

The John S. and Drucie R. Chase Building Archive
bda_cba008
Ms. Vonnye Rice Gardner Oral History

- My birth name is Vonnye Margaret Rice.

My mother's name is Johnnie.

That's why she named me Vonnye.

But normally Connie, Johnnie,
Vonnice is spelled with an I,

but she put a Y in the name

V-O-N-N-Y-E to represent D8 family.

So that's how I got my name.

And I grew up at 1609 E 7th Street.

And the thing that is interesting about

where I grew up

is that to

the left of me

going West was Lillian
Brown, who was a nurse.

Next door to her was Missy Willa,

who was an educator.

Then next to her was

Ms. Hunter who took in a
lot of students from HT

and also Roosevelt
Thomas who lived upstairs

in Missy Willa's house.

Both he and his wife were all educators.

Also on the very corner was

Ms. Mays whose

daughter was an educator.

You cross the street and
you get to another educator,

Billy Nail Chambers.

Next to them were the Hertz.

The Hertz left when I was very, very small
and moved to California,
but they were educators.

You skip two houses and you
get to JD and Lily Williams.

They were also educators.

The house next to them were the Pens.

And I know of two of his children.

They were born about the 1920s.

They were both educators.

You across the street, one
house over it was Flossy Smith.

He was also an educator.

Going back the other way from
our house, two houses down

were five children, they were the Collins
and

the two daughters were also educators.

They taught at Kean.

And one of the sons was also an educator
and he eventually moved to Washington DC.

If you go back left and
you cross 7th Street,

right almost in front of the cemetery,

I believe that's your
great-grandfather's home.

And he was also an educator.

So there were a lot of
educators that lived in,

in our area there on 7th Street.

There was also those who were businessmen,
who had businesses such as Mr. Lindsay.

There were plumbers,

there were all different
types of men and women who

had businesses that were very vibrant
doing a time period when I was growing up.

Very much so.

The thing that's also interesting
about 7th Street is that

there was barely enough room
in between two cars because

the streets were so wide.

You see 7th Street now and you've got
double lanes on both sides, but it was,
everyone had huge front yards,
huge front yards.

But as time went on, I
think it was about 1958,

a little earlier.

They finally widened the street.

Yeah.

- [Interviewer] So we
have been reading about,

the obvious disparities,

in Africa American and
Mexican American communities

versus other parts of Austin around
like the resources that the city provided.

So my question for you is

in your neighborhood,

what was the condition of the roads
and like street lights, things like that.

- As best I remember it was not until

I was in

maybe

high school going into college,

that Concho was not paved.

Komal right next to the cemetery.

It was paved.

Komal was not paved.

Thomas was not paved Thomas was not paved

right up next to HT,

it was not paved.

The other thing that's
interesting about the people

that lived in that block.

The two ladies that lived on a corner
in the 1600 block were Germans.

Back behind us on 6th
Street, they were Germans.

But then there was also a mixture

just on the other side
of the railroad track,

there were some that were Germans

and some that were Swedes.

In fact, right next door to where Eve,

Eve June lived at 709
Concho, if I'm not mistaken.

Right next to them, it was a white family.

And there were other
white families that were

kind of spotted through the neighborhood.

Germans owned that building
that was on the corner of

Comel N 12th Street.

And there was still a lot of white people.

I don't know whether they were Germans

or whether they were Swedes or not,

but they still lived in that area.

But then you have a
lot of Swedes that live

just on the other side of I-35 going West.

We all played together.

There was just so far that
you could go in the block

when you heard Ms. Griffin
call would call my mother.

And everybody was trying to
find where the kids were,

but we always knew where everybody was,

but, we all played together.

There was one Hispanic family that lived

right next door to us at 16,

let me see 9, 10, 1610, 1611,

1611 I believe it was.

But it was mostly

black and a lot of Germans.

But there were some
difficult times during that.

If you leave 70 street going West,

no going East and you get to ATB.

If you look to your left,

if you could pull up in a parking lot

and look across the street,
you'll see a huge tree.

For all of that area right
there where that park is,

it used to belong to a Jewish gentleman.

And he would not allow the
parents to let their children

out of the cars because he said that

they were eating his food for free.
I will never forget that.
It's just interesting experience.
Where on the other end,
you go down town to
Maria Internet, Bone Brothers,
Scarborough was a little different,
but they were all,
many of them were Jewish businessmen.
Shnada Shnord, in fact, Shnada Shnord
hit one of the first black sales clerks
by the name of Bernice White.
Bernice lived on,
what is the name of that street
it's in.
I just can't think of the name right now.
But she was one of the first
blacks to be a salesperson
after world war II.
But my mother never had a
problem shopping with them.
And so there were just
certain places that we shopped
and certain places that we didn't.
The thing about Scarborough is that
you couldn't try on any clothes.
You couldn't try on any

clothes and good friends.

And in fact, if you

unless they changed it in
the last couple of years,

if you're going down 6th Street

and you make a left on Congress Avenue,

the first corner you come to on the right,

I think it's a CVS, it's a drug store.

That drug store sits
kind of juxtaposition,

kind of awkward because
that's the way the door was

for good friends.

And so I guess he just left it like that.

But you couldn't try on any clothes.

You could buy whatever you wanted.

But I remember going in
there with my mother,

I guess I must have
been about 10 years old.

And the lady looked at me up and down.

She looked at my mother
up and down and she says,

I don't wait on niggas, you can
go over there and ask Sally,

whatever her name was, I don't
remember the woman's name.

She'll help you.

And I never moved, and I was mad.

I was upset.

And you know how your mama or your grandma
used to pinch you and make you be quiet.

When

we got home, my mother,
because most of these pictures,

I've already turned over to
the History Center in Houston.

And I said, mom how you
showing me these pictures

of these white folks?

She said, because that's your family.

So if you hate the lady in the store,
you also hate yourself.

She said, because we all
covered in different colors.

So you cannot judge the
character of a person

by the way they look.

And that was a big lesson for me.

That's when she told me
about my great-grandfather.

My great-grandfather
came over from Ireland

with his black maid

and they landed in South Carolina,

but they had to hurry and get out of there

if family found out that they were married

and they ended up in Houston.

And they had five children,
one which was my grandmother.

And so my mother's actual
birth lineage is
Irish.

But see, I didn't know that as a child.

And so we, we tend to
learn as we get older,

a little bit about our family
and the things that happen
in our family.

My grandmother was a lot fair
in complexion than my mother,
and

my great-grandfather.

In fact my cousin, Janice
has a picture of him.

She's been saying she's going
to give me a copy of it.

But she has a picture of him.

She's telling me you know
he's a European, he's a white guy.

So, we can't judge our families.

And so we have to be a
little bit more understanding

and knowing who we are and
where our family came from

and what they had to endure.

- [Interviewer] Very true.

Let's talk about your parents' occupation
and what they did for a living.

- Well,

I am proud to say that

I am a fourth generation educator.

I am a third generation college graduate.

My father graduated from
Columbia he's Ivy League.

My mother took courses
at Columbia as well.

My mother's lineage from
college was Bishop College.

And my father went to Prairie View.

And the way he got to Prairie View,

he got to Prairie View by
way of his oldest brother

who had already gone to Prairie View.

My mother taught school in Houston,
called Blackshear School.

And my father ended up being a principal
at Blackshear school in Austin.

And that's another story to tell too.

We don't want to go into that right now,
but the name EL Blackshear has a

long history of his work
that he did in Prairie View.

Because I think they were
called principals at that time.

But

not only that,

my mother's father finished

Bishop.

He finished college.

My mother's sister finished college

and she was a reading clinician in Houston

at Bruce Elementary for many, many years.

And I have cousins.

I have second cousins (phone dings)

who are also educators.

So my grandmother taught at
a little community called

Hud Smith.

And I've been saying I
need to find out where that

little community is.

It was just right outside of Houston.

But she taught school.

My mother taught school.

My father taught school
and many uncles that I had

taught school.

On my father's side, one of his

second oldest brother was a minister

and he moved to Memphis

and he was there for many, many years.

And his wife taught school.

And so did many of my other cousins

on the right side of the family.

So we have a long lineage
of people in education.

And then

I taught,

my first real job was,

and I have to credit
Mrs. what is her name,

Mrs?

Well, it was not Van Dyke,

but she was a Van Dyke at one time,

but she had the People's Business College.

Do you know where that was?

I'm going to take you from,

I'm going to take you from Ms. P's

shop, where you have that building

and you come to the corner.

When you're right there on the corner,

you are going to look to the
left and that's where the

People's Business College used to be.

I have a picture of her
in my file somewhere

so I can make a copy and get that sent to you, so remind me.

- [Interviewer] So that's the Robertson Hill area as well?

- That's right.

- [Interviewer] Right. Okay.

Wonderful.

- Yes, it is.

- [Interviewer] Okay.

- Because right across the street, on your left hand side is where Dr. K Yearwood grew up.

She had two sisters.

And somewhere in my files,

I have a picture of both of them.

Her sister was in Connecticut and she was here in Austin.

- [Interviewer] So your father was the principal at Blackshear?

- First he was assistant principal of Gregory Town

under Mr. Parsley.

And when Mr. Parsley passed away, they gave my father the job.

And a few years later, they renamed the school Blackshear in honor of Mr. Blackshear,

who had been the principal at Prairie View.

Now also about 1936.

I'm just guessing the years right now.

I think that's when they built Campbell.

And when they built Rosewood.

What happened with the
black schools is that

if you were a principal
of a larger school,

they would also give you a smaller school.

And so daddy was also principal at

Rosewood.

As that school got larger,

some other things happened.

The city started to grow.

And so St. John, which
was a county school,

it was taken into the city.

It was part of Austin public schools then.

And so

Mr. Cary Stewart was given Rosewood

and daddy was given St. John.

So he had St. John and
he also had Blackshear.

And the thing that's interesting is that

I had talked with a few people on Facebook

and they said they don't even
call it St. John any longer.

You know where there's a, okay,

you're coming, going North
on I-35 and you get to

St. John's Avenue and
you look to the right,

and it used to be a home Depot there.

That's where St. John used to sit.

But before that,

it's set across the
street on the North side.

And so most of the people
who were in my age group

went to school there.

And then a few of them
transitioned into the new building,

which was across the street.

Why they got rid of that building?

I have no clue.

I have no clue.

Because now I think it's named Pickle

and it's just built
right around the corner.

And a lot of people just
really felt really bad about it

because nobody remembers
the name St. John,

nobody remembers a lot of
the people that taught there.

It's just really kind
of sad how you can just

blot out of an entire neighborhood,

but that's basically what has happened.

- [Interviewer] Absolutely.

My grandmother grew up at the orphanage,
the St. John's orphanage.

Which I'm learn-

So I think was also on
the North side of 35,

they said it was closer to
where Highland Mall.

So it was closer to FishVille
I guess, all that lane.

- Okay. Imma tell you exactly where it is.

- [Interviewer] Okay.

- You're coming down

I-35 and you want to make

You're coming down I-35 and

you're going to make a left turn on,

which would be 290

going into Highland Mall.

If you go to your left, you'll go to,

think they renamed it.

It used to be Lincoln Village,

that whole area right there.

And I've got a picture of it.

I just need to find it for you.

Was the orphanage.

And my friend May, May and I
went to Austin High together.

That's another story in itself.

I remember asking May, I
said May, what did they do?

What did they do with all
the graves that they dug up

when they were digging
up middle Fishville road?

She said Rice, I don't know.

She said, but they probably
just paved it over.

She said, because nobody mentioned it
until it was after the fact,

because that's where the cemetery was.

The cemetery was right in that same area.

- [Interviewer] So our
building is on Hutman?

- Hmm?

- [Interviewer] Our building is on Hutman

our temporary building, so right on,

what is that, right before 35,

right next to St. John's avenue.

So all of that was considered.

- Yeah. But what you have
to understand is that,

that area

where

let see where,

I don't know if it goes
all the way back to Reagan,

but you circle back around where
the gas company used to be.

All of that was owned

and cared for by the

Baptist Association, they
owned all their property.

They owned all that,
where Highland Mall is.

- [Interviewer] And that
would include the Fountain

and all the different.

- Exactly.

You want to know a little
bit about Blackshear?

- [Interviewer] Yes
that would be wonderful.

And all the schools that you went to.

- Well.

- [Interviewer] And the
neighborhoods (laughs).

- I never was much in the first
grade and the second grade,

because I was so anemic and so sick.

My godmother, Mrs. Duncans

would keep me most of the time.

But my first grade teacher,

her brother was called Aaron,

who was the president of Sam Houston.

You know where Sam Houston used to be.

My second grade teacher
was Ms. Baker, Anez baker.

I remember where her house was.

And a couple of doors
from that is where the

Calhouns used to live.

I did not want to go to third grade.

Mrs. Baker conned me and
gave me a nickel (laughs)

to make me go to third grade.

She was such a sweet teacher.

She was just,

it was almost motherly.

If he didn't saying something,

I mean, I don't remember the words,

but I just remember her
energy was just so kind.

And I finally went ahead
and went to third grade,

but I just wanted to stay there with her.

Just wanted to stay there with her.

Fourth grade was Ms. Thompson.

Ms. Thompson taught us everything
that we needed to know.

And did some,

we did geography, we did handwriting.

Yes, handwriting.

We learned about

science.

We did all kinds of science experiments.

You name it and we learned it.

Because one of the things
that was going on then,

and we're talking about
definitely in the fourth grade,

which kind of ended right about the time I

let me see that would've
been 70, 71, 72, 73,

maybe 73, 74.

They finally decided to
get rid of what we called

the basal reading program.

I'll explain that in a little bit, but

we would do vocabulary.

We would do phonetic analysis.

We're talking about fourth grade now.

We would do vocabulary.

We would have to write our
senses, using our words.

Then we would have to read them out loud.

Then we would do two
different kinds of questioning

that the teacher would do.

It would be recall, like,

what did Johnny do?

Where did Johnny go?

Who went with him?

Could you tell the time and
day the story took place?

And then the teacher would do,

why do you think Johnny did what he did?

Why do you think he picked those friends?

What kind of people were they?

So we were starting to do
some critical thinking.

We did even more in the fifth grade.

And our vocabulary truly enlarged.

The bottom line is,

by the time we got to junior high school,

we were ready for junior high school.

By the time we got to high school,

we were ready for college.

But the thing that is interesting

and that you have to remember,

many of my classmates who
did not go to Anderson,

they were just as smart or smarter.

Why? Because of the
teachers that they had.

They made sure that they had
everything that they needed

academically to succeed.

The thing that's interesting is that
my first year teaching,
we had a television in every room.

We had

SRA, which was the demise for me.

Which was the demise of the
actual basal reading program.

You know it might sound kind of archaic,
but it got us where we needed to be.

The other thing is that

we were introduced to the symphony,
introduced to music.

This was at Blackshear and in Kean.

Where did you go to the elementary school?

- [Interviewer] With the St. Mary's.

- You went to St. Mary's.

Do you remember, did St
Mary's have a school song?

No, not in the Catholic school.

But in the Protestant schools,
every school had a school song.

The thing that was interesting is that
those kids that went to Protestant schools
were just as smart as the ones
that went to Catholic schools
that were just as smart
as the ones that went to

Catholic schools, went to private schools
because we had a lot of
dedicated teachers.

Whether they were nuns,
or whether they were in the secular area.
It was just a different class of teacher,
much different.

The thing that's interesting is that
you don't ever want to forget the name of
Juanita Van Dyke.

I did a PowerPoint on her.

I think you all saw that at the light.

No, I don't think I showed it
during the program that we had,
but I showed it when we
did my father's birthday.

- [Interviewer] And we
interviewed Mr. Van Dyke

and he talked about, that was his mother.

Correct?

- That was his aunt.

- [Interviewer] His aunt wrote
- That was his aunt.

- [Interviewer] Is that
who wrote the school song?

- Yes.

Juanita Van Dyke,

that was his aunt?

And she sang beautifully.

And not only that, Clifton's father was a singer.

Yes. And I heard that Johnny sang as well.

Johnny was

one of his older brother.

Then there was

Mrs.

What was her name?

I can't think of her name right now.

I can see her face.

Her husband used to be the pastor at E music.

In fact, I have a picture of his funeral.

I just can't recall his name right now.

It's what 73 would do for your brain (laughs).

She wrote the song for Kean and then Bridgend D. Woody

wrote a song for Anderson,

of which I doubt they're probably using it.

I don't know. I have no clue.

It doesn't matter.

It's just it's important to remember that this was something that she did out of the goodness of her heart.

But

the thing that's interesting is that

as we're getting older,

we're starting to lose
a lot of our classmates.

But I remember the first
day that I walked into

Austin High School,

and May Hamilton and I
got some pictures of her

and us together.

She welcomed me to Austin High.

And we've been friends ever since.

We did PTA together,

we did historical commission together.

We were just good friends.

We were good friends.

- [Interviewer] Were you
one of the first classes

that was integrating at Austin?

- No. You're talking about

Libby Denard.

- [Interviewer] Mm, this would've been,

- We're talking about 58 59.

- [Interviewer] Oh, okay.

- Yeah,

I got there in 60 61.

61. Right.

But there was still a small number
and I can show you the yearbook
that I have from
my sophomore Year.

This is

Dr. Connor.

This is his daughter.

Yeah. That's his daughter.

This is Dr. Roberts.

This is Dr. Mitchell.

The Mitchell house,

and I don't know what
has happened with it,

but Lydia Hayden grandmother
originally owned that house.

And I'm happy to say that

I was able to get Lydia onto
the Historical Commission.

Yes.

But when his wife died,

when he died,

his wife went back to New York.

Now this is another doctor. This is,

you remember Miss Hammond,
that's her husband.

This is Coney, this is
the lawyer.

What is his name?
- [Interviewer] Lampkin?

- Oh, Ken Lampkins.

And then that's Everett given
to they named to park after.

But the thing that's interesting.

Do you know where he used to live?

He lived right next
door to where, he lived.

It's a small world.

And, he lived right across the street.

I mean, there were
a whole slew of very important blacks
that lived in that area, that whole area.

- [Interviewer] In what area?

- It's on San Bernard from
12th until you get to Rosewood.

And then when you go around the corner,
you've got other teachers,
you've got Ivy Van Dyke,
Clifton's mother, you have
Clifton whose grandmother worked for,
and Clifton can tell you more than I can,
worked for the governor's mansion.

And she's the one that did
the school sound production.

- [Interviewer] Well,
this has been wonderful.

And again, I know I can come
back again and again and again.

So I might have one last question
and then a closing question for you.

And you've already kind of led to this
is thinking especially about
the black shirt neighborhoods
and Robertson Hill.

What should folks know about those areas?

And I mean, you've already
spoken to all of the,
amazing people that kind of
lived on one or two streets,
right in that neighborhood, but.

- Right, because see
you had Ms. Christian.

That house is, you know what

I said if I will never, ever
forget to take another picture,
because it's a brand new building
right there on the corner.

- [Interviewer] Would
you explain where she is?

- Ms. Christian was trained
by Madam C. J. Walker.

She was trained by Madam C. J. Walker.

And I know you know who
Madam C. J. Walker is.

And many of the other young

beauticians that came after her,
she trained them.

It was a Christian beauty school.

Among my materials, I have a picture of
one of the graduation
programs with her sister.

Her sister lived in the
house on the corner,
tightly cornered from where
this doctor lived.

Right.

She went to Ebenezer.

And if you ever go into
Ebenezer go into the building,
you will see her name on the wall as
one of the major members
and contributors to
Ebenezer Baptist church.

Because that is where I grew up.

That was where I spent my childhood.

See, I remember before Ebenezer was
remodeled and rebuilt and redone.

I think I was

57, 57, 58, 56, somewhere of in there.

- [Interviewer] Will you
explain also the proximity from

your neighborhood so that the

Robinson Hill area is

like, right literally next.

- Right next door.

- [Interviewer] Next door.

It's right next door.

In fact, he lived in Robinson Hill.

He lived on, I can't think
of the name of the street.

I just can't think of it,

but it's right next to Ebenezer.

I just can't think of the name right now.

But he lived there.

Arthur D Woody lived in that neighborhood.

And in fact, Bob Ward had wanted
me to talk to the guy that

bought that house, to get some history.

Because I asked the man, I said,

do you know the name Buchi?

Didn't have a clue.

You ever heard of that name?

Buchi was the name of a,
kind of a cartoon character

back in, I think it was in Philadelphia.

Mr. D Woody used to write
an article for them.

And he was one of the first,

well he wasn't the first black,

there was one black man that
was a mayor, was not a mayor,

but on the city council,
before we had the city
council under the organization
that we have to this day.

But he ran for city council
seat back in the forties.

And he did a lot to get
people interested in voting.

Lots of times people didn't vote because
they were afraid to vote.

Now they don't vote because
they just don't know
any better.

Because we don't have our
children teaching our children
the importance of it.

That our minds are some presales.

- [Interviewer] So the
last question for you is,

for all these folks that are moving into
essentially in Austin, especially in these
particular neighborhoods
that we talked about,

what is it and what would
you want them to know?

What would you want them
to kind of think about

as they're moving into these communities?

- Well, it's kind of hard
to explain to somebody

whose brain not on the same
wavelength that you're on.

It's like talking to a dead man.

But the thing that I
want to see make happen

would be more books are written.

I want to see more information,
not just sitting inside of the,

Historical Commission or
any other organization,

sitting in your organization,
but I would like to see

some events so these things
can be shown to the public.

So they would know who came before them.

It's important we get that message out.

It's like all the material that I have.

Like if I took all of these
names away and I asked,

I would have to go back to say,

even some of my students in their fifties,

they would not even recognize these people

and know who they were
or why it was important

to even know who they were.

These were accomplished people
during a time period when

it was very difficult for black
people to even go to school,

let alone, get a doctorate degree
and start a business and start a family.

But we need to do something.

There was a book that came
out, I think it's 50, 51.

And it was kind of like
a historical book about

what was going on in the black community.

Then I think what in the
seventies or eighties,

they came up with a directory.

But no, we need pictures.

We need events.

We need, just like they did for my father.

They named a school after
my father, sold the building

and never put his name back.

My efforts fell on death ears,

but there were other people
who were surrounding me.

And especially during a time
when I got sick, in fact,

I've had three, four strokes since 19,

no since 2000.

But there were other people
that were out there that were

rooting for me.

And we were able to get this
program done last April.

But we need to do that for more people
and for more people in the community.

And that's what needs to be done.

I need to get somebody to help me
get all of these pictures organized.

Because I have a whole list,
that thick, of funeral programs.

And one of the programs,
it's about Dr. Christian,
but there's nowhere in there to note
that that was Ms. Christian's husband
and that he was a doctor in the community
and where he used to live.

Those little notes make
a world of difference.

So the children will understand, oh,
that's where so and so lived.

But that's what we need to do.

Black history needs to be done everyday.

It's kind of like when I was teaching,

I had two children in my class
that were from Switzerland.

I did a whole unit on it.

My children, some of them
didn't even know where

Switzerland was, let alone
the information that my

parents were able to provide.

And it's all about how
you relate to people.

I remember that first year,

it was about two or three
weeks into the school year.

And one of my white parents
walked in, she sat in and

I showed her where to sit.

And we were finishing
out the day and she said,

I just had to come and see you.

I said, oh, I'm glad you're here.

She said, I just found out
today that you're colored.

She said, I've been hearing about you

and what's going on in the classroom

and how much fun he's having
and what all he's learning.

She said, but I never taught my child

to respect black people.

She said, but I now have
a different point of view.

Anyway, before the
conversation ended, she said,

can I be one of the homeroom mothers?

I said, I would love for you to be.

She was one of my best homeroom mothers,

totally different.

It's all in how we deal with people.

And now we are in a different era.

The hate is back, blah,
blah, blah, blah, blah.

I'm not going to go into that because

I like to stay positive, because I think

history is important and
we need to know exactly

what's going on and whatever,

I can ever do to help,
that's what I want to do.

- [Interviewer] Thank you so much.

- You're most welcome.