but anything that you got in life, you had to work hard for it. Although my parents didn't -- my mom did have a high school diploma, my dad probably didn't go higher than maybe 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> grade and you know, the South, he was from a family of sharecroppers. So in terms of having an extensive education, my parents didn't, but they valued hard work and they certainly valued education and I kind of grew up in a home where you were expected to do well, you were expected to kind of be obedient and they didn't tolerate any foolishness. So that's kind of how I grew up.

SL: So, where did you go to college?

SG-L: I went to Bucknell University and actually that was my first introduction to Pennsylvania. I had applied to several schools in [00:06:00] New York and probably expected that I would go to college in New York, but I had taken some tests and I had done pretty well on my SATs, and then they had something at that time that was called the National Achievement Scholarship and I think at that time that was targeted for students of color, Black students at that time. I grew up during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, and during the time of the Vietnam War, and so forth, and so that was the beginning of opportunities becoming available for Blacks and so I had taken this test and I had done pretty well, so I began to get all these letters from colleges all over the country trying to recruit me. I guess I was a part of that wave of recruiting Black students to go to school. So Bucknell actually sent me a letter and I applied to Bucknell and I went there because I was accepted and they gave me a very [00:07:00] good scholarship package. So that's really the reason I went there.

SL: So you had some experience living in Pennsylvania.

SG-L: Yes, that my introduction to Pennsylvania: coming to Bucknell. So I got my Bachelor's there and then I had opportunity to get a Master's there, so I stayed there to get my Master's, then I went back to New York, kind of expecting to get a job in New York and just stay there where my family was.

SL: What was your major in college?

SG-L: My undergraduate major was political science. I actually went to Bucknell expecting to go to law school afterwards and although I did actually apply to law school and I was actually waitlisted at Columbia University Law School, and by the time it came to go or to continue to pursue law school, I recognized that wasn't really what I [00:08:00] wanted to do. And so I did stay at Bucknell and I got my Master's and then I came back to New York. Couldn't find a job and got a job here in Bethlehem and that's what brought me to the Lehigh Valley in 1976.

SL: 1976 is when you started at Northampton Community College.

SG-L: Yes.

SL: Describe what Bethlehem was like in the mid-1970s.

SG-L: Well as I recall, I came here as a single person. It was very difficult to really kind of become a part of the community. The one thing I can remember, and I still kind of see it, even today: Bethlehem was very clearly "new people." Either you were born and raised here in Bethlehem, or your family had been here for decades and [00:09:00] decades and then you were part of the Lehigh Valley. But if you were a new person, you were a new person. There was very clearly to me a dichotomy between new people and those people who had been here for decades or for generations. So I was a new person and I had been involved in being in church at home and so forth on Long Island and having grown up in the church and whatnot. But even when I came here to the Lehigh Valley I kind of visited the churches but this was a difficult community to crack. I really feel that even among the Black community, if you were a new person, you were a new person; you were an outsider. It was Insiders and Outsiders. New people were Outsiders. And so, for a long time, in fact, for four years I essentially was a commuter. I worked here from Monday to Friday, Friday I was on the highway headed back to New York [00:10:00] and then Sunday night headed back to the Lehigh Valley to work. So basically really for 4 years I commuted and I really didn't begin to build a life here, I would say, until maybe 1980.

SL: What happened then?

SG-L: I just began to make friends with people, I began to realize that hey, "I need to build a life here you can't you can't commute forever." It's one thing if you're commuting an hour, but I was commuting to New York. And I just began to meet other people my age and kind of began to build a social network here. In 1981 I got involved in a church. Actually, I was one of the founding members of Grace Deliverance Baptist Church and that was 1981 and that church kind of became my family. We were a [00:11:00] community where, actually, it was a church founded by -- we were pretty much all young people. We were all like in our late twenties or early thirties. Our pastor was a little bit older, but it truly was a church of young people, and then I had other friends and I basically began to build a life here, and that happened after being here four years.

SL: Who was the minister?

SG-L: The founding pastor was Lorenzo B. Hall. He was originally from Washington, DC. He was the pastor of Saint Paul Baptist Church, which was a Baptist Church here in town, and I wasn't a member of St Paul so I don't know all that went on, but anyway, he was only a pastor there for a short time and then he and a group of people from Saint Paul came out of Saint Paul, [00:12:00] and then a bunch of us founded Grace Deliverance Baptist Church. We gathered in the home of Tom and Loretta Wright. Tom is now the associate pastor at Grace Deliverance. But Grace Deliverance Baptist Church was started in the basement of Tom and Loretta Wright's home here in Bethlehem.

SL: Now, if you would, describe Northampton Community College in the late 1970s early '80s.

SG-L: OK. Northampton at that time was so, so much smaller than it is now. It truly, at Northampton at that time, in many ways that was a community in that you knew absolutely everyone. All the administrators, all the faculty, the secretaries, the maintenance. It was a small enough place that you knew everyone. And so now, it's just [00:13:00] so large now you wouldn't be able to know, but back then you knew everyone. You knew what everybody was doing, you knew all the little gossip on campus, and it was also a very kind of small and cozy place at that time. When I first went there, there were not many people of color. There was Frank Stanton, who I believe was one of the first Blacks who ever worked at the community college. There was Louise Johnson and also there was only one Hispanic at that time, Eddie Nieves, and we actually worked in one program. We worked in a program called Project Aware. It was an educational opportunity

program and that's actually the program that hired me. I came to Northampton as a program specialist in the Project Aware program. So [00:14:00] I was a part of the faculty, but eventually in just two years our director took another position and I became the interim director of Project Aware, and that was in 1978, and then thereafter I became the permanent director. So I began at the college primarily as an administrator. Project Aware was, as I said, it was an educational opportunity program, and Project Aware was a program in which we provided students, and we probably had the largest segment of students of color, who were recruited and who came to Northampton, and they came through the Project Aware program. So we provided counseling, we provided tutoring services. Project Aware was a program designed to recruit students who may not be academically prepared, but [00:15:00] we provided the additional support services that they needed in order to successfully graduate and make it through college. And so that was a program that was founded by then-state representative K. Leroy Irvis, who was a very influential man in the Pennsylvania legislature, and he founded the ACT 101 program. So there were ACT 101 programs at colleges and universities all across the state of Pennsylvania. We just called our ACT 101 program at Northampton Community College Project Aware. But it was a program in which we had large the large a large number of Hispanic and African-American students, and the point of the program was to give them the kind of support so that they could be successful in higher education. So we saw students come through our program who later transferred and then [00:16:00] went on and became lawyers and so forth. Students were very, very successful in the ACT 101 program.

SL: And how did your roll at the college change over time?

SG-L: Well, initially I came as the program specialist and that particular position meant that I assisted the director with some of her assignments, but I also advised, I was like an academic advisor, a counselor to some of the students. At that particular time that they just had two male counselors and so I was available to help out with the female students. And then, as I said, two years after I came, the director took another position, and I was the interim director, but then I became the director of the program. So, not only was I the director of the ACT 101 program, but I also became [00:17:00] very successful in developing and writing grants. And while I was doing that I wrote the grant for the Student Support Services Program, so we were able to get funding for that program, also during the time I was an administrator and that, actually, that division of the college was students -- the student services, I mean the Student Affairs Department. So as an administrator I was one of the Student Affairs administrators. So during my time we were able to add additional programs. We had an Adult Resource Center that was really designed to help adults, and we work with a lot of women, we wrote grant funds, we got grant funding for programs for women. I was involved in a program called Tuesday College. Actually, I was one of the founders and originators of that in which we had a special kind of programs [00:18:00] and classes on Tuesdays. And that was designed to get women to come to the college. Adult women and non-traditional women, to introduce them to the college. Actually, we were very successful and initially Tuesday college has credit-free programs, but that was a kind of non-threatening way for women to come and eventually many of those women started taking credit courses from the college. So, during my early years at the college I was involved in those kind of special programs and initiatives to get special populations to come to the college and to be successful at the college.

SL: When did you transition into the teaching side?

SG-L: OK. Actually, that happened in the early 1990s. I was an administrator for about 15 years and then [00:19:00] during those years I eventually, in 1986, I met my husband, we were married in 1987 and then our daughter was born in 1988. So at that time I had a young child and I was a busy administrator and long days

and I just kind of knew that at this stage in my life that kind of schedule just wasn't the best thing for me, and so since I had a Master's degree in English from Bucknell, I had the opportunity, I expressed my interest in teaching. And so I went through kind of a transition, I took some additional courses at the University of Pennsylvania and so by about 1991-92, I was gradually teaching a course or two in addition to my administrative responsibilities. So that by 1993 I was ready to go into the classroom full time. So that's how I [00:20:00] began to do my teaching.

SL: Tell us a little bit about your future husband.

SG-L: My future husband, Ulysses Harold Levy, who everybody knows as Harold, he uses his middle name as his primary name. He and I actually met through a mutual friend. He was working at Penn State University, he was a Penn Stater himself. He has his Master's and his Bachelor's from Penn State, but I had a friend here in the Lehigh Valley who had begun college but hadn't finished, so he was actually working -- he was a non-traditional student and he was trying to finish up his degree at Penn State. And so he had shared with me that he was going to be graduating and so he and another friend of ours, we went out -- a good friend of mine, Pat Graham. She and I and Lloyd Knight, who actually introduced me to my husband; the three of us would kind of hang out together a lot and [00:21:00] when Lloyd graduated, he said he was going to have his friend -- his buddy Harold -- help him find a room so he could have a reception and Harold did --

SL: Is that a half hour already?

F1: Mm-hmm.

SL: Wow.

SG-L: That was a half hour?

F1: Yeah.

SG-L: I didn't even get to the good part!

F1: No wait, we still don't --

SL: OK Dr. Levy, you were just telling us about meeting your future husband, Harold Levy. What year did you get married?

SG-L: We got married in 1987.

SL: Here in Bethlehem?

SG-L: Yes. We were actually married at the Emmanuel Evangelical Church on Center Street because our church, Grace Deliverance Baptist Church, which at that time was located on 838 [00:22:00] North New Street, was small -- it didn't accommodate the number of guests that we were having. So we got married at that Evangelical Church on Center Street. And then we had our wedding reception at the Hotel Bethlehem and we had a very nice wedding reception and we heard from some of our guests that the people at the Hotel Bethlehem were kind of, "Well, who are these people? Who are these Black people? Are they from around here?" Because we have guests coming from the Pittsburgh area, New York, and everybody came looking very beautiful and stylish, so we heard that the people at the hotel were wondering, "Well who are these Black people?"

SL: So it wasn't common for black people to have events at Hotel Bethlehem at that time?

SG-L: Maybe, probably not. I'm sure some did, but probably not to the scale that we had. But we had a very lovely event.

SL: How many [00:23:00] children do you have?

SG-L: We have one daughter, Nicole, who was born here in Bethlehem at St Luke's Hospital.

SL: Tell us what it was like raising a family in Bethlehem.

SG-L: In many ways this is a nice community to raise a family and to have a family, but at the same time it's difficult if you're raising children of color here in the Lehigh Valley. The school system can be a difficult system in that there's certain expectations and there's also a lack of expectation for children of color. So, our daughter a bright student and she was in honors classes and so forth, and I know it was hard for her because she was very often the only [child of color?]. And so it's difficult for children of color being raised here in the Lehigh Valley. At least it was. Our daughter is 30 years [00:24:00] old now, so when she was going to school, even socially it was difficult. There weren't large numbers of black students and so it was a challenge. I know it was a challenge for her and I'm sure it's even a challenge now for young people socially. For young professionals, who may be white, that might be fine, but for young, college educated Black people, it's difficult. This is not an area where they necessarily would find a large social system and a support system of young Black educated professionals here.

SL: You mentioned your religious affiliations. What was the social scene like for young Black people of different ages in terms of clubs, activities, things like that?

SG-L: Well when I came back in the late '70s [00:25:00] there really wasn't much of a social outlet, at least not for me, I'm sure there were they were organizations here like The Elks and the CVA -- the Colored Voters Association -- or whatnot. But I think that kind of catered to an older crowd and so, as I recall, there really wasn't too much going on, which is why I commuted back and forth to New York. I know there was a time when, this was like in the '80s, the early '80s, things kind of picked up a little bit. There was a place that opened up over in Allentown called the Jetport. A lot of young folks kind of hung out there and then in Easton, actually, Larry Holmes opened up a place called Round One, and I know a lot of young people my age would kind of hang out there. So, at different times the social opportunities would be a little bit [00:26:00] better. But just overall the Lehigh Valley wasn't then, and even now, I don't think is really a great, great place for young Black people to socialize and to have social outlets and to meet other people and so forth.

SL: What was the political climate like?

SG-L: The political climate. Wow, that's kind of --

SL: In terms of people --

SG-L: Just in terms of pe --

SL: Issues that might have been important then, bussing --

SG-L: From what I heard, people growing up here in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, it was kind of difficult. I didn't grow up here, but I can remember my peers who did talking about the fact that they couldn't go to the public pools here in Bethlehem. I remember Frank Stanton, my colleague at Northampton Community College who passed away a couple years ago, I remember him sharing that when they were growing up, Black kids couldn't go to the [00:27:00] pools here in Bethlehem. So I know there was some issues here in Bethlehem. And even down through the years, there have been different times where the NAACP has had issues that they've had to deal with here in the Lehigh Valley and so forth. So, I

think the struggle that has been the struggle for Black people across the country has been the struggle for black people right here in the Lehigh Valley.

SL: And even though there wasn't, say, legal segregation, there was a kind of redlining and Bethlehem had different communities.

SG-L: Absolutely.

SL: Where did the majority of the Black community live and what parts of Bethlehem or neighborhoods?

SG-L: When I came here it was very clear to me that many blacks lived on the south side and having heard about that growing up that that's pretty much where black people live. But then, if people ever came to the north side, I think they called it like [00:28:00] over town or something, that was something. And even where we reside now in Bethlehem Township, that, I understand, if black people moved to Bethlehem Township, that's when they were really kind of progressing economically. From what I understand, it was difficult when people first moved to the Bethlehem Township area. I knew there was a woman who had served on the Community Advisory Board out at the college for the Project Aware program, Mrs. Francis, when I first came here she lived in Bethlehem Township and she was shared with me how difficult it was when they first moved to Bethlehem Township years before. So there have been issues of Black people just being living in certain parts of town and move to other parts of town it was a challenge.

SL: How would you describe your [00:29:00] experiences visiting stores, banks, restaurants?

SG-L: Well, you know what? I had an experience here that probably, it was an experience of discrimination, but in some ways it was probably the best thing that could have happened. When I first came here I lived in an apartment and I lived in an apartment from 1976 to 1980. And after pretty much deciding that I wanted a larger apartment, I looked for a townhouse and there was a townhouse not far from where my apartment was and I had called about it. And so they said yes, this townhouse was available. So what happened, my mother was here visiting me, so my mother and I got in the car and we went to look at the townhouse, and when we got to the townhouse they told us it was no longer available. [00:30:00] Now keep in mind I had just called. The townhouse was available. When my mother and I showed up and I expressed my interest in it, all of a sudden this townhouse was no longer available. So I do believe that that was because of the way I looked, my race, and so what ended up happening was I called a local realtor and said I thought well maybe if I got a realtor they could help me be more successful in finding something. And as it turned out we talked about well, why don't you think about purchasing a place? And so that ended up being a good thing because instead of renting an apartment I ended up buying my own home. But I always believe that that apartment was no longer available because the person saw me and when she saw me, the apartment was taken. But I just believe that they say were not interested in renting to a young Black woman. [00:31:00] So it wasn't a pleasant thing but in the end it worked out in my favor because I ended up buying my own home instead of renting a larger apartment.

SL: Were there any events that stand out in your mind during the, say, '70s, '80s, '90s, that shaped the Black community or that were issues that Black people were concerned about?

SG-L: As I recall I just remember going to meetings that just deal with the things that even we were dealing with at the college. Meetings about opportunities for Black people, Black people getting good jobs, Black people being hired for like, in the school system, why don't we have Black teachers, why don't we have Black administrators, why aren't there more Black people on the police force, and so forth. And so they were the same kinds of [00:32:00] issues that we were dealing

with at the college. The fact that we needed more Blacks, we needed Black people in the classroom. Why aren't more Black people being hired at the college? So I do recall there was always issues of employing more Black teachers, and educators, and administrators, and so forth.

SL: And who were some of the community leaders at that time?

SG-L: Community leaders at that time I remember well, Mrs. Esther Lee has certainly been active in the community down through the years. There's a scholarship organization, the JF Goodwin scholarship, people like Tom Wright as a community leader. Although he wasn't originally from this area, he was active in the community. There was a gentleman, Fred Middleton, was active in the community. Mrs. Butts, who was a retired police officer [00:33:00] at that time. The Williams family, so, and of course the pastors. There was a pastor, Reverend Hargrove was a local pastor at that time and of course the religious leaders during those years. So there were a lot of people involved in the community.

SL: Were there any Black businesses and entrepreneurs that you recall?

SG-L: In Bethlehem, actually, I don't recall any, that I can think, of any Black businesses.

SL: Any restaurants, barber shops?

SG-L: I know there was a barber shop in Allentown, but I honestly don't recall any businesses here in Bethlehem.

SL: Did you have any unique challenges as a Black woman? [00:34:00]

SG-L: I can't think of any that would be specific to Bethlehem, other than what I experienced trying to rent an apartment. That's the only thing that I can recall specifically. And then of course, I was always very proactive on my job just in terms of issues related to blacks and so forth, and so I was always kind of an advocate at the community college in terms of opportunities for Black students, Black faculty and administrators, and actually, students of color, and I've always been an advocate and if they were obstacles I didn't let the obstacles stop me. I've always been verbal and really proactive, so I just always got involved in the community. [00:35:00] I remember for a while I was involved with the YMCA's One Imperative, which was designed to combat and to end racism. So any opportunity that I would have within the community or at the college, I was involved in to end racism and to embrace opportunity for everyone. In fact, when I first came to the college, I was responsible and I developed what at that time was essentially multicultural awareness programs, and so I did workshops right there at the college for faculty and administrators to make people more aware. Now, today is called diversity training. But at that time it might have been called multicultural or transcultural awareness programs to make people more sensitive and to create a [00:36:00] climate that was more conducive for people of all races and gender and so forth. So I did a lot of those workshops back in the day, back in the late '70s, early '80s, and as time went on I would bring in other consultants to do that kind of training for faculty and administrators at the community college.

SL: What were the things you like most about Bethlehem that kept you here?

SG-L: After I kind of stopped commuting back and forth to New York and I developed a support system of friends and a church family; this really is a nice area in that it is not that far from Philadelphia, it's not that far from New York. Just in terms of the location, Bethlehem is really a kind of idyllic location and community. [00:37:00] I just look forward to the time when, and I see it, it has grown, you see many, many, many more people of color. I just look forward to the time when the community is more kind of unified, because you see, I might go

shopping, I might go to the mall, or to a grocery store, and you see many, many people. But there's just not a way in which people can get to know each other and when you can really build a strong community. That's what I look forward to. And even though I do go to a church, a large church, the people who attend my church are from all over. But the Bethlehem community I know has grown significantly down through the years. I just wish there were a way that we could better connect and know that we're here and build a strong community, and a strong presence here [00:38:00] in the Lehigh Valley.

SL: Well as my final question, as we sit here in 2019, how would you say Bethlehem has changed over the last 40, almost 50 years?

SG-L: Well first of all, it has grown tremendously, just in terms of this was once an area that you could say was an area that kind of evolved from farmland and so forth. But it's like, to me, the Bethlehem Area has now become just a suburb now of New York City and Philadelphia. There are so many people who now commute from the Lehigh Valley to New York City and to Philadelphia. So it's grown exponentially just in terms of the population. It's also grown in terms of people of color. The Hispanic community [00:39:00] has just exploded with the Poconos area, there's so, so many people from New York, New Jersey. So it's grown in terms of diversity. It has really exploded in terms of diversity and, as I said in my previous response, I just wish that there was a greater presence and a greater connection among all the community. So I'm looking forward to that happening because I really think the Lehigh Valley area and Bethlehem is a good place for young people to kind of build their dreams and to grow their families, and I would just like to see a stronger presence and stronger opportunities and a stronger sense of community so that young Black people and people of color can enjoy this area. [00:40:00] Because I think this is an area that, given opportunity, could be a wonderful place for young families.

SL: Well, Dr. Levy, thank you so much for your time this was very informative.

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