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RAYAH LEVY: I am Rayah Levy here with Barbara Hemmons to talk with here for an oral history project titled "The Voices from the African Diaspora: The Black Experience of Bethlehem, PA" as part of Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. We are here at the Bethlehem Area Public Library on Monday, April 22, 2019. Barbara Hammons, thank you for your willingness to speak with me today.

BARBARA HEMMONS: You're welcome.

RL: Can you please spell and state your full name and also your date of birth?

BH: It's Barbara, B-A-R-B-A-R-A, Hemmons, H-E-M-M-O-N-S, and date of birth is 7/9/1947.

RL: Thank you. So tell me, where were you born?

BH: I was born in North Plainfield, New Jersey.

RL: And what year did you [00:01:00] and your family move to Bethlehem?

BH: It was around 1974, I believe, when my husband and my daughter and I moved here.

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

BH: Alfred Hemmons.

RL: And your daughter's name?

BH: Well, when we came here we only had the one daughter, and her name was Katrina.

RL: OK, and tell me something about your husband that you would like to share with us?

BH: My husband, was, well, we met at college. I was going to Howard. He was going to George Washington University. And he was majoring in law. And we met on Howard's campus, and he was very active in the activities at the college. It was funny because we met on a, well, [00:02:00] I was leaving campus, he was coming onto campus, and he was asking for directions. And we told him where to go to the event that he was coming to, and he says, "Oh," well, he says, "Well, could I have your phone number?" And I said, "No, I don't give my phone number out." So he says, "Well," he says, "I'd like to call you," so he got the phone number. And we started dating, and he was interested in what I was doing, which mostly was music, and we got married about a year later. And he was also a substitute teacher in the DC public school system. And I had started working in the DC public school system also, so he was at one school that I was at, and teachers got very excited about it because he's very handsome. And they got all [00:03:00] excited about it, but they kids loved him to death, and he started working with the government, and we

moved from there because the job that he was working at had expired actually. So instead of just looking for another employment there we moved up here because it was closer to my parents, and he was the first black lawyer that was hired by PP and L at the time, and we found that we were part of a whole movement of young college and technical people moving into the area at the time. And we started, you know, while he was working there and I started working at the church, and I was unable to find another teaching job up here. So we just carried on as best we could.

[00:04:00] And he, well, we ended up finding that he was the first black attorney to be accepted by the or to go on to the Lehigh County bar, which was a shock to us because when we came here there seemed to be a number of black people here and some black lawyers also, but they were just coming in to the area for a while, and they'd either go back to -- I was going to say Northampton County, but we were in Lehigh County, but they would go back to Philadelphia or wherever. But he just ended up opening up his own law office here, so he became a self-employed lawyer, and I ended up helping him.

RL: OK, and what did you do? What kind of work did you do?

BH: During that time most of what I did was just church work. I taught Sunday school. I also was the musician at the

church, and once he started his own law practice I started working with him. [00:05:00] So then that meant that I had to learn how to handle a law office, and I became a legal assistant, and I worked with him for quite a few years. Then I started working outside with another company that was in the area. And then I started privately teaching music. So most of my life has been music and church.

RL: Is your husband still alive?

BH: No, he passed away in 1997.

RL: OK. And could you describe your experience when you first moved to Bethlehem?

BH: It was different. It was different. I grew up in south central New Jersey, or mid-state, and I'd always been around, you know Afro-Americans and black people, and it was just part of [00:06:00] where we were. It was just, you know, you didn't have to look to find our people. In Washington it was similar, the same because you were around a lot of black people, nature of the city, and also a lot of professional black people. So being a professional coming here was strange to a lot of people because they had not really seen many professional black people. And it was a big difference because technically it's only about an hour, Bethlehem's only about an hour away from where I grew up, but ideologically and socially they were a little bit

behind where I grew up. So it was a matter of, you know, you just happy to find another black face walking down the street or, you know, when you're going someplace. And it was a big [00:07:00] shock to me, and it was a bigger shock to my husband because he was born in Chicago. So coming here it was like, you know, Never Never Land, and a lot of the people that were moving in at the same time kind of flocked together. And then we joined churches. We would meet together and all and be talking about the different reaction the other people here had towards you. But it was one mostly of just not being the same as where you came from.

RL: Where exactly in Bethlehem did you live?

BH: North, on the north side. We started out, actually, on west side in an apartment. We had been looking for a house, and we couldn't find anything that we liked. And we finally ended up getting a house on the northeast side of Bethlehem, and actually we're still in the same -- well, [00:08:00] family's still at the same house now. But again, you move into an area and you're the only black person in the area. So it was a shock that, like, wherever you went you were a lot of times the only black person.

RL: So what year was that?

BH: We moved into the house in about '79, I believe.

RL: OK. And what was it like raising a black family here in Bethlehem?

BH: If it hadn't been for the church it would have been extremely difficult. Because one of the reasons that I didn't get a teaching job, they just didn't believe a black person could be a teacher. I had heard once it was said that there were no qualified black teachers, and it didn't make any difference if the person had been teaching somewhere else [00:09:00] or what. They just, they weren't qualified for Bethlehem. I had signed up to substitute, and eventually I was called, but I found out the whole system here was different in that you had to contact the school and get to know the principal, and it wasn't the district calling you it was the principal that was calling you. So it depended upon how many schools you would go to to say I'm here and available. So it was a big difference for me because I had grown up with some black teachers. And then having gone to Howard University too, it was all just about, you know, what 75, 80 percent black, so here it was very strange to me and to my husband at first. And then you kind of get used to it, but again it was the acceptance of you by the greater society which just didn't seem [00:10:00] to happen because it was out of their understanding and belief, I think, that you could have that

many black professionals who knew what they were doing and were able to do the job.

RL: You said you had a daughter that was born in Jersey? How was her adjustment period here in Bethlehem?

BH: Well, my oldest daughter was born in Washington. She did all right. But again, it was a matter of just getting along with the other students that were in the classroom who happened to be white. Her interaction with other black children was through the church. And then when my youngest daughter came, was born, it was very similar to her too, but again by that time there was nine years between the two of them, so by that time there were more black people here, and so [00:11:00] she had other black students, you know, along with her part of the way through.

RL: And what are your daughter's names?

BH: Well, my oldest daughter is Katrina, and my youngest daughter is Robin.

RL: OK.

M1: (inaudible) (break in recording)

RL: OK, and what was social life like here in this area for you and your family?

BH: Most of social life came through the Masons, the Elks, again through the church, the NAACP. Those were the main

social organizations, and most everybody was participant in one of them or both.

RL: OK, and so if there was an event, like for example a dance or a birthday party, is that where you went to have the [00:12:00] celebrations?

BH: Yes, in many cases, again, again, through the churches also, the different groups would have banquets during the year, so the banquets were usually pretty large because that's where you got dressed up and went.

RL: So the black community never thought to perhaps go outside of the church or the Masons to have a celebration? And why was that?

BH: Not really until maybe a little later on because going out generally meant going to a hotel or an organization that had a large enough banquet room or whatever, and then you would get to know where you could go and get the best food and the best reception. Then again if, you know, over the years it would get out more and more and more and more, [00:13:00] and lot of the people that were working in these places also were members of the group, and so it was pretty much kind of closed, pretty closed.

RL: Right, a community.

BH: Community.



RL: So the 1970s, it was a time of transition from the tumultuous period of the 1960s. Nixon, the Nixon saga, what was the political climate like in Bethlehem around that period, that transitional period when you arrived here in Bethlehem? What was the political climate?

BH: It was funny. Coming from Washington where everything is politics, coming here, we never really bothered with politics. We'd understand, you know, what was going on in the state, what was going on in the nation, politically we never were really too involved [00:14:00] in it. My husband did get somewhat involved because he was an attorney. He would have to meet with the, you know, different lawyers and judges at the Lehigh or Northampton County. So he was more in tuned with what was going on than I was. I had a friend, well, became a friend that was from here, and I had met her at school, so she was telling me about what some of the things that were going on, and when I got here I found out that a lot of what she said was true, but it seemed like it was kind of -- everything was not yet caught up. It was like we're still back in the '60s. So it was hoping and trying to do the best that you could to try to get society moving a little bit faster to the acceptance. I did run for school board once, and everyone was extremely happy that I did that because it

afforded [00:15:00] you to get out into the public to say "we're here." And Ester Lee was one, I was saying before, that I was following because she had ran for city councilman several times, and it was again, it was a matter of staying in there to say we're here, listen to us.

RL: Did they listen? Did anything happen that impact the community?

BH: I don't think there was a big impact, no. I think it just kind of -- it just kind of wore on. Not wore off but wore on because other people moved into the area more involved in politics and involved in getting things done, so again, it was a matter of people moving into the area because most of the people that were here were, I think resigned to what was going on.

RL: Oh, so when you say other people moving into the area you mean other black folks move [00:16:00] --

BH: Well, and mostly young black folks, yes.

RL: OK, and so they got more involved politically?

BH: Yes.

RL: OK. Do you feel that institutions were welcoming, and did they treat you fairly?

BH: Some did. Some didn't. I know my husband had a hard time because there were some people who just refused to work with him. And when he went in several people left to

different departments or just completely left the organization.

RL: Excuse me, do you mind telling me what organization?

BH: Well, it was PP and L.

RL: PP and L.

BH: And they just left, completely left the organization or changed departments. Some of the secretaries had problems doing his work. He was working with the vice president, and they just out and out refused to do some of his work. So it was hard getting [00:17:00] into the companies, and then once you got in there it wasn't always easy just trying to do your job.

RL: And how about, like, for example, in the public schools and colleges and universities. Were you welcome, or did you enter into those institutions that made you feel uncomfortable?

BH: I think, well, my children with the public schools, they felt uncomfortable sometimes because they were the only black person in the classroom or the only one involved in something because I kept them involved in different things. Both of them were smart, and you know, it was a matter of you can't keep them back because they knew what they were doing. They knew what they wanted to do, and we were behind them, and so it wasn't a matter just of keeping them

out because they were [00:18:00] black. There had to be another reason. So the other people that I had talked to, I know there was another lady that, well, actually was teaching somewhere else, and they told her that she wasn't qualified to teach, but yet she was and had been teaching in Pennsylvania, and it was hard. It was very hard. Another teacher, friend I knew that was doing substitute work, and it was like, we don't want you here. So, you know, some of the parents just would rather not have her at the school. And it was very hard. Now the colleges, we never really had too, too much interaction with the colleges. I had gone to some courses at Moravian Seminary, and, you know, it seemed to be pretty well, you know receptive. Then [00:19:00] there was a program that was going on down at Lehigh that, it was called the STAR Program, which the Odis had run and started with Lehigh's blessing and their thing was to get the minority students, not just black students but minority students involved in different things and to know that they can succeed, and through different programs ahead at Lehigh they were given different techniques as to studying and so forth. And the big push was let them know that college is available and to get them into different college programs. And it was a very successful program, and then Lehigh started cutting

back on that. But they did start, you know, working with the minority students that were in the area.

RL: How about recreational facilities and restaurants?

[00:20:00]

BH: There was never really too, too much trouble with restaurants or at least that I saw or recreational facilities. I mean, generally you just went in, had dinner, got up and left. Service didn't seem to be too much difference, so.

RL: And how about police officers, landlords, and city services?

BH: Police officers were pretty fair. One thing about the Bethlehem police is they know the people that live here. So they were pretty fair and just. One of the problems that did have was with the banks because I know my husband had several problems, well, because he had to deal with many banks, but the banks kind of -- they put, I guess, tighter [00:21:00] restrictions, let me put it that way, on a lot of black people. Real estate was another problem. It wasn't so much that you could only live in certain areas. It was because the banks didn't want to give you the monies for the mortgages. So there was a problem in the business sector that way with real estate and banking.

RL: So you spoke about the Elks and NAACP. Were you involved in that? Were you a member in any of those organizations?

BH: I was a member of the NAACP for a while. I never really did much with them. I supported them where I could. In fact, my husband and, you know, family supported where we could. He more than I because a lot of the clients that he would get would be recommended to him by the NAACP [00:22:00] or one of the other groups.

RL: And who were some of the important black leaders in the community at that time? Were there any?

BH: Well, Mrs. Lee.

RL: Mrs. Lee, OK.

BH: Mrs. Esther Lee.

RL: OK.

BH: She's still in there, bless her soul. There were a couple other black attorneys, but again, through the legal system there were some restrictions. Other than that, not too many.

RL: How about black businesses? Were there black businesses?

BH: There were some black businesses and lot of black businesses were struggling. A lot of the professional businesses, the people would come in, start a business, and then they'd end up having to go somewhere else just to make a living. My husband stuck [00:23:00] it out here, but I

know that it was a lot of problems because there were people that ended up trying to tell people why are you going to that black attorney? The court's against him. Why don't you go to this white attorney down the street or my friend or somebody that I knew, and why don't you go to them? And it was hard a lot of times with getting business and keeping business.

RL: Did your family ever feel at one point that you should leave Bethlehem?

BH: Truthfully I'm going to say no, because my husband said I'm here, and he says, and I will make it, so.

RL: As a black woman living here in Bethlehem, what were some of the unique challenges that you face, whether at work, [00:24:00] in the community, or the church, were there any challenges that were unique to you that you had to overcome?

BH: There were some. They're not forefront for the simple fact that I was more acceptable to a lot of people because of my light skin color. And so I didn't have the problems that some other people did. Again, it was more trying to make sure that my daughters got what they needed and were treated like they should have been. I served on many different committees. I had no problems with that. The

biggest problem I had was trying to get into the school system when I came. [00:25:00]

RL: And speaking of churches, what church do you and your family attend?

BH: We attend the St. Paul Baptist church in Bethlehem.

RL: And where are they located?

BH: Well, it's northeast Bethlehem.

RL: OK, OK, and describe the religious life and activities for your family.

BH: It was very important to us. I was raised up in the church, and my husband was also. And so the church was very important, and our belief is very important to us and to our family. Our children were raised up in the church also, and like I said, we both worked in the church. My husband started out as a trustee. Then he went from trustee to deacon, then went from deacon he became a minister. I, again, had my music ministry, and so my kids were involved in that, and the youth [00:26:00] groups, also with the Sunday school I taught. In fact, we both taught in Sunday school. And church life was very important to us, and it became more and more important to me because that was my outlet other than working with my husband. And we had, well, along with him I became a deaconess, and recently I'm going into the ministry, so



church was a big part of our life and really kind of formed how we felt about the community and how we felt about other people also.

RL: So women played a very important role within the church at St. Paul's?

BH: Yes.

RL: And so you didn't encounter, like, certain obstacles because you were a woman even within the black church?

BH: I did in particular when I was talking about going into the ministry because I had pastors [00:27:00] that just didn't feel that women should be in the ministry. The pastor that we just had, you know, he passed away this last month, I had talked to him for couple years, and finally we came to an understanding that, you know, I could go into the ministry, so that's what I was working on at the time. So it's hard for a lot of the people in different churches, women in different churches to succeed in the ministry because they just feel that it's man's job.

RL: Are you the only woman in the ministry at St. Paul's Baptist?

BH: Yes, and the first.

RL: OK. Are there any aspiring young women currently at the church who --

BH: There's another lady that we're working with, but I don't know when that will happen, but we're working on it.

RL: So how has the church evolved over [00:28:00] the years?

BH: It has evolved quite a bit. We've come out more from the black community to go out into the larger community, and with Rev. Jackson, pastor we just lost, he was more interested in getting us out, and so then he was always out talking to people too, and people would come in just based upon his personality. So our church was growing, and we have a lot of different nationalities and all in the church. And it's growing. It's growing a lot.

RL: How about how many members would you say you have at the church?

BH: It's hard to tell. It's between 250 and 300.

RL: And when was the church established?

BH: St. Paul was started in 1925.

RL: Nineteen twenty-five, that's a very long time. [00:29:00]

BH: Yes, and it's the second youngest of the larger churches, the second youngest church. There's older churches here yet.

RL: Did other church step out of that, of St. Paul's Baptist Church?

BH: My understanding is that St. John's Baptist kind of started for the black people in the area. Then from that I believe

Second Baptist broke off from them, and, well, actually the church broke off and became a Baptist church, and then St. Paul from Second Baptist. And there's another church here, Grace Deliverance now, which broke off from St. Paul's, so we're all kind of stemmed off from the same church because all the black people were worshipping together at the one church. And then around the '80s I believe some of the, especially the people that were moving [00:30:00] into the area would start going and visiting other white churches, and they joined there, and then other churches, black churches that were outside of Bethlehem. So the churches grew, and it's just, like, one church right into the other.

RL: You know, as you look back from the 1970s and even though now we're in 2019, what were some of the positive changes that you have seen and some negative changes that you have seen that has impact you as an individual? So you moved here in the 1970s, and now here we are today? Did you see anything drastic that changed over the years? [00:31:00] Anything that pops out at you?

BH: I think we fit better into -- well, it sounds backwards, but we fit better into the general population, let me put it that way. But I think it's not only that we fit better into it, we're more accepted by them. Their eyes had to be opened as well as everybody else's. And it was

restrictions that they figured out after a period of time that just didn't need to be there. If you're going to like this person you're going to like this person no matter what their skin color is or what their religion is. And I'm finding now there's more of homogeneity, I think is the word I'm looking for. The biggest problem [00:32:00] that I see now is one that I'm afraid it's not coming from us, but it's crime. We had this great surge from New York City and north Jersey several some years back, and it seems to be everything's coming into the area that just doesn't need to be here. And I don't think it's just our area. There's a lot of different areas. But I think we're also finding a closer attitude with areas outside of this area. One of the things that shocked me when I first got here was the insulation of people. Bethlehem was here. Allentown was there, and there was one group I was in, the Bethlehem women didn't want to go to Allentown. The Allentown women didn't want to go to Bethlehem for meetings. [00:33:00] And it was so insular, and you talk to people. They had never been out of the Lehigh Valley. And I think now it's wider open because now you feel more easily accessible to Philadelphia, to New York, and to other places also. So that's good, but again, as we go out there's other things coming in that are not quite desirable.

RL: I just want to go back to the church for a second.

Politically, is the church involved politically in any way with Bethlehem or did they tend to separate church from state?

BH: There's no connection. I think the biggest connecting piece is the NAACP because the news is brought to the church, and if it's something that we can [00:34:00] do to help then that's what we do. But we don't go out looking for political things to get into.

RL: So the NAACP plays an integral part within the church?

BH: Yes.

RL: Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you would like to share with me that pops out at you, anything at all?

BH: Well, just one thing that Bethlehem is a nice place to live. If it wasn't I don't think we would have stayed. I think we have added to the betterment of the community, and I think that's what we have to look at is what has been done to better the community. And I think we've been a part of it. But Bethlehem [00:35:00] is a nice place to live in.

RL: And so you have no regrets moving to Bethlehem?

BH: I have none.

RL: Your daughter, so your daughter grew up within St. Paul's Church, am I correct?

BH: Yes.

RL: And then eventually she, because of marriage, she decided to attend another church?

BH: Right.

RL: And is that usually the case? Do you lose members that way because of marriage?

BH: Not really. That was one of the things that surprised me when we moved here is because of the closeness of Second Baptist and St. Paul, and even St. John's because we would have one of the parts of a couple, one of the people living, working in our church, and their husband or their wife would be in another church. So there were quite a few families like that, and [00:36:00] I think that's one of the reasons why the churches were so close because somebody was related in the next church. My daughter went with her husband to St. John's. He was raised, well, raised up part of the way at St. John's, but he's also a musician down there. So she's been at St. Paul's -- St. John's, I'm sorry, with her children. So they're being raised up at the Methodist Church.

RL: I have one more question. I just want to go back to the situation where you mention that they didn't want to hire

you as a teacher. Now your daughter is working within the school system. Could you us where she works?

BH: It was funny because I kept telling her, we both kept telling her be a teacher, go into teaching because my husband had taught, I had taught, just go into teaching. Go into teaching, be a good teacher. [00:37:00] "No, I don't want to go into teaching." So she went to college. She went down to Temple, and she graduated in communications. And she got a job working at KidsPeace here. And she found out she loved working with the kids. So then she decided she wanted to go into education. She wanted to teach, so that meant going back to school, so she went to Lehigh, and, well, she worked at Centennial School. And through that she went to Lehigh, and when she got out there was a job for her, and she thoroughly loves working with the kids. And she works with special education, and she's working at Liberty, and she just loves it, and she's good at it. She's very good at it.

RL: That's nice.

BH: So we're just glad that she was able to get into the system.

RL: And so even though you were unable to get into the school system, the next generation did. [00:38:00] And I noticed that the next generation of children born here in

Bethlehem, they tend to move away. They go away to college, and they don't return. Your first daughter, is she living in Bethlehem?

BH: No. She was here. She was living in Allentown for quite a few years, but she was working down near Philadelphia, and, well, she also went to Howard. And then she moved, and well, she's moving back to the area now, but she wants to be with the family. So she's moving back to the area now, but she's working in New Jersey. The biggest reason why most of the kids would leave once they would get their degree and all is there were no jobs. And there were just no place for them to come back to. And like I said, my daughter, my oldest daughter, Katrina, [00:39:00] she came back, but she had to, you know, back and forth, back and forth just to get job that she wanted to work in.

RL: OK. So I thank you. Thank you so much for joining me today, and I appreciate it very much.

BH: Well, you're welcome.

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