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SHOLOMO LEVY: Hello. I'm Professor Sholomo Levy from Northampton Community College, and it's my honor to be here today with Mr. Harold Levy to talk to him for this oral history project, "Voices of the Africa Diaspora: The Black Experience of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," as part of the Lehigh Valley Engage Humanities Consortium. We are honored to be here at his lovely home in Bethlehem on Tuesday August 20, 2019. Harold Levy, thank you for your willingness to participate in this project. Please say and then spell your name.

ULYSSES HAROLD LEVY: My name is Ulysses Harold Levy. U-L-Y-S-S-E-S H-A-R-O-L-D L-E-V-Y.

SL: And what is your date of birth?

UHL: May 21, 1951.

SL: Why don't you start by telling us where you were born?

UHL: [00:01:00] I was born in McKeesport Pennsylvania, right outside of Pittsburgh, in 1951.

SL: And who were your parents, and where were they from?

UHL: My fathers name was Ulysses James Roland Levy, and he was from North Carolina, and my mother was Maisie Jones, and she was born in Sumter, South Carolina. So both of my

parents grew up in the south and eventually migrated to Pittsburgh.

SL: And is -- do you maybe want to tell us about your family ancestry or name, and why they moved to the north?

UHL: Well, my mother's family was sharecroppers, and they, like millions of other African Americans, [00:02:00] moved from down south to escape the rampant poverty in the south. And so they moved to Pittsburgh -- the Pittsburgh area -- to work in the mills in and around Pittsburgh. My mother was a housekeeper, and she did -- like many other African American women at that time -- did a lot of house cleaning and laundry and that sort of stuff for rich white women, white folks, and my father had a number of jobs, like a lot of African American men at the time. He worked at Bettis atomic plant. He was a technician, and he was one of the first black technicians at Bettis atomic plant in Pittsburgh, where he handled a lot of radioactive materials for [00:03:00] that company. He also sold insurance. My father was an entrepreneur, and he was the only black insurance salesman in our area. And everybody knew and loved my father.

SL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

UHL: I have one brother, Carl, who's two years younger than me, and my sister Diane Judith is two years older than me. So I'm the middle child. The problem child.

SL: How would you describe, you know, your growing up, and high school and college years?

UHL: High school was a lot of fun in a lot of ways, but it was also a time when there was a lot of civil unrest in the country, and I remember 1967, '68, when the [00:04:00] Civil Rights Movement and civil rights issues all across America was raging, and then Martin Luther King, of course, was assassinated in '68. Me and some of my white friends would go up on the hillside of Pittsburgh in North Braddock and look down over the steel mills and contemplate and think about all the hatred and all the malice that occurred, and we didn't understand it because we loved each other. And until the day they died, my two white friends, Dave [Feriola?] and Mark [Vasco?], they were like my brothers. But we didn't understand the racial [amnesty?], the hostility, and all that stuff, because none of that existed between us. So to see the rest of the country burning and looting [00:05:00] and all the rest of that stuff going on in America at that time was very painful for me, and it was also a time when it was hard for African American men to get jobs in Pittsburgh, and particularly in

Braddock. And Braddock had the distinction of having the first steel mill in the United States, Edgar Thomson Steel Mill. And Edgar Thomson Steel Mill, like a lot of other plants and corporations at that time, relegated African American men to the lowest jobs that they could find in the mill. And of course, they were sued, and they had to -- they were forced to hire African American men. So in 1969 when I graduated, I was -- I went down to the United States Steel Mill in Braddock to get a job working in the mill, [00:06:00] and I remember walking in and I'm sitting in the employment office, and the interviewer comes out and he goes, "Ulysses Levy? Ulysses Levy?" And you could tell that he's looking for a white guy. So when I stood up, his jaw dropped, and he called me in. The interview was very short and perfunctory, and when I was walking out of his office, I happened to turn around and look back at him, and I saw him take my application and throw it in the garbage. So I was upset. I went home, and I told my dad what happened, and my dad called down to the steel plant and fussed -- raised holy hell. And they eventually hired me, but of course they put me in the foundry, which is the hottest [00:07:00] place in the mill, and I was a laborer. So I was relegated to firing up the ingots as they were casting steel. And I remember getting burned on my neck by

hot, flaming chunks of steel, and all that, but it was a remarkable experience, and what it taught me was that I didn't want to work in a steel mill. I didn't want to work in a steel mill because it was dangerous, it was hot, there was no safety requirements. It was just -- it was like walking into hell. It was like walking into hell.

SL: And so when and where did you go to college?

UHL: Well, that summer, I saved up all the money from the steel mill. I went to Boyce Community College in Monroeville, Pennsylvania. And I went there with the intent of -- I wanted to sing. I wanted to sing. I wanted to sing, and [00:08:00] so I joined a choir. I became the president of our community college choir, and I did very well at Boyce Community College. After that I went to West Virginia University, where I switched my major from music to International Relations, and I stayed down in West Virginia for a year. It was absolutely -- it was a horrible experience in some ways because it was still fighting the Civil War, and it was 250 black students out of 18,000 whites, and again, I happened to be the president of the Black Student Union, so I would be getting -- I'd get death threats 2:00, 3:00, 4:00, 5:00 in the morning, and so it was that kind of situation. And again, I was at a time when [00:09:00] the Civil Rights people around the country

were still fighting. Angela Davis was in prison. And we was raising money to get Angela Davis out, and I remember standing on stage in the auditorium on West Virginia University's campus, and at that particular event for Angela Davis, there must have been at least 100 different federal agencies and state agencies, state police, all kind of police. There was more police in there than there was students and faculty and staff. So I was being watched, I was being videotaped, all that stuff, and it was a very difficult time in my life. So after -- I spent a year down there, and when I -- I dropped out of school for a year, came back to work [00:10:00] back in the steel mill again, and then I realized once again that I did not want to work in the steel mill. I saved that money, and I went to Penn State University at Harrisburg. At that time, it was called the Capital Campus, and I got my bachelor's degree in International Relations from Penn State Capital Campus. Then after that, K. Leroy Irvis, who was in the state legislature at the time, had started a program with the state, and one of the things that they were trying to do was integrate all the state agencies. So my grades were good, so they asked me if I would take a job working in the governor's office, office of administration, bureau personnel, in the [00:11:00] classification and pay

division. So as it turned out, my job, my role, my responsibility was to calculate the pay and salary increases for state employees. It was the most boring job in the world, but I did it, and as it turned out, I became the first African American man to sit on the state negotiating team, and negotiated contracts with [ACME?], Pennsylvania state police, Pennsylvania state nurses, [ABSCUFF?], [SEWA?], [CUNY?], all the state unions. And one of the most remarkable experiences I had was in 1975, I believe it was. The state went on strike, and one of the [00:12:00] union members found out where I lived. I lived right up the street from the state capitol in Harrisburg, and so they start calling me 2:00, 3:00, 4:00, 5:00 in the morning, "We're going to blow your effing brains out, blah, blah, blah. You're messing with our money, dah dah dah dah dah." They found out I was on the state negotiating team. So the next day when I went in, one of the secretaries said to me, "Harold, you know, you look really tired. What's wrong with you?" And I told her what happened, not thinking, you know, I just was talking. So she went back and told the governor, and then the next day at 6:00 in the morning there was two huge state police officers at my door at 6:00 in the morning, knocking on my door and it scared me to death. And they said, "Mr. Levy?" "Yes? Can I help

you?" "Yes. We're here because [00:13:00] the governor sent us to get you, to escort you to work because the state is on strike and we know that you have gotten some death threats. So we're here to protect you." So they put me in the back of the car, carried me down to the state capitol building, which is only like 20 blocks away. And then it got so bad with the crowd in and around the capitol, they sequestered us over at Camp Hill, and that's where we could finish our negotiations.

SL: So you've been involved in -- I mean, a black person born in Pennsylvania and being intimately involved with labor and racial issues throughout Pennsylvania in many different parts. When and why did you move to the Lehigh Valley, particularly Bethlehem?

UHL: OK, [00:14:00] can we stop real quick?

SL: Yep, we can take a break. So we were saying in the first segment that you're a native of Pennsylvania, and throughout all your life you've been involved in steel mills and working with labor unions and working with civil rights issues. What brought you to the Lehigh Valley and to Bethlehem in particular?

UHL: Well, I was working at Penn State University. I was the affirmative action officer and assistant to the president, and took a job down at Penn State Capital campus, and went

to the Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education in Philadelphia, and ran into this young lady who I fell in love with. Her name is Sharon Gavin Levy, now. But that's what brought me [00:15:00] here. Yes I stalked her. Yes, that is my heart. So --

SL: And what year did y'all get married?

UHL: We got married in 1987. And it's been wonderful. We've been married for 31 years, and -- 32 years. I've been corrected. I'll probably pay for it later. But it's been wonderful. It's been 32 years of happiness.

SL: And what did you think of Bethlehem once you moved here?

UHL: When I first came to Bethlehem, Sharon was heavily involved in church at Grace Deliverance Baptist Church, and I was not. I was not a regular churchgoer at the time, even though I grew up in a [00:16:00] Baptist church. I had kind of fallen away from church, but when I attended church with Sharon one day, the Lord met me at the front door, and it's been wonderful ever since. So that's what brought me here to Bethlehem. Bethlehem, for me, is -- it's a beautiful place. I love Bethlehem in a lot of ways. What I liked about Bethlehem was it was idyllic in the sense that it was -- for me, it was very peaceful. It was a very peaceful community, and after Sharon and I got [00:17:00] married, I was hired at East Stroudsburg University as the

assistant to the president and director of affirmative action, so my responsibility was to handle all the discrimination complaints and issues, as well as write the university's affirmative action plan to increase the number of women and minorities and veterans and disabled folks throughout the university. But also, I was selected to help write the state of Pennsylvania's affirmative action plan for all 14 colleges and universities in Pennsylvania, and so I've been intimately involved in handling discrimination complaints and those kinds of issues, civil rights issues for women, minorities, handicapped people, veterans, and people who had been discriminated against because of their race, sex, color, gender, [00:18:00] handicap or disability, or their sexual or affectional preference, not only at East Stroudsburg University but also throughout Pennsylvania. And so how that ties into Bethlehem was one of the things that I was responsible for was writing our articulation agreement with East Stroudsburg University and the city of Bethlehem to put a recruiting center in downtown Bethlehem, down right off of -- in fact, it's on Broad Street in Bethlehem. And the purpose of it was to increase the number of women and minorities that we could recruit, particularly students, here in the Lehigh Valley, in [00:19:00] Bethlehem in

particular, so that they could attend school at East Stroudsburg University up in the Poconos. So that's something that I'm very, very proud of because actually that project grew out of a project that we had designed in conjunction with Grace Deliverance Baptist Church, as well as a Hispanic center on the south side of Bethlehem. And between those two facilities, we put the word out into the community that East Stroudsburg was trying to increase the participation of, again, minorities and women, faculty, staff, and students at the university, and so because of that project, there is now a standing facility in downtown Bethlehem because of the work [00:20:00] that we did.

SL: Now, because of the nature of your position as both a recruiter and working with affirmative action, did you get to meet a lot of the black people in the area, and what were their main concerns and issues?

UHL: Well, yes, I did. I got to meet all the leaders in the Lehigh Valley, particularly in the minority communities because again, they were trying to get their children into the university, as well as get employed at the university. So I got to know all the black pastors and ministers and reverends and that sort of thing here in Bethlehem, and quite frankly [00:21:00] in the whole Lehigh Valley. So it's been a wonderful way of meeting people. And of course

you get to hear all the concerns, and a lot of people felt that they had been shut out of economic opportunities here in the Valley, not only in the colleges and universities here in the Valley, but also in the companies and corporations in the Lehigh Valley. A lot of people complained bitterly about the recruitment of minorities particularly at companies like [Yale?] products, and some of the other companies. United States Steel, Bethlehem Steel had a horrible reputation in the minority community because again, what they would do is hire minorities, and they'd put them in the [00:22:00] worst jobs in the mill. The worst jobs and the most dangerous jobs in the mill, and they'd be paid the least. You know, they would be paid less than similarly situated white workers in the mills. And when you talked to Hispanic workers who worked in the mills, they were paid even worse. So in a lot of ways, some of these companies and corporations in the Lehigh Valley do not have a good reputation because they appear to have been systematically discriminating against African Americans and other people of color in employment.

SL: What were your experiences as a consumer, I mean, just going to restaurants, banks, shopping centers?

UHL: I really haven't had any really bad [00:23:00] experiences at any of the banks, at any of the shopping centers, nothing like that.

SL: So you'd say people are generally welcoming, and...?

UHL: Yeah, for the most part. For the most part, I've found people to be pretty nice. I'm a pretty easygoing kind of person anyway, so my wife liked to say that I'm Mr. Hey Buddy, so, you know, because I'll meet somebody and I'll say, "Hey buddy, how are you doing?" And so it kind of breaks the ice between me and folks, and people typically will respond kindly if you approach them kindly. So...

SL: And how many children do you have?

UHL: I have one daughter, who's the apple of my eye, who is brilliant, and she's [00:24:00] gorgeous. She looks like me, of course.

SL: And what's her name?

UHL: Nicole Bethany Levy. She's 31. She has two children, and they also are the center of my joy.

SL: What was it like, as a parent, raising a black child in Bethlehem?

UHL: At times it was difficult because while I like the quiet, the serenity, so forth here in Bethlehem township, it wasn't really good for my daughter because as a young black child, she didn't have a lot of kids to play with, and

because she was very, very smart and very precocious, at school a lot of times kids would pick at her because in addition to her being [00:25:00] very smart, she's very pretty, and so they would tease her about being a nerd and that sort of thing. So her experience was not always a good one, even though she was on the science Olympiad and graduated at the top of her class and all that stuff, you know, there were some painful moments. And then of course, some of the teachers didn't provide the level of support that I thought they should have provided to my daughter at the time, and I think that one teacher in particular, it felt like that her expectation of my wife and I was that we're, you know, these two dumb black folk coming in here, talking about our daughter. [00:26:00] And her response was just less than what I would have expected of a so-called professional. So again, my daughter's educational experience was difficult. Now, she went on to graduate with a degree in anthropology from one of the finest universities in the country, but here in Bethlehem, it was tough for her.

SL: Were there many black businesses, entrepreneurs?

UHL: There wasn't a lot, no. There was a couple. There was a black barber on the south side of Bethlehem, Ricardo Watson. In fact, he's still there. He still has a

barbershop on the [00:27:00] south side of Bethlehem. And from time to time, some small black restaurants would open up, but they didn't stay in business very long. Years ago, back in the '80s, there was a gentleman by the name of Clyde Bosket that had a barber shop, and Clyde was quite the entrepreneur, but all in all, there wasn't a lot of black businesses in Bethlehem, and quite frankly, still not.

SL: Is there much of a social life in terms of outside of churches? Were you involved in any of the lodges or clubs or political organizations?

UHL: I wasn't. I, [00:28:00] of course, because of my job I had to interact with some of those organizations, particularly organizations like the Elks and NAACP, for example, and some of the other clubs.

SL: Who were some of the leaders?

UHL: Well, there was Miss Esther Lee, who is the president of the Bethlehem NAACP. One of the leaders that I've always looked up to was pastor Reverend Tatum, who was the pastor at Grace Deliverance Baptist Church. He's no longer here. Him and his wife moved back down south, but an associate pastor, Mr. Tom [Wright?] has [00:29:00] subsequently taken his place, and they've been very, very active in the African American community. And way back in the day, there

was a doctor, a black doctor in Bethlehem. I didn't have the chance to meet him, but my wife did. Dr. [Goodwin?] -- Jeff Goodwin -- who -- I think I said it right, or I probably said it wrong -- but anyway, he was instrumental in providing leadership here in Bethlehem.

SL: And at what point did you become politically active?

UHL: Well, three years ago I [00:30:00] was asked to run for this area, Area Three, which is Bethlehem Township, Saucon Valley, and Hellertown. And I became the vice chair of Area Three, and right after that, I was approached by the Pennsylvania Democratic Black Caucus, and they asked me if I would serve as the director of the Northampton County Democratic Black Caucus, so that's my present duties and responsibilities. Right now I'm serving as the director. And we are very -- we are getting very active in this area simply because we have an election coming up in 2020. [00:31:00] Northampton County is ground zero in the country for the Democratic Party, so all eyes are going to be on this county, and I suspect that I'm going to be right in the middle of all that.

SL: Well, how would you say Bethlehem has changed in the 40 -- almost 50 years that you've been here?

UHL: Bethlehem's changed dramatically. We watched the collapse of Bethlehem Steel. We saw the former Bethlehem Steel site

being raised and then of course they put the Sands Casino on that site. But the biggest change to [00:32:00] not only Bethlehem, Bethlehem Township, but the whole Lehigh Valley has been the demographic shift that has occurred within the last 30 years. What's going on in the Lehigh Valley is that the white population is the older population, and it's unfortunately dying off at a faster rate than Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans, and so while the white population is declining, there's been a huge increase of minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans. And that has caused to a large degree some extreme discomfort on the parts of whites who aren't ready for that demographic shift. However, you can't stop [00:33:00] the sands of time, and that's what's going to occur. So I suspect by the year 2040, one half of the Valley or more is going to be people of color, and if you look at Allentown right now, Allentown is already a majority minority city, and so Bethlehem and Bethlehem Township is going to follow suit, particularly because of the advent of minorities and people of color moving into the Valley from New York and New Jersey.

SL: And as a final question, what do you like most about Bethlehem that has kept you here all these years?

UHL: My wife. No, seriously, I love [00:34:00] the Valley. I have some wonderful neighbors, and we live in a multiracial community. It's predominantly white, but they're just wonderful folks, and I like the peace and quiet that I have here. You know, I've got my apple trees out back, I have my garden out back, and the rabbits and the deer and the raccoons and groundhogs and squirrels. I'm good.

SL: Well, Mr. Levy, thank you so much for your time. This has been very informative.

UHL: Thank you. Thank you, sir.

SL: Thank you.

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