

Copy of KingSharon 20190607

RAYAH LEVY: I am Rayah Levy, here with Sharon King to talk with her for an oral history project, "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 Friday June 7th, 2019. Sharon King, thank you for your willingness to speak with me. Can you please state and spell your name, your full name?

SHARON KING: Sure. My name is Sharon King, S-H-A-R-O-N K-I-N-G.

RL: And what is your date of birth?

SK: My date of birth is April 15, 1962.

RL: OK. Roughly what year did your family move to Bethlehem?

SK: My mom came to Bethlehem in the [00:01:00] 1950s with some cousins of hers, and then my father, I think, at the time was in the service, so he followed after that. And then at one point, all of my mother's siblings lived here, and they kind of followed after my mom. Some of them lived with her for a time before they moved out on their own with their own families.

RL: And could you tell me, what's your mom's name, your parents' names?

SK: Sure. My mother is Vivian W. Butts. Her maiden name was Williams, so Vivian Williams Butts, and my father was Raymond Earl Butts, Senior, and they both are from Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

RL: Could you tell me a little bit about your mom?

SK: Sure. Even though my mom moved to this area in the 1950s, it wasn't the first time that she had been here. When she was young -- [00:02:00] I'm going to say maybe in the 1940s, since she was born in 1933 -- that her family worked during the summer traveling north to work on farms, so she actually spent some time in this community as well as out on Long Island in New York for a couple of summers working. My mom, again, she grew up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. She graduated from Elizabeth City State University. She has a degree in education, but my mother actually never became a teacher. When she came to the Lehigh Valley, she worked a number of different jobs. She worked for what was the predecessor of General Electric, and she also worked for a hat factory in Allentown. I think it was called Hutt & Wasserman. I think I'm pronouncing it incorrectly, [00:03:00] but I think it might have been like a predecessor to like a Stetson Hat Co., and in the 1960s -- actually in 1964 -- my mother joined the Bethlehem Police Department, possibly on a dare from one of

my aunts that they were both going to put in applications, and then my mother was the only one that did, and then she ended up joining the force in 1964, when I was two years old, and she was the second female police officer to join the Bethlehem Police Force and, I believe, the first African American woman to join the Bethlehem Police Force. My mother worked for about 25 years on the force. She retired. During that time, she was promoted to sergeant. She worked [00:04:00] as a sergeant in the communications department, so that meant she sort of oversaw the desk when the calls came in and things like that. Other than that, my mother was very active in the community. She was a member of Saint Paul Baptist Church. She worked for a number of ministries. She was a member of the trustee board. At one point, I understand that she was chair of the trustee board. She was also a founding member of the Flower Club. She was a missionary. She also was a founding member of the Tuesday Bible study that they still do today. It was one of my mother's favorite things, because then afterward they would always go out to eat. My mother liked to go out to eat. In addition to that, my mother was active in the community. She was a member of the Bethlehem branch of the NAACP, [00:05:00] probably for all of my life and possibly earlier than that. For as long

as I can remember, my mother was the membership chair of the Bethlehem branch. She did other things. She was an avid bowler. At one point after she retired, she belonged to a theater group. They were trying at one point to get her to come back to work like as a security guard, I think at the front desk of the police department, and my mother was just like, "I can find other things to do other than work." Like, she thought about it, but she really just found other things to do with her time.

RL: The theater group, was that a local company in Bethlehem?

SK: It was a local group, and that was after I had left, so I don't know what the name of it was, and my mother was not an actress. She was more like a kind of behind-the-scenes person, so she helped out. She did not act with the group.

RL: Were they African Americans?

SK: It was a mix of people. I actually have a photograph somewhere of the theater group. [00:06:00] In addition to that, I believe she was a member of like the local human relations board, and she probably did a couple of other kind of community related activities that I'm not remembering right now.

RL: The Flower Club, what was that?

SK: The Flower Club was a ministry at the church that they just made sure that there were always flowers on the pulpit, or

if they were needed for any other event at the church, they made sure that they were provided.

RL: And tell me about your father. What's your father's name?

SK: My father's name is Raymond Earl Butts, Senior, so my brother is Ray, Junior. They both grew up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. My dad grew up on a farm. I think he was one of nine siblings. I'm not sure what the order was. My father didn't graduate from high school in Elizabeth City, but later, when they moved to Pennsylvania, my father [00:07:00] got his GED. That's something that I remember -- that my father studied. I think he actually went to Liberty High school, the high school that I graduated from, at night and got his GED. My father served two tours in the Army. He spent some time in Korea, and when he came to Bethlehem -- ultimately my father was a construction worker, but he also worked at a gas station and probably did other types of jobs. My father's specialty in construction was as a concrete specialist, so he did driveways. He also had his own side business, where he did things like slate floors and just -- he could build things for people, like one of his long-time clients, he built a fountain out of stone in their backyard, and that's what they wanted, so he just kind of constructed it. A fond memory I have is that sometimes [00:08:00] when I was

home, my father would take me to some of the job sites and show me the work that he had done, and one of those job sites was work that he had done when they were expanding Lehigh University. So we went up into some of the buildings, and I got a chance to see some of the work that he did. My father was a person who also was active in the community, but not in the same way that my mother was. He was a member of the Elks Lodge here. He was a member of the CVA, which was the Colored Voters Association, which no longer exists. If you asked my father to do something, he would do it. He was that kind of, like, a volunteer. Because my father's specialty was concrete work, a lot of our neighbors, when they were putting in concrete, my father would just, like, show up, and he would say, "How come you didn't call me to do this for you?" And then he would do the work, and they would try to pay him, [00:09:00] and my father would just kind of give them this, like, weird look, and then he would go back home. And he also put in the floor in the new building of Saint Paul Baptist Church. And again, that's how my father volunteered, that whatever he could kind of do sometimes he would, you know, being called on, he would just go in and do it and not expect to be paid for that.

RL: So tell me some more stories about your dad.

SK: One thing that I didn't mention, when I was younger, my dad actually worked for a short period of time for the Bethlehem Steel. I was pretty little at the time. I'm not sure how long he worked there, and he might have worked for a contractor that worked at the steel, and while my dad worked there, he actually had an accident: a steel beam fell on his back. And I think they [00:10:00] brought him home, or they took him to the hospital, and my dad actually couldn't work, but they would come every day and pick him up and take him to the job site, maybe because they didn't want to be sued. I'm not really sure. I was little at the time, and I do just remember sort of, you know, when you're a child and your parents are talking you get these, like, little undercurrents of conversation, and my mother would kind of be like, "You can't work. You should stay home." But they would come again every day, and my dad would go, and he didn't work until he was able to work. And like I said, I was pretty little at the time, so I'm not sure how long that went on and how long he actually worked at the Steel. And my dad did have back problems kind of on and off during his lifetime, but he was blessed that he was pretty much able to work and cured and that he didn't have any kind of permanent disabilities. I [00:11:00] know when I was young, one of the things that we used to do is we

used to go on trips to the Bethlehem Steel, you know, because that was like Bethlehem Steel, that's our big company here, and we would see how the steel bars were made, and they had a video with, you know, Donald Duck kind of telling you the story of steel, so you got a sense of what a steel bar actually looked like, so I could only imagine what that must have felt like to have a steel bar kind of fall on your back, that, you know, it must have been pretty heavy and pretty painful. But like I said, you know, my dad did recover to the point that he was able to work, and he didn't seem to have any major, you know, like disability. Like he didn't walk bent over or just have problems all the time walking with that. The other thing about my dad, he liked baseball. His favorite team was the New York Mets, so, you know, I think [00:12:00] during their heyday when they won the '69 World Series, we were watching it. You know, my dad was an avid Mets fan, and my brother used to play baseball, and one of things that we would do is that there used to be a baseball field down at the end of the street where we lived, on Walters Street, that's now a park that was created by the Just Born Candy Factory, but that used to be a baseball field. So we used to walk down to the field and watch my brother play baseball there, and sometimes we would travel around the

state, you know, because his team was doing well, and they went to different playoffs and things like that. We would get in the car and just kind of travel wherever the team went. My father had a sense of humor, but it was a very dry sense of humor. When he and my mother were dating, my mother used to tell the story that my dad was driving the car -- and this was in North Carolina -- and he was running over corners, and my mom [00:13:00] said, "Well, what are you doing?" And my dad said, "I'm cutting corners." You know, that was the kind of humor that he had. As I mentioned, he grew up on a farm, and my father liked to garden, so we always had fresh vegetables growing in the back yard. We had a cherry tree in the front of our yard. We had an apple tree and a pear tree in the backyard, and then we had the garden that my dad always planted. And we were only allowed to harvest. My dad was in charge of the garden. Even my mom, the only thing you could go out there and do was pick the stuff when it was ready, but nobody could mess, really, with the garden. And I didn't realize until I moved away that you don't always have access to incredibly fresh fruits and vegetables, and to be able to just kind of go out into the yard and pick a tomato or the smell of a fresh green pepper, and then you just go in the house and you wash it, you cut it up, and you put a little

bit of salt on it, [00:14:00] and you eat it. I'm like, that was my life when I was a child, and I just thought I would always have that, and I sort of took it for granted, and when I moved to New York, it's not that easy to get or as inexpensive to get just access to really fresh fruits and vegetables. So that's one of the things that I miss from growing up in Bethlehem.

MALE: Where in Bethlehem did you live?

SK: When I was young, we lived on the Southside of Bethlehem, and we lived on Hobart Street. We lived at 215 Hobart Street in an apartment that was over a garage. And we also had a yard. So we had a yard. We could go down and play. And the interesting thing about this apartment that as you climbed up the stairs, when you opened the door, the bathroom was on the left, then there was kind of like this little entry hallway, [00:15:00] and the apartment was on the right. So it was very interesting, because in the wintertime, when we would have to take a bath, the bathroom was on the opposite side of the front door, so it was always this moment where, you know, my mother would be standing in the apartment, and we would run through the doorway, because it was so cold. So that was kind of like a weird thing of that apartment that we lived in. And it was an apartment with two bedrooms, and my brother and I

shared a room, and then my parents had their own room, and a living room, and a kitchen.

RL: So how were they able to grow a garden?

SK: I don't remember that we had a garden in that place. If we did, like I said, downstairs there was a fenced in yard that we had access to, so if we had a garden it would have been there. But when I was six years old, my parents actually bought land [00:16:00] and built a house on Walters Street on the North Side of town, and it was interesting because the people that my parents bought the land from were black -- the Warners, Mr. and Mrs. [Henry and Hattie] Warner. And I think that at one point that that land used to be a farm and that my parents bought one of the last two plots of land that they still had available. And my parents built their house on Walters Street, and we moved into that house in the summer of 1968. It was a three-bedroom ranch house with a garage and a basement and about a quarter acre of land, and I remember that's where we had the garden in the backyard. And my father also liked plants and flowers, so all the plants and flowers and the vegetables that were grown in our yard were the result of my dad.

RL: [00:17:00] I want to go back to your mom for a second. Did your mom ever go out on the streets to patrol the streets?

SK: My mom did. At some point when she worked for the police department, they restructured the department, and she had to go out on patrol. I think that my mother said that during her career she never shot anyone. I'm not sure if she ever had to draw her gun. One thing I remember is just -- it is very interesting to have a mother who was a police officer, that you got different responses from kids when you were growing up. If someone said, you know, if they heard my name and said, "Oh, I know your mother," sometimes I would say to them, "Really? Well, what'd you do?" Because that's how you got to know my mom (laughs) usually. You did something. Or people would kind of look at me, and they'd go, "Oh, your mom's a cop," and they just really were kind of [00:18:00] wary of being around me, because they just thought if they did anything that just wasn't really on the up and up that I was going to report back, so it was an interesting mix of the way people kind of responded to what my mother did for a living.

RL: So did you have siblings? What are your siblings?

SK: I did. I have one brother, Ray, who is two and a half years older than I am. When we were younger, I guess we were just, you know, we were regular siblings, and sometimes we got along, you know, sometimes we didn't, but, you know, to this day my brother and I are very close. In

2013, my mother got sick, and she ultimately died of pancreatic cancer. So that was almost like another kind of bonding moment for us, because I still remember that [00:19:00] I was working from home, and my mother called me, and she said something was wrong, that she wasn't feeling well, that she had some type of like -- she was hemorrhaging blood, and could I come. And I said to her, "I'll call you back." Because I lived in New York, and I'm like, OK, we're talking about you've got to pack, you've got to get to the bus station, it's a two-hour bus ride. We're talking three to four hours, minimum, before you get there. And I got on the phone, and I called one of my uncles, and I said, "My mother's in trouble, and she needs to go to the hospital." And they took care of that, and the next thing I did was I called my brother, and my brother lives in Maryland, and that night we were both there with my mom. We both showed up, and throughout that entire year, we were back and forth, staying with my mom whenever we needed to do. We were just there, and I just know [00:20:00] my brother would do, like, anything for me. He, like, calls me his baby sister, and sometimes when people see us interact with one another, if they haven't met us both before, they're like, "OK, which one of you is older?" And he's like, you know, "She's my baby sister,

but she's in charge, you know. She thinks she's in charge." And my brother would do anything for me. I remember one time when we were younger, my grandparents on my father's side, they still lived on the farm where they had raised their children, and they had one of those woodburning stoves, and we were messing around in the kitchen, and I was about to fall onto the stovepipe and get burnt, and my brother, like, pushed me out of the way, and he was the one who actually got burnt, and that to me just kind of characterizes [00:21:00] our relationship, that my brother would get hurt for me, that he's just in my corner all the time, and if I need something, my brother is there for me. You know, I don't have to worry about that.

That's like a given in life, and especially now, since it's just, like, the two of us that if we need one another for something that we pretty much know. You know, because sometimes you have adversities in life, and families split, but my mother was very big on family. Like I said, all of her siblings came to live in Bethlehem. My mother would make sure that we got together if there was a family reunion, if it was in Bethlehem, if it was in Virginia, if it was North Carolina, if my mother could get a ride, she was going. We used to get together for holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. When the families got too big

[00:22:00] to kind of do that -- and we also used to have, like, picnics in Saucon Park -- my mother started having Kwanzaa celebrations every year. We wouldn't do the whole week, but we would do one day, and it was just very important for the family to get together and support one another, and we kind of picked that up from my mother. So like I said, sometimes you can have adversities in life, and they can actually tear families apart, but it's like my brother and I have this tacit understanding, like, it's just us, and it's our kids, and family kind of extends out from that. So it's like whatever happens in this life -- you know, we may get annoyed with one another, but we got each other's back, and that's just, like, you know that no matter what happens, that person is in your corner, and that's a pretty great thing to have.

RL: Sharon, tell us about the role that the extended community [00:23:00] played with taking care of your mom.

SK: They were really awesome. Like I said, my mother got sick. Actually, when she called me was like February 11, 2013, and the reason that that day resonates because that's also my father's birthday, February 11. Like I said, I lived in New York. I still live in New York. My brother lives in Maryland. And we had to travel back and forth to take care of my mom, or she was in and out of the hospital. At one

point she was at home, and she couldn't stay by herself, because she couldn't walk very well, and the community of family and friends that we have here in Bethlehem really rallied around us to take care of my mom. Miss Esther Lee, who's one of my mother's oldest friends, created a schedule of [00:24:00] women from the church who would come and stay with my mother during the day. Some of them would come and stay overnight. I might come from New York and stay a week or two at a time, and my brother would come from Maryland and stay for as much time as he could stay, but when we were here and when we weren't, this community of friends and just church members just really rallied around and took care of my mom. Wherever my mother was, if she was in the hospital, if she was in a nursing home, if she was in a rehabilitation center, people came and visited her, and family and friends came. They came at all hours of the day or night. And I think that's important when you have an elderly person or anyone in your family who's ill, that the people who are getting paid to take care of them know and understand that, you know, she got people, and these people [00:25:00] are going to show up. It could be five o'clock in the morning, it could be eleven o'clock at night, it could be one o'clock in the morning, that they would be coming from someplace, and they would just, like, drop in

and check on her, and there were times when people would call us and say, "Something is wrong, and you need to either call these people, or you need to get down here and check it out, because something's wrong. She doesn't look right." And I would say every single time that that happened, something was wrong with my mother, and the people who were paid to take care of her -- you know, not to slight anybody for whatever reason -- but they hadn't picked up on it yet, but somebody that knew my mother well and knew what looked right and what didn't look right caught it first, and they called us, and they alerted us, and they made sure that my mother was taken care of, even when my mother was in hospice. My mother's first partner [00:26:00] with the police department, his name was Officer [Merle] Getz, and he used to visit people at the hospice. So he found out that my mother was there, and he would go and visit my mother every single day and just sit with her, as my mother's friends and family and church family did. They just came. My mother wanted company, and people accommodated her in that respect. So wherever my mother was in her journey, there was always somebody there who just stopped in. And like I said, it could be any hour of the day or night, and they would let you in. Like, they couldn't bar you. And it was quite possible that any hour

of the day or night, somebody was going to come in and check on my mom, which was pretty awesome.

RL: Where was she in hospice?

SK: Saint Luke's Hospice.

RL: Why do you think your parents moved to Bethlehem [00:27:00] as opposed to a bigger city?

SK: I think the fact that my mother had family that came here, so I think that she followed her family. And then, you know, perhaps they liked the Lehigh Valley. It's not a question that I ever asked them, because, you know, sometimes when your parents are around, they're just always around. You don't really think about, you know, I should really find out why you do some of the things that you do. You just kind of take it for granted. But I'll say in preparation for this project, some of the research that I did, it just seemed that my parents, once they came to this community, that they just did what I think African Americans did in the '50s and the '60s, that they became active in the community. They became members of the NAACP. I found a newspaper clipping that surprised me that said that my father was one of the first vice presidents of the [00:28:00] Bethlehem branch of the NAACP, and to me, that's not characteristic of kind of the person that my dad was. He was a very quiet kind of behind the scenes kind of guy

doing things, but like I said, he was an Elk. He belonged to the CVA. My mother belonged to the NAACP. She belonged to other church organizations, local and within the state of Pennsylvania. So when I was growing up, there was always a community of people that I was around that they were doing stuff. You know, when my grandmother on my mother's side came to live here, she was active in the community. She was a deaconess in the church.

RL: Your grandmother came here?

SK: She did. My mother's mother.

RL: What's her name?

SK: Her name is Catherine Lilly Williams. So it's just, [00:29:00] like, that's what they do. That's what my family did and the people that they knew did, that they were active in the community. They made a difference. Every year for Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, there's a march that's held on the Southside of Bethlehem. Again, I found in a newspaper clipping that my parents were honored for being long-time participants in that march from almost its inception to, you know, the present day when my mother was alive and she was here, and every opportunity when she was around, she participated in that march.

RL: OK, Sharon, thanks so much for sharing that story about your parents. Let's move on to you now. Are you married?

SK: I am divorced. I have one son, who is 25 years-old -- my son, the engineer. He graduated from Penn State with a degree [00:30:00] in mechanical engineering. That was very funny to me, because when I was growing up, when I went to college, I needed to leave Pennsylvania. It was just a decision. I need to be somewhere else. I grew up my whole life here. So I was really kind of surprised when my son, who grew up in New York, decided that he was going to go to Penn State. And someone said to me, "Well, what campus is he going to?" And I'm like, "You mean, they have more than one? I didn't know." But he was out at University Park for his four years, and he loved it, and he's a mechanical engineer now. He lives in Delaware, and he's actually getting ready to buy a house, so he's doing well.

RL: And what schools did you attend in Bethlehem?

SK: I went to Broughal,¹ when we lived on the south side, for kindergarten. I went [00:30:00] to Marvine when we first moved to the North Side for a couple of years of elementary school, because we had family that lived down the street, and my mother would drop us in the morning before she went to work, and then we could always walk down the street to an uncle and aunt's house after school. Then after a couple of years, I went to Edgeboro Elementary School,

¹ The interviewee notes that this is an error; she went to Donegan. Broughal is a middle school.

which is now an education center, and it was a block down the street from where our house is. I went to Northeast Junior High School, and I also went to Liberty High School. And then when I graduated from Liberty, I went to college at Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia. I studied journalism, and I worked for the newspaper, and before I graduated, I was editor of the newspaper. And after I graduated, I worked for a number of years and went back to [00:32:00] grad school in the 1990s, and I went to Columbia Journalism School on a fellowship. It was called the Knight-Bagehot Fellowship for Business and Economics, and it was a fellowship for midcareer business journalists, and it was a one-year fellowship program. And while I was there, I was like, "Well, you know, I don't have a Master's in Journalism, and I'm at a Journalism school." So I kind of said, "Well, you know, I'm here, you're here. What would it take for me to get a Master's while I'm here?" And they created this program for journalists that were in my fellowship program where they had some courses and requirements that we needed to complete. And so I ended my fellowship year with a Master's in Journalism. And also while I was there -- like I said, it was a fellowship for midcareer journalists, and we could take classes at any of the [00:33:00] graduate schools at Columbia. So a lot of

us in my fellowship class mirrored the first year of the MBA program with our fellowship. So we took classes along with first-year MBA students. And we had an opportunity during our fellowship year to sit for the GMAT, and if we passed with an acceptable grade, we could also apply to Columbia Business School and complete the second year and get an MBA. And I decided I'm here. You're here. I'm never going to stop my life again -- because I had to stop working for an entire year to do the fellowship -- I'm not going to go back to work and then say, "Oh, hey, let's stop work again and go back for that second year of the MBA." So I took the GMATs, I passed, I got accepted [00:34:00] into the B school, and I stayed for the second year and got my MBA. So I did two years at Columbia, and I came out with a Master's in Journalism and a Master's in Business.

RL: So I just want to go back to your earlier years here in Bethlehem, especially perhaps middle school and high school. Can you recall any stories during that period, how you were treated and things like that?

SK: Sure. And I can kind of go back maybe even a little bit earlier than that. Interesting growing up, I think, being African American in Bethlehem -- and I can't compare that to anywhere else, because this is where I grew up. I always had a lot of family around me, and when I

transferred to Edgeboro Elementary [00:35:00] School I was the only African American in the school. At that point, my brother was in junior high school. So it was interesting that -- I think we're probably talking about the '70s, so I probably had an Afro -- not a very big Afro -- so that was different than a lot of the students had ever seen before, so you had people that wanted to look at your hair, they wanted to touch your hair, they wanted to put pencils in your hair, and it wouldn't fall out, so they thought that was quite interesting. I would say girls were probably more accepting than the guys. We would be in gym class, and in the '70s, I guess it was a thing that you would learn square dancing. Guys didn't want to touch me. They didn't want to touch my hand. You know, they would kind of make [00:36:00] it look like they did, but they wouldn't. Sometimes, you know, some derogatory things were said at the playground, and -- you know, that I would try to ignore, but some of my girlfriends were, like, you know, "You can't talk to her like that, because that's our friend." References to coons, that, you know, somebody was having a conversation and it just like, all of a sudden that word kind of came in, and it's like everybody knew that was directed at me, and I would just kind of like really ignore them, but some of my girlfriends -- and these

were my white friends that I grew up with -- you know, kind of took issue with stuff like that. What else? I mean, when I got to middle school, it was definitely more ethnically mixed and diverse, and we started maybe kind of separating a little bit more, because once you kind of get [00:37:00] to an age where you're going to start dating, you know, at that time there wasn't a lot of mixed race relationships, so I stopped kind of getting invited to parties and stuff with my friends and kind of like just, you know -- your social circle evolves, kind of.

RL: Tell me again what school. I'm sorry -- middle school, what school was that?

SK: Northeast. When I was in elementary school and in middle school, I was a cheerleader. You know, that's what my friends and I were into cheerleading and gymnastics, and I was a -- that was my activity. I was a cheerleader.

RL: And how about high school, when you got to high school?

SK: High school, I was in a lot of the college preparatory advanced classes. They weren't very ethnically diverse. It was funny, because there was one [00:38:00] Hispanic guy who was in a lot of my classes, and when was saw each other like years later at a reunion, it was like, "It's so good to see you," and it's like, "It's so good to see you," and he said to me, "You know, I'd be sitting in class, and I

would look at you, and, you know, you were there, and that kind of, you know, made it OK," because, you know, we were surrounded by a lot of people that really didn't look like us, and that kind of gave us a level of comfort. When I graduated from Liberty, there were five students in -- five African American students in the graduating class of 600, including myself, so we kind of knew who each other, you know, was, and we were pretty, you know, we were friends.

RL: Who did you go to the prom with?

SK: I did not go to the high school prom.

RL: Why?

SK: I guess the issue was who would I go to the prom with, and [00:39:00] it just didn't really seem like it was going to be something that I was going to enjoy. I did go to, I guess, the dance in -- which maybe it was considered to be like a prom -- in middle school, and I went with a group of friends.

RL: What was social life like here for you here in Bethlehem?

SK: We did a lot of activities that were sort of centered around school and sports. Like I said, I did gymnastics, so when I was in junior high school, there was like -- I don't know if we were a club or not, but we used to do performances. I was a cheerleader, so that meant I was attending all of the sports games and cheering for the

team. I played a little bit of basketball -- not very well. In high school there were dances. Like, I belonged to a club that was called The Brotherhood Club, which was made up of [00:40:00] primarily black and Hispanic students, and we would have activities. There were always activities with my church. It was active. I was a member of the junior choir. You know, there would be church trips. We would go to -- again, sort of back to social activities in high school -- dances, sporting events, you know, homecoming for our high school, basketball games, football games, wrestling. Because you always knew somebody who was participating in one of the sporting events, so you would go on and, you know, cheer the team and cheer your friends.

RL: So again, I just want to go back just a little bit, and you mentioned before about your family being involved in the King's march and so forth. I know you were rather [00:41:00] young when King was assassinated in '68. Do you recall any inkling what was going on in your household at that time? Because there was a march here at the library. What was the feeling like when King was assassinated? I know you were very young at the time, but can you recall anything?

SK: I don't really recall at that time what was going on.

RL: Tell me, again, here we are in the 1980s. In the 1980s,
you were in high school, am I correct?

SK: Graduated.

RL: You graduated in the 1980s. OK, so before you graduated
and so forth, tell me, what was the music? Again, tell me
about the music. Did you listen to *Soul Train* during that
time to get a taste of the black experience, [00:42:00]
because there wasn't, you know, that -- ?

SK: Absolutely. You know, we watched *American Bandstand*, and
we watched *Soul Train*. You know, whenever we knew that
Soul Train came into existence, we were watching it. The
music -- there was a radio station outside of Philly called
WDAS, so that was a radio station that we could listen to
and hear black music. The local radio station was playing
more of a mix of, I guess, what would now be called, like,
classic rock, so I grew up listening to that, too, and that
was WAEB, but when I was in high school, Kool & the Gang,
Al Jarreau, The Ohio Players, like, Run DMC was just coming
on. Oh, my God, Parliament-Funkadelic, [00:43:00] Heat
Wave...

RL: Did you try to share some of this culture with your white
friends at school when you were experiencing this outside
of school?

SK: I don't really think at that point that we were kind of like looking at that. It was like if you liked the music, you went to the events, because when there were dances at school that, say, were sponsored by The Brotherhood Club or there were dances in other communities, it wasn't just black students. There were predominantly black and Hispanic, but if you were not of those ethnicities, and you liked the music, that was it. We were kind of like what you liked kind of brought you together, although it was mostly the minorities who were participating. Because another band at the [00:44:00] time, you know, KC and the Sunshine Band. You know, KC was not black. You know, Average White Band, you know, *Play That Funky Music White Boy*, you know. It's what you liked that sort of brought you together at that point. I guess we weren't thinking about trying to share our culture in high school. You know, we weren't probably as culturally aware as people are now, I think.

RL: Did you guys feel as if there was self-segregation? Like, why were all the black students sitting at that -- you know the book *Why Are All the Black Students Sitting at That Table?* -- did you feel as if the blacks that were living here at the time when you were going to school self-segregated or just the community did?

SK: It was probably a little bit [00:45:00] of both. You know, you kind of hung out with the people that you felt most comfortable with in school and elsewhere. You know, when we moved into our house on Walters Street, as far as I know, we were the only blacks in the neighborhood. I remember when I used to walk to junior high school -- because again, it's just like down the street and up the hill, and they used to have a crossing guard there. And the route that I took home was also the route that people took who lived in the village -- in Marvine Village. And so I remember this guy -- this adult crossing guard -- was kind of like shocked, because I would speak to him every once in a while, and we kind of got in a conversation, and he would say, "Oh, where do you live?" And I'm like, "I live two blocks up the street," you know, and it was kind of like, [00:46:00] you know, he had to kind of check his expression, but, yeah, you know, "My parents own a house two blocks up the street, so I don't actually cross the street and go into the housing projects. We have our own house." And in that area, that was kind of unusual.

RL: Did you ever feel a sense that people ever treated you unfairly? Like for example, schools or some of the institutions or anything like that that felt that you were ever treated unfairly?

SK: I don't know that I ever felt like I was treated unfairly. I think there were definitely times and instances and circumstances in my life where I was treated differently.

[00:47:00] My mother, for example, had no qualms about if we were in a department store, and my mother felt for any reason that she was not getting service, she was getting substandard service, because she was African American, VB, which I used to call her, and she would laugh and say, "Did you hear what she called me?" had no problem with calling you out. "Excuse me, I was here first." You know, when somebody would -- say we'd be waiting to check out in a department store, and they would say, "Who's next?" and my mother would say, "I'm next, and clearly I am the person standing at the front of the line, so it's very clear that I am the person who was next, so it really wasn't necessary for you to ask this blanket question to the group, 'Who's next?' I'm next." You know, so we kind of learned from that that you just really don't take a whole [00:48:00] lot of nonsense from people just by example, you know, and I think it's something that was relayed to our children as well, you know, even though they didn't grow up in Pennsylvania, that they spent time with their grandmother. When my mother passed away, some of the messages that were in her printed obituary is that we all sort of made a

statement about something that our mother or grandmother sort of gave to us. You know, one of my nieces, who is very tall, said, "She always told me, 'Stand up straight. Don't shrink down. Be who you are. Aim for the stars.'" You know, she was proud of all of the accomplishments. She went to every [00:49:00] graduation. You just learned that. The love that I have for black history and for books and for reading came from my mother. My mother used to bring us to this library all the time, and she would go in the adult section, and we would be in the children's section and, you know, pick out books. Every one of her grandchildren loves to read. They're just gifts that she passed on to us, you know, either consciously or not, but this sense of self and not feeling that you have to apologize for who you are. When I left Bethlehem for college, I made a decision to go to a historically black college, a predominantly black college, because that was an experience that wasn't a part of my reality when I was growing up, and I just wanted to experience that.

[00:50:00] And it was really uplifting to go to a place where most of the people were African American, and they were doing all kinds of things. They were athletes. They were scholars. They were into politics and the arts, and

just -- almost everybody. They were musicians. They were journalists.

RL: Before we actually get into that part of it, I want to ask you, as a teen, were you involved in the church in any way?

SK: As a teen, I attended church, and I sang in the choir, and we would do events, like, you know, there might be plays at Christmas or at Easter, you know, so I was acting, I guess. I also, when I was young, I used to take piano lessons. My mother thought I needed to learn how to play the piano.

[00:51:00] And I practiced sporadically, but my mother was also very ready to volunteer me for any event at the church. If there's something going on, Sharon will play the piano, and I'm just, like, I was incredibly shy as a child. So if you could imagine someone playing the piano and, like, every part of her body is convulsing, because she's just, like -- how could you even hit notes? But it's just like arms, legs, everything is going like this, because you can't wait until it's over, and it's just like, "Why does she keep doing this to me?"

RL: Who taught you to play the piano?

SK: I took lessons. I went to a piano teacher every week and practiced and with that I was just like, "I'm fine. Can I just play over here at home? Why do I have to be out there?" But that was another one of my mother's things is

that she would put you out there. She would volunteer you for things.

RL: Was it Barbara Hemmons?

SK: [00:52:00] No, this was another teacher. I don't think at the time that Mrs. Hemmons was actually teaching piano, but she was the pianist and the organist for the choir, for the youth choir at church when I was there.

RL: Do you recall any black businesses here in Bethlehem when you were living in Bethlehem?

SK: The only black businesses that I remember were like barber shops. Clyde, maybe Barco [Bosket?]? I'm not sure of his last name, but I think he's in Allentown, and then friends of the family, the Watsons, one of the sons had a barbershop on the south side. Those were the black-owned businesses that I remember. And my mother's friend, Pauline -- Ms. Pauline Grant -- was a caterer, and I don't know that she actually had an official place of business, but she was a [00:53:00] caterer who was often hired to do events, and she actually catered my wedding when I got married in 1986. We got married here in Bethlehem at Saint Paul, and we had the reception in the backyard, and Ms. Pauline catered it, and I remember my mother was just kind of like going nuts, because, you know, it was Ms. Pauline, and it was my wedding, and she made my mother rent china

and this and that, and my mother was like, "Oh, we're just going to do this in the backyard," and Ms. Pauline, "Mm, mm, mm."

RL: And what's the name of your husband who you got married to?

SK: My ex-husband's name is Derek, Derek King. He's from New York, and my son is Derek, Junior.

RL: OK, so you have told us about your high school years and so forth. Why did you not return to Bethlehem when you graduated from college?

SK: [00:54:00] I think that I didn't really think there was a lot of opportunity here for me in Bethlehem. I didn't think there was a lot of opportunity for African Americans in Bethlehem, and the type of career that I wanted -- I went to school to be a journalist and a writer. I thought I wanted to be a magazine writer, although ultimately, I became a newspaper reporter. I didn't really see a lot of opportunities to do that here, even though they do have local newspapers here. One day, I wanted to work for *The New York Times*. *The New York Times* wasn't in Bethlehem. And I think I just really wanted a different experience than I had growing up, because [00:55:00] even though Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton is considered to be a metropolitan area, this really felt like a small town to

me, and I wanted to sort of see and experience a little bit more of the world and kind of live in a larger community.

RL: Do you think you will one day move back to Bethlehem?

SK: No. (laughter)

RL: So I'm going to wrap this up, but before I wrap it up I want to ask what are some of the positive -- well, first let's talk about some of the negative things that you have experienced in coming back now -- and again, I know you left Bethlehem a while back. What are some of the positive things you've seen and the growth that you have seen here in Bethlehem?

SK: [00:56:00] Well, I did leave Bethlehem when I graduated from high school and really never moved back. Like, I would be here sometimes in the summer with odd jobs and things like that. But most of my family remained here, and they've made lives here, and good lives here. And, I guess, as the community has grown and expanded, opportunities for African Americans in the community have grown and expanded. I think there's a more readily identifiable middle class and upper middle class and probably, in some instances, upper class of African Americans here. There's more events that include [00:57:00] our culture in the performances and the artists that you see at Musikfest and the other venues here, that

it's more culturally diverse. So I think lots of positive things. The things that were going on here when I grew up, you know, the NAACP is still active. You still need to fear Ms. Esther if you just really are not trying to do the right thing for minorities in this community, because as old as she is -- and I believe she's probably in her late eighties -- she's still a presence and a force, and she still has no qualms about calling you on the carpet. So those kinds of things that people were doing and the activism and the churches and things like that, those things are still here. [00:58:00] I grew up here. I don't want to move back -- I'm very happy in New York -- but even as I was walking from the bus station, I was walking down Main Street, and I remembered historic Bethlehem, that area over there that we used to visit there during school, but we also used to volunteer there, and that's part of my history and part of who I am. So I don't feel bad that this is the place that I grew up in. I have good memories here growing up and family, and this place kind of made me who I am. Negative things -- yeah, I mean, the derogatory way that, you know, African Americans were treated. But, you know, [00:59:00] you survive that if you're lucky. I was lucky. I had friends and family that were always around me and supportive of me, black and otherwise. You

know, we had some tragedies. Tina Anderson, a little girl -- I don't think she was 10 years-old -- was killed by her mother's boyfriend. They found her, like, you know, in a pool of water somewhere, a stream or a lake. I was a child when that happened. You know, she was younger than I am, but, you know, I was a child. So, you know, we had some tragedies in our community that we all kind of had to deal with, you know, even afterward. You know, my friend's mother was in a nursing home, and she wandered away, and they didn't find her. You know, when they found her, you know, she wasn't [01:00:00] alive. That just happened in the past few years.

RL: What's the name?

SK: Audrey Penn. So, you know, good things and bad things. I don't think I would change the place that I came from. You know, I'm not ashamed that I came from this place. I think there are some things, of course, that need to be improved, and, you know, my life is different than other probably ethnic minorities that grew up here, because I grew up in a house. You know, everybody didn't have that, you know, back when I was growing up. I remember even though we grew up in a house, everything wasn't easy. I, you know, as a child overheard some conversations with my parents saying, "OK, the mortgage is due. Have you got it?" And they

would, you know, [01:01:00] be paying what now would be considered, you know, next to nothing, but that wasn't easy for them to come by to pay that mortgage for that house. And, you know, at one point my mother said to my dad, "You know, we qualify that she could get help with lunch," and my father was like, "I can afford to pay for my daughter's lunch." And he used to give me a dollar every day, and lunch was, like, 50 cents, but that was extra money in my pocket. But that meant something to them, to be able to do that for me. So, you know, this place made me who I am. I don't forget that. I'm not saying that everything was wonderful, but I have history and family and friends. You know, now that you have the internet and Facebook, you know, we have groups from like high school, and that [01:02:00] even that mixed group that we are, but those are people that I grew up with from elementary school into high school, you know, and we're still connected. So, you know, this place made me who I am.

RL: Sharon King, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your story.

SK: You're welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE