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RAYAH LEVY: I am Rayah Levy here with Lillian Robinson to talk with her for an oral history project, titled "Voices from the African Diaspora: The Black Experience of Bethlehem, PA," as part of the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are here at the Bethlehem Area Public Library on Monday, June 4th, 2019. Lillian Robinson, thank you, for your willingness to speak with me today.

LILLIAN ROBINSON: You're welcome.

RL: Can you please spell and state your full name?

LR: My first name is Lillian -- L-I-L-L-I-A-N -- middle name June -- J-U-N-E -- Robinson -- R-O-B-I-N-S-O-N

RL: Could you please tell us [00:01:00] your date of birth?

LR: July 28th, 1962

RL: Thank you. Lillian, where were you born?

LR: I was born in Easton, Pennsylvania.

RL: So you were born in Easton, Pennsylvania. What year did your family move here to Bethlehem?

LR: My family moved here to Bethlehem in 1920. I'm not really sure the exact date, but my grandfather had gotten word about jobs here, of course. I mean, the economic migration was very real, based on life, lifestyle, family commitment, and his perseverance. So, they moved here to Bethlehem. And I think a couple years later, he worked at The Steel of

course, because they needed many people for production
[00:02:00] and so he worked there.

RL: May I interrupt you for a second? Could you please tell me
your grandfather's name?

LR: Edward Johnson.

RL: OK. And you can continue with the Bethlehem part, what you
were just talking about.

LR: He and my grandmother, [Lillia?] Childs Johnson had ten
children. Three of them didn't survive beyond a child.
One of my uncles drowned in the Lehigh canal.

RL: What's your uncle's name?

LR: His name -- God bless his soul -- James Johnson. He was
swimming on the last day of school -- 1930 -- and he wasn't
allowed of course to swim in the public pool with his
friends. So, he and another group went to the canal. And
he was overcome [00:03:00] by a current. And his soul was
taken. That was in June of 1930. My grandmother hyper
focused on the rest of her children, my mother being one of
them. My mother, [Margarite?] Johnson Robinson, was born
here, educated here. But we moved later to Easton when she
met my father, Albert [Louis?] Robinson. 1959, my family
moved. They originally settled here in Bethlehem, but my
father's family roots were in Easton. So they followed
those roots to Easton.

RL: And what's your father's name? [00:04:00]

LR: Albert Louis Robinson

RL: Do you have any more knowledge about your grandfather -- what he did besides working at Bethlehem Steel? And why do you think they moved to a small town as opposed to some place like New York and Chicago like they normally?

LR: I think it was based on economics. There were jobs here. Bethlehem Steel had a great great need for men to work at that time. So the call went out I guess all over the country, and a lot of men, of course, answered that call. My grandfather was one of them. My uncles and my aunt, Lillian, as it turns out, did leave Bethlehem and went to the big city, to Philadelphia. And that's where they resided [00:05:00] all their lives. But they were educated here, born here, in Bethlehem. Graduated Liberty High School. And then they left and lived in Philadelphia. But my grandfather was also a Baptist Minister, who ministered at First Baptist Church. I think the original church was on -- don't quote me -- Broadway -- I believe. It was quite some time before I was born. But he was minister there until 1950, if I'm not mistaken. I mean at that time in Bethlehem, the migration was coming from Europe. A lot of Europeans were coming to Bethlehem [00:06:00] -- Portuguese, Eastern Europeans, Welsh -- thus all the

churches on the south side. Each church represent an ethnic group that came from Europe. But meanwhile there was also a migration that came from the south as well.

RL: So, your grandparents moved. Where exactly in the south did they move from to Bethlehem?

LR: My grandfather was born in Lynchburg, Virginia, to my great grandmother -- her name was Amanda. She was twelve years old when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into law. So she was indeed born a slave, if you would. And of course, she didn't make the migration north. She settled in Virginia. And my grandfather, you know, made sure she had [00:07:00] provisions for the rest of her life. And I believe -- and my grandfather's brother -- Ollie also came some years later. I think Ollie got into some trouble. There was some trouble. It was never really talked about openly --

RL: Here in Bethlehem?

LR: Here in Bethlehem. There was some problems with someone on a trolley -- I'm not really sure what it was. So Ollie had to seek alternative means.

RL: So did he leave Bethlehem?

LR: He did leave Bethlehem, I think he settled in Newark, New Jersey.

RL: Can you tell me where exactly your grandparents lived when they moved to Bethlehem?

LR: They lived on East 3rd Street, across from -- I believe those homes aren't there anymore -- across from what was then the Bethlehem Steel offices. [00:08:00] That's where they resided. I'm sorry --

RL: No you go ahead, I'm sorry.

LR: His church was, of course, up on Broadway.

RL: Did your mom ever share stories with you about your father's experience working at Bethlehem Steel?

LR: My father?

RL: Your grandfather, I'm sorry.

LR: She did. She said -- I think while he was working there, there was a strike. And my grandfather was always preaching the word. So I guess at that time, the men of Bethlehem Steel became unsettled. And unsettled men do sometimes violent things. So I think there were some disturbances around Bethlehem. These men were out of work. You know they had to feed their families. So they called my grandfather to come and try to talk to these men -- to settle. [00:09:00] Because they were pretty amped up about not being able to provide for their families --

RL: I'm sorry. Did he speak to the African Americans of Bethlehem? Or did he speak to all the men of Bethlehem? Why did they call him -- and again to your knowledge?

LR: Well because I think they knew he was a peaceful man. And they wanted to bring peace to these men that were causing some -- I think they were turning cars over -- there was some --

RL: And were they black or white or were they both?

LR: I think they were the white personnel.

RL: And why do they think they would call your father who at the time was considered a colored person.

LR: Right, but I think they had enough respect for him to know that he might be able to try and settle these men on some level. [00:10:00] Just based on who he was. They knew he was a minister. So he wasn't going to rally the men against the company. But my grandfather didn't respond to this call because there were some labor things in place that -- I guess there were scabs that tried to get in. My grandfather didn't want to be in the middle of that, any kind of labor disruptions.

RL: What did he do while he was there?

LR: I'm not really sure. I think he talked about some form of -- it wasn't safe. Whatever he was doing, I'm sure it was before OSHA set up guidelines and standards. And I'm sure

they probably put [00:11:00] black people in more unsafe conditions as far as production -- I'm sure they did.

RL: OK. Tell me about your grandfather as the minister as far as you can -- you know stories that you might have heard. He started -- was he a deacon? What did he do at Second Baptist?

LR: That's a good question. I'm not really sure how he came into that role. Obviously there was a void in the ministry. I mean at that time there weren't that many black Baptists here -- I mean there were, indeed. Again the migration was coming from the south. But, my mother played the piano in the church, I know. And it was a small congregation. [00:12:00] But I mean, again, that was before I was born. And it really wasn't much talk after I came, I knew.

RL: To your recollection, do you know if the church started at someone's home? Or did they buy a building -- to your recollection?

LR: I have no recollection of that. The only recollection I do have is that church, again, on Broadway. That's the only church that I know where he ministered. I'm not sure if it started in anyone's home. It might have very well.

RL: OK. Let's go onto your parents. Your mom in particular. What schools did she attend here in Bethlehem?

LR: She attended Liberty High School. She graduated in 1945.
[00:13:00] At the time she graduated with five blacks, my
aunt June was one of them -- Donald Watson, [Elray?]
Johnston. It's funny I know them. It was a handful if you
would. But she spoke very fondly of those years. I mean
she was in high school during the war and she just
remembers -- I'm sure -- the world was changing. Some of
her classmates left and never came back.

RL: You mean the five blacks? They stayed?

LR: They were OK. But people that she knew -- that she was in
her formative school, that were either drafted or
volunteered for the war. She always spoke very fondly of
those years. [00:14:00] And I'm sure they weren't easy,
but she had very tight knit group of people she hung out
with. For most of her life, she was Eastern Star.

RL: Oh she was? OK.

LR: She was indeed.

RL: And when she graduated from high school what did she do
after that?

LR: She worked in the university club. I'm not really sure
where that was, but she talked about it with a woman named
-- she called her -- my mother always gave people a
pronoun. It was Mrs. [Clark?] I'm not really sure her
first name. She talked about Mrs. Clark all the time.

She's very fond of her and I believe she went to my grandfather's church. They did [00:15:00] -- It might have been -- Lehigh professionals that were at this university club. Again I'm unsure, but from listening to her speak about it that's what it sounds like, what it was.

RL: How long was she there?

LR: I think until she met my father. Let's see -- 45 -- she might of -- maybe 1956-ish.

RL: And did she belong to Second Baptist?

LR: Indeed. Indeed, she played the piano.

RL: And so you said she had fond memories as far as school was concerned? Did she tell you any other kind of stories about growing up here in Bethlehem? [00:16:00] That you can recall?

LR: Yeah, of course. So, I think mainly -- because she talked very fondly about her childhood and just being at home with her family and how beautiful it was -- because they were very close. Like I said when my grandmother lost her children she became very hyper focused on the rest of them. And it just gave them gifts and jewels I think -- tools if you would -- to live. But I think she talked about the simplicity of life in those, in that era. Even though I think she understood at the time, she didn't have many choices -- many opportunities as far as furthering. I mean

I guess she could have broadened her horizons. But in my mind [00:17:00] it really wasn't afforded to her at that time.

RL: So do you think they just stayed within the black community and didn't venture out? So their main focus -- the reason why she looked at life being full and enjoying life in Bethlehem, was it because it was just in their circle?

LR: I think so. I think so.

RL: Do you think she ventured out of that circle at any time whereas she felt uncomfortable? Have you heard stories?

LR: No, not at all. My mother (laughter) my mother was very confident. She was a people person, I don't think she felt any kind of way at any time in her life. She was very confident woman. My mother was very -- how do I say this -- she was very fashionable. She was very -- [00:18:00] she liked to get dressed up a lot and just be out in public and talking to people -- being very social. That was my mother. She never felt that she couldn't go anywhere because she was black -- too that she was a woman. She never felt that. She always felt -- well this is her world too. My grandfather always said to her, "life is a banquet and everyone is welcome." And I think that's what the credo she lived by.

RL: So tell me why do you think she moved to Easton?

LR: She met my father.

RL: And what's your father's name?

LR: Albert Louis Robinson. She met him and she fell in love. That was the love of her life. So she followed him. I asked her that once -- why did we [00:19:00] move here? And she said, "Well I wanted to be with your father, your father was here." But she was a young widow.

RL: She was a young widow.

LR: Yes, they were only married -- I think -- eleven or twelve. She was a 39-year-old widow with five children. And so she had to reinvent herself. And she did.

RL: And you don't think she ever wanted to return to Bethlehem after she became widowed?

LR: She never talked about it, although she loved Bethlehem. She absolutely loved her home. I remember when she passed I cleaned out some of her things. And I saw countless newspaper articles about Bethlehem -- like scrapbooks -- I didn't even realize she kept [00:20:00] -- about Bethlehem of course The Steel and the people. People at the CVA. She talked about the CVA --

RL: What's the CVA?

LR: Colored Voter's Association. Imagine that.

RL: Do you have any knowledge or any stories that she shared about that?

LR: I don't know how involved she was. I think when the CVA was formed she had already started her family. That might have been pre-Civil Rights Era. I'm not really sure of the timing on that.

RL: So was this an organization that she was involved in or she didn't get a chance like you said?

LR: I don't know if she was an actual member. But I know she did support it. She supported [00:21:00] a lot of Civil Rights efforts. Course she was an NAACP member.

RL: I was about to ask --

LR: Indeed.

RL: She was an NAACP member? Did she play any major role as being a member?

LR: No, she was just always an active member.

RL: Did she tell you stories about things that the NAACP did at that time?

LR: Those were changing times. I can remember little instances where there might have been African Americans in our community in Easton that got in some trouble, and of course, they were, maybe even falsely accused of some things. Or brought in on some trumped-up charges of disobedience where it might not have been 100% true. There were some fallacies within stories [00:22:00] of the Easton

Police Department. So the NAACP would get involved and my mother was always very active in showing her support.

RL: How long was she a member, do you know?

LR: I think until she passed. I mean she always kept on the ranks if I'm not mistaken. She was very adamant about being involved with the NAACP.

RL: And was it the NAACP in Bethlehem or Easton?

LR: She might have started here in Bethlehem, but I know she was definitely an Easton member.

RL: Working on this project I see a lot of overlap with people either in Easton or Allentown. And even though they live in these places, they still have -- for example -- [00:23:00] one of the lodges, Elk Lodge. They still have their focus here in Bethlehem, but a lot of the members are living in Allentown. Did your mom come back -- even though she got married and moved to Easton -- did she come back to Bethlehem a lot to be involved in the church in the different organizations and so forth.

LR: She did. Of course, I mean my mother would attend the yearly banquets they would have here in Bethlehem. And she would also attend the Elk's community events. I can remember attending parades of some sort when I was very young. She always was very connected to Bethlehem. I mean

it wasn't that she left and never turned back. She constantly turned back.

RL: So did she remain within the church or when she moved she decided to join [00:24:00] another church?

LR: It's funny you say that because when she moved to Easton, she suddenly -- I guess it was an epiphany. Sometimes life comes to you and you don't even see it coming. And she had an epiphany that she needed to leave the Baptist church and join the Catholic church. So off course we followed, we were children. So we all of course were baptized Catholic.

RL: OK. You know I've been trying to get a lot of information about your mom and your grandparents. And despite this being a Bethlehem focused project, I still want to ask you about yourself. So could you tell us about yourself? For example, where did you go to school in Easton? What schools did you attend in Easton?

LR: I attended [00:25:00] Easton Catholic Elementary School and then I attended Saint Anthony's, Saint Joseph's, Saint Bernard's. I attended all the Catholic schools in Easton, I believe. But then the last two years I went to Easton High School -- public school. Then after high school I enlisted in the US Army -- very short time. I didn't love the Army. And then after that I went to Richard Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. And then I came

back. I wanted to be in New York City to experience the richness and the culture of New York City.

RL: So when you graduated from college, you moved to New York City?

LR: No. [00:26:00] Well I was off and on. I have a cousin there, she was living in Harlem on East 112th street. She had just recently moved back from Los Angeles -- she had moved to Los Angeles and then she moved back to New York. And she was like "cous' come." And I did. But she, you know -- we had a lot of fun. Definitely had a lot of fun. We used to run around to all those dance clubs around New York City, downtown. You know, that was our thing at the time.

RL: So were you ever inquisitive about finding out more about your mom's root here in Bethlehem?

LR: Yes, I would ask her about her childhood and what made it so... [00:27:00] She talked about it in a -- and I'm sure it was -- in a pure sense. But I think it was just based on the fact that our mother and father of course, were a unit, and came from a very strong family structure. Based on religion -- that was the basis of their foundation. And I think that's what made it really a good thing for her. My grandfather served in the Army. He served in the Spanish-American War.

RL: So what I want to get -- you as an individual -- were you inquisitive about knowing about Bethlehem? You as an individual, because your mom was born here.

LR: Indeed, I was. I would ask her questions. You know the funny thing -- even like today. [00:28:00] I mean there's -- sometimes I would drive here to Bethlehem and I'm like wow where am I? I don't really know Bethlehem. I think I should. I mean it is indeed the valley. I don't really know Bethlehem in that respect. I knew where she lived -- my mother lived on east 3rd street.

RL: But didn't your parents, your mom in particular, brought you here at some point?

LR: We used to come back to see my grandparents.

RL: OK. All right.

LR: They lived -- I was so young -- they lived in The Heights. I don't even know where The Heights is. I'm not sure what area that is.

RL: But you were rather young when --

LR: Very young because my father --

RL: How about as a teenager did you ever venture over here to Bethlehem?

LR: No. Well [00:29:00] sometimes, of course, Lehigh would have parties, I would come with my friends. Based on some social events. My mother, she would bring us to -- if the

CVA had an event or the ELK's had an event, the NAACP, we were here. But it was strictly based on some social event or some community event that they were giving. She wanted to be a part of, and she wanted us to be a part of as well.

RL: Like I was saying before, I'm going to concentrate on you. You've told us about your family, your background, and so forth. You've been telling me about yourself and the schools that you attended. So [00:30:00] do you have siblings?

LR: I do. I am number four in line of five. I have two brothers and two additional sisters.

RL: And what are their names.

LR: The oldest is Albert [Marc?]. Second is Lucille Kim. Third, Timothy [Noel?]. Fourth Lillian June. And the baby is Amy Sue -- Robinson.

RL: And are you married?

LR: No ma'am.

RL: Do you have kids?

LR: No ma'am.

RL: Ok. Tell me a little bit about social life as a teen or as a young adult growing up in Easton. What was social life within the black community?

LR: A teen?

RL: Yeah a teenager.

LR: Let's see that would have been high school. [00:31:00] I was a teen in the disco era. So trust me -- we, my friends and I -- I hung out with artists at the time. And we would run into New York City and express ourselves, trust me. But the teen -- are you talking about activities? --

RL: As a teenager, was the central focus of social life around the church, around the organizations? What was social life like for you and your siblings as far as events and so forth? Did you go to dances? Did they have to be a church dance?

LR: We're catholic but we're not super catholic. We would definitely involve ourselves with activities around the valley. [00:32:00] And then my mother would also -- I think she wanted to give us a sense of black culture. She would involve us in cultural things outside of the community because there weren't a lot of black culture here in the valley. So we would attend events in Philadelphia or New York City, or wherever the event was taking place. Mostly theatre. That's why I feel in love with theatre. When I was very young I saw -- I think I was eleven years old when I first saw *The Wiz* on stage. I remember being so -- it literally took my breath, because I remember I wasn't breathing. Because I didn't want to miss any stage production. And I remember how powerful Stephanie Mills --

shout out to Stephanie Mills -- how powerful her performance was. And of course [00:33:00] I saw other shows. Because at the time it was a culture of black theatre. It was bubbling brown sugar. It was sophisticated ladies these were black shows. And my mother made sure we saw all of these shows to give us a sense of who we were -- who we are.

RL: So that's great. You experienced the culture outside of the Lehigh Valley.

LR: Yes. I mean don't get me wrong there were cultural -- African American cultural things that were going on. Of course more were happening in urban areas. And thank god we live in an area where it's not too far reaching. It's not too far to get in a car and go to New York City, go to Philadelphia, go to Washington, D.C. for that fact.

RL: What's the name of the Catholic Church that your family attended? [00:34:00]

LR: Saint Bernard's. At the time.

RL: Was it an inter-racial congregation?

LR: No there was just -- what do you mean by that?

RL: Was it black and white?

LR: We were the blackest. There were white, there still are. There was just a couple of families. Now it's a little

more. Our priests are African, they're from the east, from Uganda.

RL: Currently?

LR: Currently.

RL: And back then?

LR: Back then, no. There used to be visiting priests from Nigeria if I can remember. But no there's only a couple of black families that are in our parish. I can remember one time [00:35:00] where the diocese newspaper called me. I'm not even sure where they got my name or phone number. But they were doing a story on black Catholics and they wanted my input. And I'm like -- wow that's interesting. They wanted to know if I felt any kind of resistance when I came to mass. That anyone -- you know look at me -- you know sideways when I sat in the pew. And I remember telling the reporter, I don't know. I don't really go for that. I attend mass because I love the structure of the mass. I feel the peace of Jesus Christ and the celebration of the mass. I don't care. I can't put that on me as far as how other people feel about me being there. That's not my problem. [00:36:00] And if they do have a problem, it's theirs not mine.

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