

Copy of Hemmons-AlozieRobin_20190522

RAYAH LEVY: I am Rayah Levy, here with Robin Hemmons-Alozie to talk with her for an oral history project titled "Voices from the African Diaspora: The Black Experience of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," as part of the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are here today at the Bethlehem Area Public Library on Wednesday, May 22nd, 2019. Robin Hemmons-Alozie, thank you for your willingness to speak with me. Can you please spell and state your full name?

ROBIN HEMMONS-ALOEZIE: Robin Hemmons-Alozie. R-O-B-I-N H-E-M-M-O-N-S A-L-O-Z-I-E.

RL: And your birthdate?

RHA: February 12th, 1982.

RL: OK, Robin, where were you born, Robin?

RHA: Where?

RL: Yeah.

RHA: Here in [00:01:00] Bethlehem; St. Luke's Hospital, Fountain Hill. In the middle of a blizzard, a very big, historical blizzard.

RL: How did you know it was a blizzard?

RHA: My mom told me.

RL: Your mom told you. (laughter)

RL: OK, so speaking about your mom, tell me, who are your family and where did they move from when they arrived in Bethlehem?

RHA: Well my immediate family would be my father, Alfred Hemmons, my mom, Barbara Freeman-Hemmons, and I have an older sister, Katrina Hemmons. She's about ten years older than me. We also had my grandmother, Estelle Freeman, live with us since I was maybe nine. So for me, growing up, she was there for the second half of my childhood.

RL: What year did they move to Bethlehem, your family? Your parents?

RHA: They moved to Bethlehem in 1973/74. [00:02:00] Actually, no. I take that back. Maybe like '75. My father's from Chicago and my mother is from Jersey, North Plainfield, Jersey, and they met during college in Washington, D.C. So my mom was attending Howard, I believe it was during her master's program. My father was in law school at the time at George Washington University and their story is that he was in a car with his friend and saw my mom walking on the street and was enamored by her and was like, "That's the woman I'm going to marry." So, they had their courtship down there, they got married, had my sister, and then my father was offered a job at PP&L, which is what brought him up to Lehigh Valley. Once he worked there for a while,

then they did move to Bethlehem. But then he [00:03:00] broke off to start his own practice, or open up his own practice, and he actually was the first African American admitted into the Lehigh County Bar. So when he broke off on to his own practice, his first office was in Allentown but then eventually he relocated his office to Southside, in the Five Points area.

RL: And what schools did you attend there in Bethlehem?

RHA: I attended Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, Northeast Middle School, and Liberty High School. Rival to Winston's Freedom. Boo, Freedom! (laughter)

RL: So tell me a little your childhood memories at Thomas Jefferson. Do you have any childhood memories that you can remember?

RHA: Oh, wow. Well, Thomas Jefferson [04:00] is a twin school to William Penn Elementary and it was very special to the district because it was open concept.

RL: Mm-hmm. And where is that located, I'm sorry?

RHA: On North Street.

RL: Oh, North Street. OK.

RHA: Actually it's almost in between Northeast and Liberty. Equidistance between the two. It was open concept, so it was like a community. So if you were in a classroom, you could hear classrooms across the building. So that way you

had to be cognizant of how you affect other classrooms, and vice versa. I actually enjoyed that. I know a lot of people are like, "No, no, no, you can't do that. You need a door. You need an actual classroom." But I enjoyed the open concept aspect. I was talking about with the black experience, there were [00:05:00] not a lot of African American students there. And to be honest with you, I don't remember any black teachers being there. It's funny -- it's not funny but, it's interesting in that there were a couple of African Americans there, but they were mixed. I don't remember any [redacted by interviewee] black students there. It wasn't until Northeast is when I was with more. And as Winston was explaining with the different tracks, where he's saying there's applied, academic, honors, we had A-Track, AB-Track, B-Track, C-Track. A being highest, C being lowest. And I was the AB Track. I had potential to be an A track, but I was deeply involved in my church and community and I did a lot of stuff so [00:06:00] I didn't want to have to spend that time to just sit and study. So I was like a natural AB, where I could just go off of my intelligence and not have to study. If I actually applied myself to study, I probably would have been in honors courses and things. But it was me and another girl, I won't name her name, but it

seemed like we were always together in the same classes. It was like the two black students/girls are in the same class at all times. It was almost like they would get us confused. To this day, my co-workers and I, we're the only three black teachers in that school right now and it's like there could only be one of us at one time. Like we have a list and there's only one of us there. I don't know -- it's just really weird. But through my childhood and school experience it was that way. Even now, in a professional career, it's still that way. It's so weird.

RL: As you think about that, how does that make you feel?

RHA: Not very good. I mean we were tight, but... [00:07:00]

I'm sorry I'm referring back to Winston's conversation.

RL: So tell me, who's Winston?

RHA: Oh. Winston! My husband, Winston. Yes. Winston Alozie.

RL: OK. (laughter)

RHA: Yeah, we will always be talking about our experiences and comparing, contrasting.

RL: OK, so I was asking you, could you just tell me a little bit more about how you felt about just you and this other student being the only black students in middle school? And did you experience that in middle school and high school, too? No, not in high school?

RHA: No, no.

RL: Tell me about middle school.

RHA: Well I actually met her in middle school. With middle school, it was interesting because Northeast, the neighborhood -- see Bethlehem is unique in that [00:08:00] there's different neighborhoods and you know your neighborhoods. And because the district being about neighborhood school, as you progress through your years, because it's a larger area coming to one building, you do intermingle in different walks of life, in different levels and stations and things like that and experiences. So when I attended Northeast, the other girl that I'm referring to, she lived close to Stefko Boulevard, so that was the Marvine Pembroke Village Projects. I'm not saying she lived in the projects, but she lived in that area. So that's where she went to elementary school, there. For Thomas Jefferson I would say is what you would call the more middle class. There weren't any -- this is going to sound really bad -- but [00:09:00] there weren't any projects kids there. There weren't any Southside kids there. It was the neighborhood in Elmwood Park area and Northside area. So going to Northeast, it was now Thomas Jefferson, Marvine, Donegan, Spring Garden. I believe it was Northeast as well. And I apologize if I'm missing any others. William Penn, although I think part of William

Penn might be Nitschmann. I mean the lines change so much. But my point is is that at Northeast it was altogether. And for me middle school was horrible, horrible, horrible, really bad. Only because I almost had a self-identity issue. Beulah Folk-Miller was Assistant Principal there and I love her to death. She's Esther Lee's sister. She looked out for me because she knew my family, we had that church community [00:10:00] connection, so she knew who my family was, she knew my expectations from my parents, she knew my own expectations for myself. So I give her so much credit for giving me that support and that mentorship because if it wasn't for her, I don't know how I would have got through middle school. Because for me I had a self-identity issue because (1) because of me being light-skinned. Not just race, but also socio-economic status because I came from Thomas Jefferson and because of where I lived on Ettwein Street --

RL: Wait, I'm sorry, where exactly is that in Bethlehem as far as where you lived?

RHA: Ettwien Street is -- I lived a block away from Liberty. I grew up there. Going to Northeast, I was with the project kids, I was with the kids in my area, like I said, it was a lot [00:11:00] more different kids coming together at Northeast. For me, I was a church girl. Both of my parents

had Master's Degrees, college graduates, I come from a smaller family. I also had a family that they weren't legacy generational in Bethlehem. They came from the outside in. So for me it was a plus and a negative, but in middle school I only saw it as a negative where I couldn't blend in, I couldn't fit in with the Marvine, the Pembroke kids because I didn't live in the projects, so they didn't know me from elementary school. Even though I grew up in St. Paul Baptist Church, St. Paul Baptist Church is right on the edge of Pembroke Village and then a lot of the black community attended there. So I knew peoples' grandparents, parents, cousins, sisters, brothers, I knew peoples' families. So they might have known me, but it was still kind of like, "We're not going to associate with you [00:12:00] because you're too smart. You're not in the C-track with us. You're in the AB-track/A-track." Then the white kids or the kids that weren't of color, because there were maybe a couple of Asians and a lot of them were immigrants so they didn't see the race, they were just there for their education [redacted by interviewee]. I don't remember any Middle-Eastern families at that time. A lot of Hispanics, and I'll get to that in a second. But it was just every group, whether it was race or class or socioeconomic status or even just neighborhood, they didn't

know how to take me in. They knew me, and I was respectful to them. Sometimes they were respectful to me, sometimes they weren't because they didn't know how to approach me. So like I said, I feel like some people didn't know how to take me because I could blend in with different groups [00:13:00] and when you're finding out your cliques and who you're with, at that time I felt that was a negative because it was like, "Well, dang, is something wrong with me? I can relate, I know what you're talking about, maybe I'm not wearing Jordans, but I know what they are, I know the importance of them and I know that that's cool and all, but why do I have to wear Jordans to relate to you?" It's different things. So that was Northeast.

RL: So who were your friends then? Did you form some friendships in middle school?

RHA: I did, I did. There were peers of mine that we started kindergarten together and we graduated in high school together. There was one girl, her name was [name redacted by interviewee], so she always sat next to me in alphabetical order. We were with each other throughout the whole [00:14:00] time. So I could say she was one of my best friends. But I think the dynamic changed because I want to say something else about middle school, but let me fast forward a little bit to high school. I would say when

I graduated from high school my close friends were three African Americans that we felt the same way where we had to stick together but at the same time we knew that we shouldn't have had to have done that, if that makes sense. But I know them through church. Most of my friends it's because we grew up in church together and when we see each other in school, we just know: be together. We just know: come together. The girl that I was mentioning in middle school, she attended Second Baptist and then we were also college roommates, but we still [00:15:00] knew that Christian base and the expectation we had from the church congregation, our church family. So that's what helped us relate as well. So I think for me, I'm a church girl. School or church, that's where I was at. Then in the community, but it was still representing church or whatever. So, I don't know, that's just how --

RL: So everything was centered around the church?

RHA: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

RL: And tell me a little bit about high school, what high school did you go to?

RHA: Liberty.

RL: And tell me a little bit about that experience.

RHA: OK, so, let me go back -- can I go back to middle school before I go to --

RL: Yeah, please, please.

RHA: Because it'll make sense why high school came to be what it was. Let me explain this. So in the Bethlehem community, growing up, now, again my vision might have been like this, but in the background you saw a [00:16:00] sudden influx of people coming from New York, from New Jersey, and even some from Philadelphia. But there was a sudden, exponentially increase to the Hispanic population. And I felt that even though African Americans had a small percentage within the population, we were kind of like "Whether you like it or not we're here, but we have our own stuff." With people coming in or with Hispanics coming in, it felt like, and this is going to sound really bad, but it sounded like they came in and just wanted to kind of take over. So it was kind of funny, we're like, "Wow, now black people are put to the side again." And I say this because now all of a sudden it's pride in the Hispanic population, so every opportunity that came, it went -- it was like [00:17:00] affirmative action for Hispanics in the area. It was like if there was an opportunity, like they would make sure that there's a Hispanic on the list. If there was anything that was competition, it felt like it automatically went to a Hispanic person regardless of if they were qualified or if they even wanted it. Sometimes peoples' name were on it

and they were like, "What is this? We don't even know what this is." They just put their name on there. So I feel like they were overcompensating for them.

RL: So this happened in the school while you were a student?

RHA: Yeah, while I was in Northeast! I mean, there was a girl that she was not black, but I felt like every time I would try to do something, they would put her in there and it was kind of like I had to automatically be put second place or I always had to wait and fall back to the point where people got us confused. I'm like, "No, I'm not her." They would talk to me thinking I was her and they would give me something and when I say something and they realize I'm not her, then they were almost like, "Oh, sorry, let me take that back." [00:18:00] And I'm not going into explicit detail, but it's just those are the experiences that really made me have a sour taste in my mouth. Then going into Liberty, not only was it Hispanics, but then it was Whites too. For example, there's a group called Little 'Canes where it's like the middle school -- Bethlehem Area School District, but Liberty in particular, were big on athletics and big on the basketball teams. And it's funny where there's that stereotype where it's like, "Oh, we have the black boys that can play ball and they like street ball so they can play good for the school," and things like that.

But it's no, that wasn't the case here. Here it's very elite and it shouldn't matter what color you are, it shouldn't matter what part of town you're from, if you're good, you're good, be on the team. That was not the case. With Little 'Canes and this was when -- my father passed away when I was a [00:19:00] freshman in high school. But he was diagnosed with cancer and he knew about it, so it was almost like without me knowing, thinking hindsight, I realize he was trying to prepare me, trying to strengthen me because he knew he wasn't going to be around much longer. But he really was like, "I really want you to be good" and he was very encouraging with me and not just with basketball, anything. But basketball in particular, that was something I was interested in, so he was supporting me. The coach was Hispanic, but a lot of the girls on the team were the Hanover Township/Bethlehem Township girls that got a lot of money. Not just basketball, volleyball too. There's a group called Quickset where you had to give \$500 and you had to do fund-raising because of tournaments and things. And my family, we were OK, but it wasn't like my dad could just drop \$500 and keep moving. He was self-employed, he had his own business. So [00:20:00] it was just like whenever there were opportunities, I kind of felt shafted. I don't know, it was weird. With Little 'Canes,

I was practicing, doing my best, and I might have missed this detail, but Little 'Canes was in preparation for you to go into freshman basketball program and go through the basketball program at Liberty. And there were a couple of girls, African American girls, they were seniors when I was a freshman, so they were like three or four years older than me that went through the program. I don't think they did Little 'Canes though.

RL: So Little 'Canes is...?

RHA: Middle school program to prepare for high school. I think they tried out and got on the team and they did well, and then they got into college through basketball scholarships and things like that. So my point is is that Little 'Canes, I worked hard, my father got the money together, put me in this program, the coach loved me, he was like, "I love your spirit." Practice would be over and I'd [00:21:00] still be out there shooting hoops or whatever, but it was almost like I got shot in the foot before I even started, because they already had in their mind who was going to get play time. They already had in their mind who was going to get into the program at Liberty because of who they are and what the program is. So I played church league basketball, I played with little kids and then when I started to see it and my dad was getting mad, because he

saw it right away. We were like, "Mm-mm, nope, done." So I did volleyball and I played volleyball in high school and I was also in step team, so that was another, I love step team, I did that through middle school and then high school as well. So, I was very involved, not just in church, but in school too. I was in athletics, music, step team, I was in everything that you could think of because I just loved learning, I just loved being active. I don't want to be at home I wanted to be involved in things. So [00:22:00] it just felt like, even with volleyball, again I think they got me confused with another girl, which is why they got me on the team. So, you know, it was just -- Quickset for example, I did Quickset with some of the girls. They got on the spots, they became captain and co-captain and I got less and less playing time. My freshman year we went to states and I played in states. But why is it that I don't get a lot of playing time as we get closer? That's because there's scouts coming to look for scholarships to schools. So I got less playing time where the other girls got more.

RL: And you were good?

RHA: And I was good, yes, I was a freshman playing in states! I mean, why would they play me in the states? So, it's just things like that just -- it didn't put me down, it just motivated me to push even harder. And I think that's a big

reason of why I do what I do now in my career. And I know chronologically speaking, I'm skipping over a lot of stuff, but...

RL: No, that's OK. [00:23:00] Tell me, you said you were into music. Were you ever involved in the band?

RHA: Middle school, yes. Middle school I played clarinet. It's funny because in middle school I wanted to play saxophone like Lisa Simpson. And when I got to Northeast, the Director was like, "Start with clarinet, it's a woodwind instrument, start with clarinet, learn it, and then you could promote yourself to saxophone." But when I started playing clarinet, I loved it. So during middle school I played clarinet in the concert band, I played the alto clarinet, which kind of looked like a saxophone clarinet, so it was like best of both worlds. My mom's a music teacher, she got her Master's Degree in music education. She tried to teach me piano, it didn't work. Learning from my mom piano, uh-uh, that was not a good mix. (laughs) So I did it for a little bit and we were like, "Uh-uh, no." We were fighting and clashing too much. It's funny, my mom's a piano [00:24:00] teacher and plays the piano, my aunt, cousins, all ministers of music in their churches, then Winston, my husband, he's the minister of music in his church and he plays piano all over. Wherever there's a

piano, there's Winston. But yet for me, I don't know, I learned the notes, I learned the music, but it just stopped. Then I'm like, "No one wants to teach me," but...

RL: So you did join the band at Liberty?

RHA: No.

RL: Why is that?

RHA: And this is why. Not because I wasn't good, not because it's a bad thing, but I know how serious Liberty High School Grenadier Band is. When you're a band, oh that's life. Like, you are all about it. And again, I loved sports and I loved step team and I knew that I could not make the commitment that needed to be done for such a great band like Liberty's. So I didn't even want to go there. And that broke the heart of my band director at Northeast, [name redacted by interviewee]. That broke the heart of my mom. That broke the heart of a lot of people that was like, "Oh my goodness, you're good, why not? [00:25:00] You're going to Liberty, you don't want to be in the band?" I mean, no, that's how much respect I have for it because I don't want to be in it and then still do other stuff and then not be wholehearted in it and then too, volleyball's a fall sport and there's a lot of Halloween parades to go to, you can't do both. And that's kind of something in the back of your mind that when you go to Liberty athletics,

you go hard for athletics. If you're in band, you go hard for band. If you're in this stuff, chorus, you go hard. If you're in theater, you go hard. When you go to Liberty, you go hard. So it's like I knew I couldn't -- middle school, I could do it all, but high school, that's a whole 'nother (*sic*) level, so that's why.

RL: OK. So when you graduated from high school, what college did you go to?

RHA: I went to Temple University in Philly. That was like my first choice and East Stroudsburg was my second choice. But I already knew I was going to Temple. [00:26:00] Growing up, my father had clients in Philadelphia. And Progress Plaza, which is right off of Temple's campus on Broad Street -- it's funny how life goes full circle. That was an African American-owned shopping center. And the city developers were trying to take it away from the people who were there, that invested in it, and he was one of the community members. And this is Philly now, not Bethlehem, but Philly. And I'll tell you why this is important. My father missed Chicago. He loved Chicago. So Philly was kind of like the next best thing. So you could tell he was here in Bethlehem but then he had clients in Philadelphia and then he did things in the community down in Philly. So we were on 309, up and down the road a lot. But going back

to Progress Plaza, he was one of the people on that committee as legal aid to help save that area. And it was successful. [00:27:00] It wasn't until after I even graduated from Temple when the developers actually got it and made it to what it is now with fresh markets and things. So Philly for me -- I love Philly. Greekfest. When my sister was in college -- my mom went to Howard, my sister went to Howard as well. So there was legacy there. So I would go to Howard's homecoming with my sister, see what college life was like. So then between that and then my father going to Philly and taking me there and getting to know Philly, I knew that's where I wanted to go when I wanted to get out of Bethlehem. So going to Temple. Now when I went to Temple I was going to become an athletic trainer and changed my major a few times. So my degree is in Communications. (laughs) But it took me some time to -- like I said, my father passed away from cancer when I was a freshman, in the middle of my freshman year. It was January 12th, 1997. And I knew that I wanted to go to college, [00:28:00] I already had that in my mind. And even if I didn't want to, I knew I had to because that was the expectation my family had for me. Or my parents had for me. I'll say family, my sister too. My mom was worried because she worked for my dad, she was his

secretary, his assistant. So when he passed away, she was unemployed. So, where are we going to get this money for me to go to school? I received a lot of scholarships for involvement in the community, in the church, schools, academics, things like that, but what a lot of people don't understand is, it's nice that when you're a senior you get all of these scholarships for freshman year, but you got three more years to pay for, where is that money going to come from? So I took a lot of loans, grants, loans, whatever, and eventually I had to stop school. So I took three semesters off, I had five part-time jobs at one point, but I got myself through. [00:29:00] So I started in 2000 and I finished in 2006. When I graduated from Liberty a big thing was that I was going to join -- I was enlisting myself into the Army, Army Reserves. My father paid for his schooling through the Army, ROTC. So, make a long story short, that did not go very well (laughs). And I think part of it too was 9-11. You know, where were you when JFK was shot? I remember where were you on 9-11? And I think that changed a lot of my perspective on the military as well. But eventually they actually -- I went on this scholarship and then I actually lost my scholarship because they claimed I was nine pounds overweight.

RL: You had a scholarship for what?

RHA: ROTC. I'm sorry, I'm all over the place.

RL: That's OK, so you had a scholarship from ROTC? OK.

RHA: So when I graduated from [00:30:00] Liberty, I signed up for Army Reserves. When I got there, I was thinking, "OK, well, I want to start Temple first and then go to basic training in the spring semester." Because I wanted to start with everybody at the same time. When I got down to Temple, Philly, I loved it, I didn't want to go anywhere. Then someone was like, "Oh, well we have an ROTC program here" and explained that with me. And again, that was scholarship money and I was like, "Oh, wow, OK." So they said that my reserve contract would have been null and void if I went into the scholarship, because it's like a new contract. And the thing is, I was already drilling with my unit in Norristown, so I knew what to look forward to I guess you could say. But then again I almost was like, "I don't want to leave school." So there were ROTC scholarship, I signed. "Please read the fine print before you sign stuff." [00:31:00] But for me, I just did not get along with the people there. They were very smart, they loved their stuff, but I just...the culture was not me.

RL: Speaking about culture and the idea of wanting to go to Philly. Did you want to go Philly too because Bethlehem

wasn't a diverse culture, where as in Philadelphia, it was and so you were just enamored by that?

RHA: Oh yes. Yeah, that's a big part of it. I always said Bethlehem's like a little bubble and the thing is too being black wasn't beautiful here. Like I said, my bestest, bestest friends, who I'm still best friends to this day, two of them, one I knew from church but I knew him since fifth grade, one was his best friend that he lived in Spring Garden Townships and I met him at Northeast. But we weren't friends per se [00:32:00] until later on in life and then my childhood friend, who I've known through church since both our moms were pregnant together, we were talking to each other through the stomach, but she moved to Virginia. She kind of was transient, so she was in some of my school years, some not. But year senior year we graduated together. We all were like, "We're leaving Bethlehem, we're not looking back. We're done. We know there's more out there, we need to leave." And I think Philly, leaving here, black was not beautiful. Black was like, "We just got to put up with you because you're here." But in Philly, black is like chocolate city, black is beautiful. My self-esteem. Like I say Temple -- Philly hardened me, but it also made me find beauty that I could not find here. And it was funny because my -- this might

be another part of it too -- [00:33:00] the big thing when I was growing up was Skateaway. That was the hangout for kids. A childhood friend of mine and I went to Skateaway one night and we met a family that they were -- there was an older sister that lived in Easton where her husband and her kids and her brothers were there. And the brothers were from Philly. And his name was [name redacted by interviewee] and we took a liking to each other and switched numbers. And it was funny because my dad was alive at that point and he called me and he's like, "My daughter don't talk to boys," and hung up on him. But we still kept in contact and I think that he helped me transition -- because he knew Bethlehem -- but he also transitioned me into Philly. And I think that having that mentor support was helpful. Temple, Philly gave me a whole new perspective on who I was. And I didn't lose my upbringing, I was [00:34:00] still proud of my community. Although Philly was like, "I'm not from Bensalem, it's Bethlehem."

RL: So why did you move back to Bethlehem if you had such -- because of that rich experience in -- because I know this with a lot of people that left Bethlehem, they didn't come back -- the next generations.

RHA: Yes. A lot of us, and I'm going to say us, we're not here. We're in Maryland or D.C. area. That was the come up,

going down to that area. So my sister's generation or her age group to mine, it was like if you went down to Maryland or D.C., that was the goal. You didn't want to stay here because you knew what was going on.

RL: OK, so, Robin, tell me again why did you return to Bethlehem after having that experience in Philadelphia and feeling that black is beautiful in Philadelphia [00:35:00] (laughter) and then coming back to Bethlehem?

RHA: Well, there's two reasons. First, because of my mom being a widow and I love my mom, I was only an hour and some change from away from home. So I was able to come home on the weekends. It wasn't like I had -- I could bounce back and forth. When I got tired of Bethlehem, I'd go to Philly, when I was at Philly, I'd go back to Bethlehem. Another thing is that after I took that time off, I started to commute from Bethlehem back to Temple. It was either a car or an apartment. I had an apartment first, that didn't work out, so I got the car and had a commute. But then also, too, in 2005 I had my oldest son. I actually was married before [Alvaro?] Was born.

RJ: OK, so if you don't mind, let's just stop [00:36:00] right there because I want to get to that in a second, OK? Because I want you to tell me about your husband and your marriage and how many kids you have.

RHA: OK, we didn't get there. OK. That's what I'm saying, it gets kind of weird.

RJ: No, no, that's OK. No, that's OK. So again, just tell about your father passing away and moving back to Bethlehem and you didn't want your mom -- she's a widow now and living alone, so you're now living in Bethlehem. Did you start working when you moved back to Bethlehem or did you continue with your college education?

RHA: I moved back to Bethlehem when I took time off. It was never in my mind that I was not going back to school. And that was part of the reason why I had trouble with jobs because [00:37:00] the jobs that would pay well were like, "Oh, you're a college student at Temple? No, you're going to be quitting soon, you're going to be going back, so we don't want to hire you." So when I moved back to Bethlehem, I was working, but I still had it in my mind, I was still a Temple student, or still a college student. Also, too, my sister lived in Ambler, Springhouse area. So when I was in Philly I wasn't by myself either, I had my sister there to support me as well. And then she would come home on weekends, I would get a ride from her or whatever the situation was. So I guess you could say there was a period of time where I was one foot in Philly and one foot in Bethlehem. I mean the experience I had of Philly was

great. I had lived on my own for two years and I had the experience and I was good. But you only have so much money and I needed to save up money to finish [00:38:00] college.

RJ: Did you graduate from Temple?

RHA: Yes, I did. 2006.

RJ: OK. And when you graduated did you leave Philadelphia right away and move back to Bethlehem when you graduated?

RHA: Well I was commuting from Bethlehem. So I was living in Bethlehem at that point. When I graduated I was already in Bethlehem.

RJ: OK, OK.

RHA: Yeah, I was in Bethlehem from 2003 until the second half.

RJ: OK. So you said you are married, am I correct?

RHA: Yes.

RJ: And your husband is again?

RHA: Winston Alozie.

RJ: And how many kids do you both have?

RHA: Four.

RJ: Four kids. OK. And what are their names?

RHA: Alvaro, Xavier, Elliott and Elizabeth Estelle.

RJ: Right. And I'm sorry I interrupted you a second ago. You were telling us a story about your son, when your son was born?

RHA: Yes. So I love Winston and [00:39:00] if you didn't know any of this, you would have been like, "Wow!" Everybody assumes that all four are biologically his. The twins are. But the older two are not. He's such a lovable guy, he took them in, he would almost feel offended if you were to say, "You're not their father," because he is. But I had Alvaro in 2005. I mean it was to the point where I gave birth to Alvaro and a week later my mom was sitting in the car with him because I had to take my final exam back at Temple. And I was nursing at the time so I couldn't be away from him for that long. I don't want to go into too much detail, but it was a very toxic situation I was in with his father. And he was not around for the majority of Alvaro's life. [00:40:00] When I earned that college degree, it wasn't just me. My name was on that degree, but Barbara Hemmons should have been on there, Katrina Hemmons should have been there, and Alvaro Davila should have been on there because that was a group effort. But I knew I had to finish. It's not a race, it's a marathon, but you still got to finish that finish line. So I almost feel like by the skin of my teeth I finished, but I finished.

RJ: So the family dynamics was really strong.

RHA: Family dynamic, church dynamic. Growing up in St. Paul Baptist Church, Reverend Marshall E. Griffith, Sr., he was

a Philadelphian, he was born and raised in Philadelphia. Even though most of his time was up here, it was like I could still talk to him about Philly. He still was that support. [00:41:00] So my church family, my church community, they knew what I was doing and I think part of it too, some of them, because they knew where I came from, my family, they knew my upbringing because they are big contributors to it, I think that there was a little bit of a disconnect with me getting married to someone that they had no idea who they were and he wasn't part of the community. And then having a child with this person and they're like, "Oh, wow, you went to Philly to get your college degree, you're coming back married with a child!" Because even though I was living here, I did distance myself a little bit and that's because I wanted that distance. I wanted to experience other things.

RJ: Was it because that black Bethlehem didn't think black is beautiful.

RHA: Exactly, exactly. Alvaro is [00:42:00] half Peruvian. His father is from Peru. Born and raised in Peru. Did not come to the country until much later in life. So that for me was very exotic, it was very different. And then again going back to some of what I said before, it was always about the Latino community here and they were very like

blacks "Ewww," like whites "OK," but we're proud, boricua proud. What was interesting for me is that him being South American, even within the Latin America, South America, there was still division there. His primary language was Spanish. But if he knew coming here to Bethlehem there was Dominicans and there's Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, El Salvadorians, different groups, Peruvians as well. But [00:43:00] you could tell even through their culture, the Latin America/South American cultures, there was divisions and things. So for me, it was almost like a refreshing break. But then reality set in and life set in and where as strong of an upbringing and black community or the support I received from the black community but also knowing where I came from, I was like, "Whoa, wait, this isn't right." I don't know, like I said, I had a self-identity crisis for a little bit there, but I think it made me a lot better to where I am today. I kind of woke up. But it still gave me a little bit of a newer perspective. Even the people that live within this community I had a different perspective of things.

RJ: I just want to step back for a second. Again, you mentioned your father [00:44:00] and wanting to be there for your mom because your father passed away. I just want to go back for a second. In 1994, and your father was a

lawyer, we had the O.J. Simpson case. What was it like in your household during that time?

RHA: That was what was on TV 24/7, the VCR. Yes, a VCR. Not a DVR, VCR was running all hours to record it. And my father would analyze it like it was a case study. He would be watching them and like, "Oooh" and "What?" He'll be on the phone with his siblings. Because my father was the second youngest of 13. He was born literally on the streets of Chicago. There was a newspaper archive article of my grandmother at the time holding him as an infant and the kids in the back and they were like the Hemmons family homeless. So [00:45:00] he knew what dirt poor was, he knew what homeless was, he knew what having a large family with no money and having to take care of each other, he knew what that was about. And he became who he was being the first African American lawyer admitted to the Lehigh County Bar. Having his own law office. Having a single house with a family and being successful. So just hearing his story itself, is just like wow. So you could see it was like that term, code-switching. He knew how to be very prim and proper and be professional and talk like this. But then he also knew how to get hood. Get hood on people. He knew how to do that code-switching. But it was just funny. During the trial, you hear him talk professionally,

those technical terms and those legal [00:46:00] terminology, but you could also see that being a supporter of the African American community, being a black male, and experiencing those injustices and experiencing those stereotypes and experiencing those himself, there's almost a duality to it.

RJ: So did you ever feel at any point you wanted to be a lawyer because he was so passionate about what he did?

RHA: I always said if teaching didn't work and nursing didn't work, a lawyer would be next. I just know he -- this is going to sound really bad -- I hated reading. That was torture for me to sit down and read a book. Until I realized I just wasn't reading the right books. If I'm into a book, I could read a thick book like this in two hours. Go through it and understand it. But the materials I was given I just (inaudible). I loved writing. And that was one thing he said as a lawyer, you have to do a lot of reading [00:47:00] and you got to do a lot of writing. So as soon as he said that, I was kind of like, "I'm good." But as I have grown up and seeing things, I wouldn't mind it. If the teaching gig didn't work then I was like, "Well nursing because I loving helping people." That probably won't work either.

RJ: So tell me, where do you teach?

RHA: I teach at Liberty High School. I went back!

RJ: OK.

RHA: And I think that's part of my journey. For someone who knew me growing up, first to know that I came back to Bethlehem, it'd be like, "Huh?" And then to know that I became a teacher? "What?" But I love it. I love it. I would not trade anything for it. I love it. And it's funny, God has ordered my steps throughout my life. Even the mistakes, failures, successes, achievements. Everything I feel like culminated [00:48:00] to me being who I am as an educator. I'm able to relate to my kids, I'm able to tell stories and they're like, "Tell me more!" But like to get the point across. And one thing that I love being at Liberty, I was in their seat at one point. I tell them, "I had Psychology class right up here with my favorite teacher, [name redacted by interviewee]!" Some of my colleagues were teachers when I was there. I love that I can relate to them as being a student, but I also have enough life experience that I can impart on them. And one thing is that, as I was saying with middle school and high school feeling like I was kind of the -- I don't want to say, average -- but being put to the side, being under the radar. I wasn't a behavior issue, but I wasn't a brainiac kid with honors, 4.0 GPA. I kind of just went through.

[00:49:00] That's one thing, that as an educator, I love all walks of life. I've tried to be fair with equity. Not equality, but equity. I try to be equitable. But one thing is that I do tend to drift towards the students that look like me. Or that I see myself in. Like I said, when my father passed away, that was in the middle of my freshman year and there were certain people in my life that I cherish and that my success was because of their support and their mentorship. And this is my fourth year at Liberty. My eighth year teaching, but my fourth year at Liberty. And this year I started working with freshmen and a program that I have been working in is, I call them my Lady Leaders. And we have a lot of community partners with the intent of mentorship, as the majority of them will be first generation college [00:50:00] students. So through mentorship in freshman year, doing career assessments, we do mindfulness, we're looking at the whole child, with mental health, with Liberty becoming a trauma-informed school. Like I said, God ordered my steps. Because my first job out of college was at KidsPeace. Working with children in crisis, with behavioral issues. So there was students that were drug addicts, were suicidal, abused, they had psychiatric disorders, everything. So like I said, everything comes together. So with the program I'm

talking about now, going back to my Lady Leaders and the school becoming trauma-informed, the socio-emotional learning is a big part of the program as well. But where I'm going with this is that we're going through -- I made a commitment because of working with the Community Action Committee of Lehigh Valley, their Generation Next program [00:51:00] is one of the community partners we have. We're tracking them until their sophomore year of college. So this is a six-year commitment. So it's not like I just have them for this freshman seminar class one semester. Be like, "See ya, see ya around the hallways." No, as [name redacted by interviewee], my principal, he's like, "We need to social work the heck out of these girls to make sure they're successful and make sure that this program works." And that mentorship piece is huge, huge. And why I say that is because that's what helped me be successful. That's what helped me get to where I've been. Dr. Henry Odi and Curtissa Odi -- I was in Lehigh University Star Academy from seventh grade to twelfth grade. To this date, Miss Odi, she's like, "Call me Curtissa now." And I'm like, "Nope, nope, nope. I have too much respect for you." I was taught to respect my elders, you don't ever call your elders without their title. To this day I still text message, "How you [00:52:00] doing, Robin? I'm praying for

you." Or, we'll go out to lunch and talk. That program is what helped me envision the program that I'm running now. But that mentorship piece is serious. Working with freshman girls, coming full circle when I was a freshman, that's what I needed. I'm providing to them what I received and what I know I needed.

RJ: So I have a question. So your mom was trying to get a job within the Bethlehem Area School District. Your mom, Barbara Hemmons, I interviewed her not too long ago. And she told me about that experience. And now you're working in the Bethlehem Area School District. How do you feel about that, the fact that your mom couldn't get in but now you are in?

RHA: Well I'll even go past that. She tried to run for school board. I think a lot of it was that again she was from New Jersey. She was not born and [00:53:00] raised in Bethlehem. She was not related to the black families that are rooted here. And also too, she had a Master's Degree in music education. She was very qualified, or extremely qualified, but she did not have that Pennsylvania certification. And she did teach at Moravian Academy for a couple of years, CMS, which is a music school in Allentown. But again, those are more of your charter schools and

private schools. But to work in a public school district, they were not trying to hear it. She couldn't even sub.

RJ: But I thought she told me that she had a teacher's certificate. Did she not have it?

RHA: Not Pennsylvania.

RJ: Not Pennsylvania, oh OK.

RHA: Yeah. Again it's just the dynamic of my family not being from here but still having the same values and beliefs and cultural beliefs. And then being deeply rooted in the church community. There [00:54:00] were times where they loved us and there were times where they were like, "You don't belong here." Because we weren't born here or, not me, but my parents weren't born here or we weren't part of a certain family. So that was like a punch in the face sometimes. And again I was young, so it wasn't like I was paying too close attention to things like that. But I know that that was a struggle for my mom. Because she knew she could do the job, but...

RJ: Right. I think at one point she felt that because she is African American, that's probably why too?

RHA: Yeah. In this town, it's about connections. And I'm not going to say it's not that way other places, but just talking about this town specifically, it's about

connections. It's not always what you know, it's who you know. And it's even more the case for blacks here.

RJ: [00:55:00] Are you involved in any political organizations; any kind of organizations at all?

RHA: Bethlehem Area NAACP, my father was very involved in that, my mother's involved in that. As far as being a card-carrying member, I did not join until about two or three years ago. But I still supported it, I still was involved, I still knew what was going on. I would say that's really the only one in this area.

RJ: How about the Eastern Star?

RHA: Yes, Order of the Eastern Stars. My father was very involved in the masonic order. He was a mason. The Order of the Eastern Stars, the female, their wives, the mothers, the daughters, [00:56:00] the way you got into The Order of the Eastern Stars because you had a blood or a marital relation to a mason. He was a Prince Hall Mason. My grandfather, my mom's father was a mason and my uncle, my mom's brother, is a mason. So it was deeply rooted from both sides for me. To be honest with you -- let me go back a little bit. So I mentioned before that my sister went to Howard and I would go with her and have a college experience. She was Sigma Gamma Rho and her boyfriend at the time was Phi Beta Sigma. And again, I love stepping.

So I went down there, I got to be Greek when I go to school! I got to be Greek because I want to step. [Passage redacted by interviewee.] And then when I got to Temple, I was told that [redacted by interviewee] were good steppers, so of course I wanted to be with the group that's you know. So my first year there, now keep in mind I was in ROTC, so I had to get up at 4:45 because I had an apartment in South Philly. I had to get up that early to make it to PT. And then I would have my PT, I was at ROTC, (inaudible) recruiting hours, I would have my classes, I had a part-time job, it was a work-study, and a small part-time job, so I was busy. So for me to try to pledge a sorority was crazy to do that year but I was ready. Woooooh! I would [00:58:00] watch the alumni chapters step and they were just like, "OK," but I didn't care because that's what I wanted to do. Make a long story short, I did make line, but I did not feel welcomed. And when I say welcomed, I think that -- now I didn't know the history that they were in trouble for doing hazing and things like that. One of the girls on my line almost died because she was diabetic and some of the activities they had us do, she was in a coma in the hospital. And for me, first of all, I'm not jeopardizing my scholarship because hey, I'm here for my degree first. All these organizations kind of got to wait.

But again, I had a realization, this isn't for me. So I kind of took a step back. And my father was very active in the masons growing up. [00:59:00] I mean I remember him going for his meetings. I remember having his apron and getting dressed up. He was Worshipful Master of Wyoming Lodge No. 135, which is prominent in this area. A lot of our church members, if they weren't Elks they were Masons and if they weren't Masons they were Elks or they were both. So I knew it. I knew other members in my church congregation that were also Eastern Stars. I knew that was like a black thing to do in Bethlehem. But for me, I wasn't thinking about that, I was thinking about Greek, Greek, Greek, step, step, step. But after seeing -- I don't know how can you call someone your sister when you're hurting them. How can you, and again, I'm active because I'm in the Army, I'm running. My Dean and the A.P. of the [redacted by interviewee] line we were on, they lived in South Philly. They had us run -- I remember running around the Lincoln. Well, it wasn't the Lincoln at the time. But running around the sports complex. But then I was on -- girls that were kind of heavy set or not in shape were on the line. I'm like this, [01:00:00] "Come on, let's go! Let's go!" And they're like, "No, no, no." But just the whole dynamic just blew my mind. And I'm like, "Mmmmm." So

then maybe later on, maybe towards the end of that year, there was a girl in my dorm that she was very quiet, but you could tell she wanted to talk to me, but she was shy and I was too active and busy in my own life, so I wasn't really paying too close mind? But there was this one day, I remember coming out of the cafeteria, and both of us were just talking because she felt kind of the same way about the Greek life there but she wanted that sisterhood, that fraternal feeling. And she mentioned the Order of the Eastern Stars and I'm like, "Wait a minute. Wait. What? I know this." And I got the connection, right? Because of my father. And I was like, "You're right." And I was like I should be following God. I know Order of the Eastern Stars is not a religious organization and we would never say it is, but it is to me. [01:01:00] [Passage redacted by interviewee.]

RJ: Is it still active here in Bethlehem?

RHA: Yes, yes.

RJ: Are you still involved?

RHA: To the best I can. To go back, though, she told me, I was like, "OK, I know a couple of people in my church. [Names redacted by interviewee]. I know that they're very involved in it. Let me reach out to them." And they're like, "Hey, Alfred Hemmons's daughter, right? Alfred

Hemmons's daughter, of course! Here's the application."

And they have to do investigations and things but they all knew. I mean I wasn't making it up, they knew my father.

He was Worshipful Master of Wyoming Lodge 135.

RJ: He was the Master?

RHA: Worshipful Master. It's kind of like the President of the Chapter.

RJ: Yes, I know.

RHA: A lot of their husbands, brothers, [01:02:00] fathers were masonic brothers with him or lodge brothers, so they knew.

RJ: So tell me...I'm sorry to digress... how long was he Master?

RHA: I believe it was for one term, so two years. I term is typically two years. So it was kind of like, let me follow God. God hasn't let me down yet. Let me follow God. Let me put this other stuff aside because I don't know what they're on. So they did the investigation, I came through the initiation, and they really just welcomed me in and I just hit the ground running. To the point where in 2009, now I joined in 2006. In 2009, and I'm kind of skipping a little bit, but I moved up through the line and I was Associate Matron -- actually in 2008 I was Associate Matron to Barbara Watson. Rest in peace sister Barbara. Oh I love [01:03:00] her. She was Worthy Matron and she was

like, "Let's go, Robin. Let's do this." Our administration, we had so much stuff going on, we were talking, it was great. But then she suddenly passed away Christmas morning from heart attack. And I'm trying not to cry. And the way that the organization is, you have to be voted in, so I took on the leadership of Worthy Matron but I had to finish that year out as Associate Matron. And I did her proud because we talked and I knew what her goals were and her vision, so I tried to make sure I carried that out. And then when I became Worthy Matron, I believe I'm the youngest member to become Worthy Matron because --

RL: How old were you at the time? About? [01:04:00] And how long did you stay as Worthy Matron?

RHA: I'm not good at math, I'm an English teacher, not a Math teacher.

RL: That's OK so how long did you stay as the Worthy Matron?

RHA: I was for three years. Which is, again, a term is usually two years, but I was in there for three. A lot of people would be like, "Why are you hanging out with my grandparents?" It wasn't like I was like, "Hey let's go out, let's party line, let's step, because these were people who were grandparents' age. These were people like Clyde Bosket, who is known for having his barbershops in Lehigh Valley, he knew my father well. I almost call him

Uncle Clyde. He was so encouraging. He's like, "Yeee, we're the matrons." All of these older people but I looked up to them. They had so much wisdom and I just loved sitting and listening to them talk. [01:05:00] And they would support me, and it was like that leadership; it was kind of awkward because of being so young. You asked me how old I was. I'm going to say maybe like -- well, 2009 was ten years ago, I'm 37 now, so 27. 27-28. It was weird being a leader and telling people what to do who are 30, 40 years older than me, even more. But that was the position I was in. It was about respecting the office, not so much the person. But because they knew who I was, and they knew that you have to invest in your youth or else the chapter's going to die. Now when we would go to our conferences in Philly -- Philly again! Go to Philly or other areas in the state, then I would see more people my age. But as far as Allentown was Virginia (inaudible) No. 86, that's [01:06:00] the chapter I belonged to. Then we had Harriet Tubman No. 64 at Easton, (inaudible) Charlotte Scott 104 in Wilkes-Barre. So that was our district, ninth district. Small but mighty ninth district. I was still young. The youngest within those three chapters. After I finished my Worthy Matron -- actually, I said three -- four. Four years. After I finished that, I became a District Deputy

Grand Matron, which again I believe I was the youngest. That was where I was overseer of our district. And like I said, just named the three chapters. But I was like a representative of the Grand Worthy Matron, who was a head of the jurisdiction of Pennsylvania. So that was the step up even more. So technically, it was six years of being in [01:07:00] office when I was in Eastern Stars.

RL: So speaking about leadership and office, 2008-2009, that's the Obama era, when Obama was running. He took the oath of office in 2009. So you were in the leadership, how did you feel about here is a --

RHA: Oh that was awesome.

RL: Were you involved politically? Did you help out, did you canvas -- help canvas for his campaign or anything like that?

RHA: No, I'd say I'd support word of mouth. Go out and vote. Because I know a big reason why Obama won was because he reached out to the youth. He reached out to the college students, he reached out to the young voters.

RL: Right, and you were young.

RHA: And I think that was critical and I think that for him doing that -- I know everybody's like, "Oh, we got to vote for him because he's black." No, you got to vote for him because he looked out for everybody, not just certain

groups, but he looked out for everybody. And the fact [01:08:00] that he reached out to the youth, knowing young voters were still going to be voting, you know, train them up as they're young, right? So that was big. But what was great for me is, as I mentioned before, my grandmother lived with us. She lived to be 101.

RL: Your grandmother's name again?

RHA: Estelle Freeman. So, 2009 was a big year. Not just about Obama becoming President, but my grandmother, she passed away in March and then my second son was born in September of 2009. So 2009 was a heavy year. But one of the things, talking about Obama, that was beautiful, is that my mom and I sat with my grandmother and was like, "There's a black man that's President." And thinking she's 101, look at all the ones she lived through and [01:09:00] experienced and seen. And now she was able to live long enough to see a black man in office.

RL: Did you guys sit as a family and watch the ceremony?

RHA: Mm-hmm. And in fact my mom got Obama to write a letter to her. So it was great.

RL: So your mom got Obama to write a letter --

RHA: Yes! She might have to --

RL: Yes.

RHA: Yes. (laughter) I'll have to make sure and tell her to show it to you.

RL: Yes, please, please.

RHA: But, that was January-February when he was installed and she passed away a month and a half later. So she was able to see.

RL: She got to see, oh, that's lovely, that's lovely. I want to wrap it up soon. Tell me, I just want to -- were there any black businesses in the area when you were growing up?

RHA: There was a lot. The thing is, not to be negative or pessimistic, but there were quite a few, but the thing is that it's easy to [01:10:00] open a business, but it's very hard to keep it open and maintained.

RL: What are some of the businesses that were here?

RHA: Hair salons, beauty salons, the barbershops, restaurants --

RL: Restaurants? What kind -- there was a restaurant? Where?

RHA: Like, for example, if they're soul food restaurants, people are like, "I don't want to support a soul food restaurant when I can make it at home half-price." Or, "I can make it just as good, even better." So a lot of people that would come into the area would be like, "Oh, well you don't have a soul food restaurant. Why not? Let's open one." They open it, and everybody's excited, "Yay, this is good, we need it." But then eventually it doesn't pan out or it

doesn't continue on because then they realize people are not supporting them.

RL: Was it on the Southside?

RHA: Mostly Southside. Couple on Northside. And that's the thing, the Bayou, for example, that's really popular and they even expanded out of town. Why is it that the Bayou [01:11:00] is OK, but then when we have a soul food restaurant on the Southside, if you even hear about it, it doesn't last very long.

RL: The Bayou, it's owned by a black and a white entrepreneurs?

RHA: No, [redacted by interviewee]. And I'm not sure if he's Hispanic or White. He's not black. And I mean I guess that's stereotypical. Winston would be like, "Wooo!" But it's very sad, even barbershops and beauty salons. People go back to New York and New Jersey, back to their communities there to get their hair done. Or even Philly, to get their hair braided. I remember when Clyde Bosket, he had a barbershop at Allentown and there was a girl that was from Africa that was there braiding hair. People would go to New York and pay [01:12:00] whatever money -- \$100, \$200 -- whatever, go to Philly. And I'm like, "But there's someone right here in town, why would you go all the way out there?" And it's very sad. And again, growing up in Bethlehem, I did not have that New York/New Jersey

experience of living there, but it's just, again, black's not beautiful. Black is not beautiful in Bethlehem. But yet it's OK to go back home but not to support here. I guess just talking about businesses, there's some retail shops. I know quite a few people that I went to school with, they've opened up shops. Like sneakers and urban clothing, and things like that. It doesn't last long.

RL: Speaking of businesses, have you ever faced any discrimination where you were treated unfairly in any type of businesses, banks, colleges, --

RHA: I feel it all the time. [01:13:00] It might not necessarily be racism, but I do think that's part of it. Being a young, black mother with four kids; for example, if I was to go out into the store and Winston's not there, I think people automatically assume that you're single, black with fatherless children. So if my kids make one little peep, or they do one thing that kids are going to do, especially with their age, I get the looks. Or people are like, "What's wrong with you?" It's so rude. Even driving. Even driving here. You have the right of way, but because of who you are, no, you have to stop. Driving around Lehigh or depending on what area or section of the [01:14:00] city you're in, you can tell.

RL: Do you feel that's because of the color of your skin or people are just like that in general?

RHA: My locs, I've been growing these since 2010. In 2009 the girl I got the braids from in Clyde Bosket's hair shop, I just mentioned the girl with the braids. She put invisible braids in my hair. Now I've always wanted locs, like this style, but I was always afraid to -- because it's not a hairstyle that if you don't like it, you just wash it out. It's something that you're committed to. So, I was like, "Meh." But I got the braids. The way she put them in my hair, I took good care of them, but I had them in for quite a few months and then this was when I was pregnant with my second son. When I was ready to take them out, the way they were put in, I had to cut them out. So my hair was this short. And I was also going through some toxic [01:15:00] relationship-type things at that point in my life. So I was like you know what, "Let's start new. Let's start now." I had no choice because I had to cut to them out. So I'm like, "Let me start my locs." So I went to Nappy by Choice, which Pay, I love Pay, and I know this is Allentown and we're talking about Bethlehem and this is Allentown, but that's the other thing too. Pay is the best loctician ever, but she kind of got that business on loc. And anybody that comes in the area, nope, everybody wants

to go to Pay or they'll go out of town. But I went to her and I've been with her ever since. It's 2019, so nine years later, I'm still going to her shop every month, even though it has been a while, kind of busy. So my point is is that this hairstyle, I think automatically people think, or I smoke weed, or they think that I'm down for the cause. No offense, but just because my hair is natural, doesn't mean you can automatically think those things. [01:16:00] But I do think it gives me street credit as a teacher. So I'll take it when I can get it. But I think that just this turns people off. I don't even need to open my mouth. I can walk into a room and it goes both ways. People will be like, "Oooooo!" Or they'll be like, "Ugh." They're like, "You don't wash your hair? You're dirty." Or it could be whatever. It's just an interesting dynamic. Because for me, I haven't always had these all my life, I'm just me. But you know people will judge you just by your hair. And black hair, woo, I've had people come up to me and be like, "Ooooo," or, "It's so rough" or "Oooh, it's oily," or so many things. Or they might be genuinely not trying be offensive, they might really just be inquisitive and ask these questions but they don't realize, that's kind of rude, the way you said that.

RL: [01:17:00] As you look back from your childhood to now, are there any positive growth that you have seen within the black community here in Bethlehem or any negativity here in Bethlehem when you look back from then to now?

RHA: I see both.

RL: You see both?

RHA: I'll start with negative and then we'll end on positive.

RL: Yeah, and then we'll end on a positive note.

RHA: With negative, I feel like a lot of people come in here thinking we're country bumpkin people because they think, "Oh, Pennsylvania's a red state." What I mean is Trump, we're a Trump state. So they automatically come in and thinking that, but they don't understand Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Allentown, we got black people here, we're not all country bumpkins, we're not all [01:18:00] Republican, straight and narrow. We're not all that way. So I think when people from Philly or anybody, even outside of Pennsylvania, when they come here, they think, "Oh, this is just this cute little country town." And then they want to come in, they want to -- almost like they feel like they're introducing us to something new. But then on the other side, they kind of are. I think that sometimes you got to know who you are serving, you got to know who you are interacting with, you need to know who people are before

you try to change them. And I think there's a lot of people that come in here and they don't want to learn about us first, because they already have this misconception in their mind. And I know it sounds like I'm talking both sides, like I'm almost hypocritical. But when you talk about the negative part, I think that sometimes there are some good things about here. If there wasn't, why is everybody moving here? [01:19:00] Do you know what I mean? There's something about here that you like if all these people are coming in.

RL: Right. Prices of the housing and the community, it's a good community to live in.

RHA: Right. And where did that come from? Well, this is the Bethlehem in me, you know the Moravians, this was religious. This was about -- they welcomed anybody into the faith. It wasn't segregated and things like that. So I don't know, it's just a weird mentality here. It's almost like a dual mentality, it's really weird. So that's the negative. The positive is that with people coming in, they are bringing newer ideas. They are bringing diversity. They are bringing fresh ideas. [Name redacted by interviewee]. I've met her and work with her with my Lady Leaders program. She works with Community Action Committee [01:20:00] of Lehigh Valley. She is originally

from New Jersey. I love her. We call each other "sis."
She's like a breath of fresh air to me. She is the
Director of Race and Injustice at the Community Action
Committee of Lehigh Valley. [Passage redacted by
interviewee.] If I had met her earlier, I would
automatically have been like, "Be quiet, go back to
Jersey." Or if certain times of my life, I probably would
have heard her and been like, "Well, why are you coming in
here thinking that we don't need this?" But I think
professionally, spiritually, emotionally, I'm prepared for
her and I see what she's trying to do, and I'm accepting of
it and I want to work together with her. [01:21:00] And
we're seeing the injustices, we're seeing the inequities
within the community. And not just the black community,
the community in general. We're seeing it and we're trying
to make that change. [Passage redacted by interviewee.]

RL: All right, great. Thank you so much, Robin for joining me
today. It was great.

END OF AUDIO FILE