

**MABEL HAMILTON – NAACP**

**Transcribed by Phyllis Greenhill**

**Spellings, etc., corrected by MH**

JM: I'm Judith Monachina here with Mabel Hamilton, and we're doing an oral history recording for the NAACP Oral History Project. We're in the *Berkshire Eagle* recording studio, so there will be a little bit of ambient noise. It's not completely soundproofed. We'll hear a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but that's okay. We just ignore it. Also in the room with us, Wendy Germain, who is doing the sound here, and Len Kates, you know, who's the liaison to the NAACP project. So we have permission to record?

MH: Yes, you do.

JM: So welcome, again. As we discussed, we are here to do an oral history, a biographical oral history, so we're going to go sort of in the order of your life, but, of course, we'll jump around, because it never works that way, but more or less we'll start at the beginning. I guess the first question is, can you tell me where you born and a little bit about your childhood?

MH: I was born in Mechanicville, New York and grew up there until age seven; returned every summer after, spent time with my Aunt Mabel and her family.

JM: You were in Mechanicville, but you were there until seven.

MH: Age seven.

JM: And where did you move to at age seven?

MH: North Adams.

JM: And you would continue to go back and visit your Aunt Mabel.

MH: Yes.

JM: So you were in North Adams, so when you went back to visit her, did you stay for the whole summer?

02:33

MH: Every summer up until the time I actually I got engaged, and then I had to go and reflect, so that was the last time.

JM: So you did your reflection at your Aunt Mabel's.

MH: Yes. Mechanicville was really a wonderful experience growing up.

JM: Can you describe that? What was wonderful? What do you remeMHer?

MH: It was diverse in the sense very few African-American families, but, nevertheless, diverse with other ethnic groups, and the neighborhood, the people were all very warm neighbors. We lived in a tenement building, and in the back was more of a courtyard with a lamppost in the center of the yard, and we used to play, and so we had Italian families, other African-American families, French families and all of that, and evidently had been pretty vivid, because I can almost remember all the names.

JM: Can you tell us some of the names, the ones you remember?

MH: Some of the names?

JM: Yes.

MH: My best friend was Rosemary Lenahan, in that building was the Boquettes and Dibellos, and then there were Italian families in other apartments there like that.

JM: So it was very diverse, ethnic.

MH: Very diverse. Rosemary and I would go as young kids, we'd go down the street—it was called Saratoga Avenue—and visit with the nuns, and we'd get cookies and hot chocolate and stuff like that.

JM: So the nuns have a convent there?

04:42

MH: Yes, they had a convent, and then it would be on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August they'd celebrate the day of Ascension, and it was like New York City with a big parade and the huge portrait of Mary, and people would go and pin money and all that kind, so it was great.

JM: What a tradition.

MH: It was.

JM: So Mechanicville, how big was it? Was it a small town or a city?

MH: I would say it was a small town. It's about maybe five to ten miles from Saratoga. It's right up in Saratoga. You know Saratoga Avenue takes one right into Saratoga, New York.

JM: That's up there. So did you start school in Mechanicville?

MH: Yes, I did.

JM: Your elementary school?

MH: Yes. I think it was school #3. They had numHers then.

JM: So you moved. Did you move during the summer or during the school year?

MH: We moved in November. That was at the passing of my grandmother in North Adams. We weren't intending to move here, but after her death my grandfather became

very ill, so we stayed, and my father moved us. Eventually my grandfather passed, my father took over his business. He had a trucking business.

JM: So when you moved to North Adams, you had to start in a new school, new neighborhood. What was that like?

MH: It was interesting. The school was Mark Hopkins, which was a teacher training school to, at the time, North Adams College.

06:44

You had a good experience. You had fun experiences there. My brother was a patrol boy, and I was always breaking lines, and he was always taking me the principal, Miss Milcham, and she was always excusing me. “Now, now, John.”

JM: So his name was John?

MH: Yes. He was named after my father.

JM: So there was Mabel and John. Who else?

MH: Siblings?

JM: Siblings, yes.

MH: Russell, he’s my oldest brother; James; and Charles, (nickname) Chuckie.

JM: So you were the only girl.

MH: Yes.

JM: Where were you in the lineup there?

MH: Middle.

JM: Middle?

MH: Two older and two younger brothers.

JM: So it must have been an experience growing up with four boys.

MH: Well, it was interesting, because, in a way, it was almost like being an only child, because my older brothers were nine years and six years older; my younger brothers were seven and five years younger.

JM: So you had your mother all to yourself.

MH: Pretty much.

07:59

JM: So you were in school in North Adams, and it was called Mark Hopkins, and do you remember anything about that, about that place, about that school? Anything jump out at you, a teacher or any new friends?

MH: Well, sometimes back in the day it was hard being in the classroom when it came to geography and history and being the only African-American child in a classroom, so we'd talk about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, books like *Little Black Sambo*, so then we'd get into Africa and all that kind of thing, and that was pretty early on, it seemed, in those school years, so that were the only times when there was any feelings being different.

JM: Being uncomfortable.

MH: Yes.

JM: So when you did read *Little Black Sambo* and things like that and discussed it in the class, is that what would happen?

MH: Everybody had to do reading portions and things like that, so it was kind of slow going through the story, and that was discomfoting.

JM: Did anyone seem to know that that was discomfoting for you?

MH: I don't think so. It was jus something that was within me, and so I never gave an expression or anything to it.

JM: But you still remeMHer it.

MH: And I was young.

JM: You were young. So you were about eight years old, nine years old?

MH: Nine, yes.

10:07

JM: Did it make you not like to go to school or anything like that? Did it make you dread it?

MH: No.

JM: It was just uncomfortable.

MH: Yes.

JM: And there was no one to really talk about it with.

MH: Uh-uh. It was enough just to have to experience it in the classroom. I didn't need to talk about it.

JM: You didn't want to talk about it.

MH: And there wasn't anybody I really could talk about it to.

JM: So outside of the classroom, were there any other African-Americans around? What was North Adams like?

MH: I would say that I was close to, there probably wasn't any more than maybe ten families, and we were dispersed at different parts of the city, but, nevertheless, there was a bond, and we were a community in our relationships with each other and all that. It was also a very warm experience, because even though in a four-block area I knew every

family, been in their homes, and it was interesting. It was fun. Coming around the corner, I was a whistling girl, and there was me and Mr. Murphy and he'd always say, "Whistling women and crowing hens all come to a bad end." \* and all that, but I had conversations with him, and there was an Englishwoman, Aunt Bea, and with her family we'd go in when we'd come from Bible study; my mother and I would stop in, and we'd have tea and that kind of thing, so it was that kind of experience in North Adams.

12:00

JM: It was kind of similar to Mechanicville in that it was a pleasant enough neighborhood, even though it wasn't African-Americans.

MH: Right.

JM: Whistling, so what kinds of things did you whistle?

MH: Songs, any song that came. I do it now too.

JM: My parents were both whistlers, and they've both sort of given it up, and it breaks my heart, because I remember hearing those great whistles when I was a kid, and they don't do it anymore.

MH: My whistling was melodic. It was songs of the time.

JM: Do you remember any of the songs?

MH: *Beautiful Dreamer*. That was probably one of the primary songs.

JM: I can't think of how that one goes.

MH: "Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me." [whistling]

JM: Now I can remember it. That is such a great image, the little girl coming around the corner whistling, the whistling girl. That's a nice image. Where were you in North Adams? I'm trying to picture now North Adams.

MH: The Big Y complex, they did that whole urban renewal project there, and I lived in that area. There's Holden Street, and there was a little street called Sperry Avenue that went right off of that, and then it was Elm Street.

JM: And that's not there anymore. Holden's still there.

MH: Holden Street is still there, yes.

13:55

JM: So what was the name of the trucking company?

MH: Hoover.

JM: Hoover. Your grandfather?

MH: That was my grandfather.

JM: Did your father also have that?

MH: No. He changed to John Amos & Son.

JM: And was that your last name?

MH: Yes.

JM: Mable Amos.

MH: Yes. Dorothy Amos, my sister-in-law.

JM: You want to tell us about Dorothy Amos, just for the record here, for the recorder? Who's Dorothy Amos?

MH: Dorothy Amos, she was the founder of Early Childhood Development Center, ECDC as they called it, at the time. It was up on the hill on Francis Avenue.

JM: That name is around, Dorothy Amos.

MH: Yes. The park is named Dorothy Amos Park.

JM: And that was your husband's sister.



MH: No. It's my brother's wife.

JM: Your brother's wife, of course, right, because that was your name, Amos.

Sorry about that. So it became John Amos & Son.

MH: Yes.

JM: So did your brothers also go into it?

15:16

MH: They worked with my father. It was hard. It was a trucking company, and they used to have to deliver coal, so the winters were horrific, because you'd have to unthaw it and all, and went to places like Sprague's, and then various homes and all. They delivered coal in the winter, and then did cleanup, cleaning in the summer.

JM: Hard labor.

MH: Yes, and so my older brother, at 18 he went into the service, so he was in the Second World War, did the Pacific thing.

JM: So now did you stay in North Adams for a while?

MH: No. I stayed in North Adams until I got married.

JM: So you did stay there. You went through all of school in North Adams.

MH: I went to Drury High School, graduated from Drury High School.

JM: From Drury High School.

MH: Also my mother and her brother, Charles, had graduated from Drury High School.

JM: So they were coming back, of course, because ..... [ph].

MH: They grew up, yes.

JM: So your family really was North Adams as well as Mechanicville.

MH: Yes. My mother, after she got married, they lived there. She met my father there, and they were married, but they got married in North Adams. She grew up in North Adams.

JM: Did you go to a church there? You mentioned a Bible study.

MH: In North Adams?

16:45

JM: Yes.

MH: Yes, First Baptist.

JM: First Baptist. So you went to Bible study as a kid.

MH: Uh-huh, and choirs and stuff like that.

JM: And choirs. So what was the First Baptist Church like? Is it still there?

MH: Oh, yes.

JM: Is it one of those spires?

MH: Uh-huh, right on Main Street.

JM: On Main Street. I'm trying to place it, because I know when you drive into that city, you see those beautiful spires.

MH: You know where the library is?

JM: Yes.

MH: It's right there on that corner. If you're going up to the library, it's on the left right around the monument.

JM: Oh, sure, of course. So it's near Eagle Street.

MH: Yes, on the corner of Eagle.

JM: That's one of the big ones. So did that church have a certain ethnic makeup, because I remember the churches in North Adams? There was a French one and a Polish one.

MH: The Congregational Church is across, the Methodist Church, they're all in that—those three were in that specific area.

JM: And I guess one just came down. They had to take the steeple off of one of the churches; not yours.

17:59

MH: On St. Francis, that was the Catholic Church.

JM: So there were a lot of churches in North Adams.

MH: Oh, yes.

JM: In a small area.

MH: Yes, in a small area.

JM: So when you're in high school, did you know what you were going to do after high school? What were you thinking you were going to do after high school?

MH: I don't know. Well, when I look back on it now, I think we were kind of programmed, in the sense that I'm talking my own experience as an African-American student, I dreamed about college, because that's what I did, at the time and moving into the civics program. At that time, it was right beneath college prep and \* general, and so when I look back on that, before I had grades or before any of those kinds of experiences, we were encouraged that was where we had to go.

JM: So you found that the other African-Americans in the city were also in that civics level, not in the college prep.

MH: I believe so, yes, because there weren't many of us who went to college; only the athletes.

JM: Only the athletes. So you were thinking you wanted to go to college, but you weren't sort of encouraged. Is that what you're saying?

MH: Yes, and plus even though my father had his own business, we didn't have that kind of money.

20:04

I did have a choice to go to a music school in Pennsylvania, but, at that time, my husband and I were seeing each other through high school, actually graduated on the same day, him in Pittsfield, Pittsfield High School, and me from Drury, so young conversation, we got engaged before he went into the service, and so it took a whole different direction.

JM: So you were connected with this person when you graduated high school.

MH: Yes, from the time we were 15.

JM: Wow. That's pretty impressive.

MH: Yes, but it didn't last. It lasted 16 years.

JM: Well, 16 years is a long time.

MH: Of marriage and years before.

JM: So you were in high school, he was in high school, and then he was going off to the service.

MH: He went into the service two weeks after graduation.

JM: Where did he go?

MH: He went to Korea.

JM: What was the year of graduation?

MH: Oh, Lord, I graduated in 1950.

JM: So that was the Korean War, and he went to Korea.

MH: Yes, he did, Air Force, so when I left North Adams is when I got married, and we went to Mitchell Air Force Base in New York. He was still in the service.

21:54

JM: So now when you decided to get married, I think you mentioned earlier in the interview you went over to your aunt's.

MH: In Mechanicville.

JM: So what did you do over there? Did you talk with them about this?

MH: Her?

JM: Yes, Mable.

MH: Yes. It was my aunt, and there were other families that I was very, very connected to.

JM: And you were making this big decision, and you wanted to talk with your aunt? Mrs. Wicks.

MH: Yes. I called her Wicksie [ph]. Her name was Mrs. Wicks, but I called her Wicksie, and she was my, I would say, spiritual mother, because she's the one that used to take me to the black church in Troy, New York. We'd go there, and we'd be there Sunday all day long, and at her house, that's where we sang and sang and sang. We would have days we'd go there during the summer, and we would be singing all day long. Her two daughters were my best friends there.

JM: What were their names, the two daughters?

MH: Ernestine and Louise.

JM: And the last name was?

MH: Wicks.

JM: And you would sing all day.

23:12

MH: We would sing. We would sing, so that was a lot of fun, the foundation of my spiritual life.

JM: And it's so interesting that you can identify that as the foundation, isn't it?

MH: Yes.

JM: That you can sort of identify that's what it is, and it was singing.

MH: First time I ever went to a church, ever saw a baptism, and I was awestruck in Troy, because it was a big church, and the baptism up close was like—it was heavy, made heavy impressions to my life.

JM: So the big church and the ritual of it.

MH: Yes.

JM: What kind of baptism? Was it a child or an adult?

MH: Adult children.

JM: Was there water?

MH: Yes. They had the pool.

JM: That would make an impression.

MH: I still can see it. It's very vivid in my mind.

JM: And the singing, and so you were thinking you wanted to do some singing as a career.

MH: Yes.

JM: So did you keep singing?

MH: Yes, until a couple of years when I got congestive heart failure and lung stuff, so it's changed my voice and all of that significantly.

24:35

JM: And your stamina maybe too a little bit, the breathing?

MH: Yes. You notice I have the cough.

JM: So the singing really requires a lot of breath, doesn't it?

MH: Yes, it does.

JM: So did you learn to sing all on your own?

MH: Well, no, I'd say from 14 to—I went to—his name was Ralph Domin, and he was the organist and choir director at First Congregational Church in North Adams. Actually, he sang at my wedding.

JM: What did he sing? Do you remember?

MH: What was it? I think it was *Because*.

JM: *Because*.

MH: "Because I come to you, naught save love." That was the big song, at that time.

JM: You know it, Lenny?

MH: "Because you come to me," Mario Lanza, he sang it in the movie.

JM: Do you think that music was more prevalent as a social thing in those days? I'm thinking of my parents who are about your age and songs were such an important

part of their life, their courtship. They used to sing in the car. When they were driving they would sing.

MH: Our family sang together even after a funeral service, whatever; not only my uncle's people related to the Wickses, their son-in-law and all that, and people, we'd get together and sing.

26:34

JM: What a nice way to get together.

MH: It was.

JM: Especially in grief and happy and sad.

MH: Yes, because everybody would get into the harmony and all of that.

JM: So you're married now, and your in Mitchell Air Force Base. Where is Mitchell Air Force Base?

MH: Long Island.

JM: Long Island. How long were you there?

MH: About two-and-a-half years.

JM: So did you live on the base?

MH: Initially, we lived with a family. We moved in with a family there. Then we moved down to the base.

JM: What was that like, living on a base?

MH: Airplanes going over, and the apartments were paper thin and all that.

JM: Noisy.

MH: But it was interesting just meeting people. They were more like rowhouses, and meeting people from all over was interesting. So it was somewhat overwhelming



coming from North Adams, because it was my first experience just seeing all of these folks of color. I remember we took a bus and just arriving at the bus station. Where did these people all come from?

28:14

JM: So arriving at the bus station out there or in the city? How did you get there? You took the bus in the city, and then out?

MH: Yes, out to Long Island.

JM: So on the Air Force base it was also a lot of people of color as well?

MH: Oh, yes.

JM: So did that feel good?

MH: Yes, it did. It was a very different experience. It was people from Georgia, just various places, and it was also very diverse too.

JM: So now there's more African-Americans.

MH: Uh-huh.

JM: And also all different kinds of people.

MH: Yes.

JM: Did you find that people were more grouped together when there were more?

No? Still integrated.

MH: No, not right there, no. There was a long period of adjustment, and then I was pregnant, and I got caught up with being pregnant, and then birth and all that kind of thing, and then my husband got ill while he was—he got diabetes seriously. When he was discharged, it was on a medical basis, so it was those kind of things. I was married at 20, so this was happening when I was 21, 22.

JM: It was a lot.

MH: Yes.

29:53

JM: So you had a baby out there.

MH: Uh-huh.

JM: And what was the name of that child?

MH: Carlton.

JM: Carlton.

MH: Named after his father.

JM: So you just had one child during that two-and-a-half years.

MH: Yes.

JM: So he didn't have to go to school there or anything. That was after. So then where did you go after the Air Force?

MH: North Adams.

JM: You went back to North Adams.

MH: Yes.

JM: You had your child to take care of, and your husband, did he have to go to work?

MH: Well, yes. He hadn't really wanted to be in that area, to stay in that area, but, nevertheless, the jobs weren't coming through, and so I had worked at Sprague Electric Company right before I got married and knew the resource person there, and so I had made the call, and he started. He got the job as Sprague's, and then he also worked at the 1896 House, and from there he went into Lamb printing company.

JM: So he had wanted to stay out on Long Island?

MH: Yes. He always liked that area.

31:18

JM: But he got a job in North Adams.

MH: Yes, and we stayed in North Adams for a while; then we moved to Williamstown.

JM: So, meanwhile, did you have more children? When did your second one come along?

MH: Yes, two-and-a-half years later, and then a year later, and then two years later.

JM: You had a family.

MH: Five.

JM: That's nice. They have each other.

MH: Yes.

JM: So what are their names?

MH: My children?

JM: Yes. Carlton, C.J.

MH: Carlton, Curtis, Valerie, Robert, Julie.

JM: Valerie, is she third?

MH: Yes.

JM: Just like you were, the girl, the third and the girl.

MH: Uh-huh. Valerie, Robert, and Julie.

JM: Were you in North Adams for all of these?

MH: Yes.

JM: So they started going to school in North Adams then.

32:25

MH: Oh, yes, until we moved to Williamstown.

JM: And then they went to school in Williamstown.

MH: In Williamstown.

JM: So what was the difference between North Adams and Williamstown? How did you feel differently or the same, or was it the same essentially?

MH: It was pretty much the same. In North Adams, I had various mentors, because I sang. Various people would have teas. Back in the day they had teas, different organizations, just some groups of people, and also politically there was a woman named Julia, I believe her name was Levison White prior to her getting married again, so she introduced me to a lot. Adele Addison was a very famous opera singer. North Adams was one thing. Williamstown was a cultural experience, so we'd go up there for the lectures. I saw Martin Luther King in Williamstown.

JM: You did?

MH: In Williamstown. Adele Addison became a very famous opera singer. This is before she got that big, and so would go to Chapin Hall and various concerts and stuff like that, so that was the difference in the experience.

JM: So right next door, but you had Williams College and all of that.

MH: Yes, and then Julia, she's the one that introduced me. I used to help register voters when they'd come in and do that kind of thing, but that was before I was married.

JM: Now you talked about the teas and singing, so did they sing at the teas? Did you sing at the teas?

MH: I was a soloist.

34:19

JM: You were a soloist. So they would have you come in and sing.

MH: Uh-huh.

JM: They would ask you to come and sing.

MH: They'd invite me.

JM: That was brave.

MH: It was kind of \* experience. They were interesting.

JM: Did they ask you what they wanted you to sing, or did they allow you to just come and sing?

MH: I sang whatever.

JM: Sang whatever. Did you have a favorite thing that you liked to sing?

MH: At the time, it's more towards spiritual, deeper. It was all pretty much religious music.

JM: So we're talking about the '60s, right? Are we talking about the '60s, the '50 and the '60s, with the teas?

MH: With the teas, it was high school.

JM: Oh, that was in high school, but the registering to vote, that was in high school too?

MH: Yes, started there.

JM: So you were active. You were active as a young person.

MH: Yes. Thinking back on it, yes, I was, and in church very active, did counseling as a junior counselor, counselor-in-training at Camp Ashmere.

JM: In Hinsdale, right?

35:49

MH: Uh-huh.

JM: So you were a counselor at camp.

MH: Junior counselor.

JM: Junior counselor. You were too young to be a real counselor, or a senior counselor, whatever they called them.

MH: Yes.

JM: So then when you got married, you're in North Adams and you move to Williamstown. Is that when you heard Martin Luther King speak?

MH: In Williamstown, yes.

JM: When you were living in Williamstown. So when would that have been? Do you remember when about that would have been?

MH: No. Goodness gracious.

JM: I heard that he spoke somewhere here, but I didn't know it was in Williamstown.

MH: Yes, Williams College. What year was that? Oh, Lord, I don't know. I can't remember.

JM: That's okay. We can always find out. We can always look it up. We know that it was when you lived there, so it was after you were married and all that. So you were very aware of Martin Luther King then, what he was doing.

MH: Oh, yes. That was a good experience. That opened up my mind—I began to realize the cultural differences and prejudism, and all of that. First, when *Ebony*

magazine came out and you'd read various stories, and when I realized what was happening, I never could really understand why schools wanted to integrate, because being in the situation, in that sense, that isolation, and then seeing the colleges down south, black colleges, schools with cheerleaders and people in the whole social aspect and all of this.

37:51

There was a whole other level of black society, all of that. It just opened up my mind to the differences that were going on in the world, in the country.

JM: So in an "integrated" place, you're more isolated.

MH: Yes.

JM: In a segregated place, you're more with—

MH: Their restaurants, their social life, it was all okay.

JM: So did you actually go down south and see this, or did you see it on television and magazines and stuff like that?

MH: Television and magazines.

JM: So *Ebony* magazine was a new thing.

MH: Yes. When it came out it was very enlightening.

JM: And how did that awaken you, in some way?

MH: I also have to say, okay, I was a reader, and all through high school I would read Frank Yerby books, which all dealt with slavery and the aspects of the things that happened with slaves and all and that experience, the separation of families, that experience in terms of being a black African man, and so that was the initial beginning, but then when *Ebony* came out, it was a whole different concept, of course, because it

was the social experience within the black community and all the glamour, Dorothy Dandridge and Lena Horne.

39:34

JM: So was the political awakening, because of the history? But then there's social awakening, because of the pride. Is that what you would say? How would you put it?

MH: I would say I don't think I became aware until those [ph] began happening, and even in terms of the images of what was happening during the Civil Rights Movement, I was a young married then, but, nevertheless, that's, I guess, when you become more \*. When I moved to Pittsfield, that was my commitment was to the community and making a difference (keeping the dream alive).

JM: So when did you move to Pittsfield?

MH: In 1968.

JM: So when Martin Luther King was—

MH: Oh, yes, when he died, and I think the hardest times, the hardest times were when the bombing of the church in Alabama, the four little girls. Well, I grieved just as much as anybody else when Kennedy was shot and killed and all that. Actually, I was carrying my fifth child, going on my way to the doctor when the news came over that he'd been murdered, so I think with the series of murders and all of that kind of thing, a great impact. Then that was the time of my divorce, and I had to decide, well, I couldn't do it in Williamstown, because when he died it was like fell on my knees, and it was like I've got to do something to make a difference, and so I made a decision to move to Pittsfield.

JM: And what was it about moving to Pittsfield? Why did you decide to do that?



MH: First of all, I had to move. I had to move, because the house was sold. It wasn't my house. It was a rented house, and it was sold, and so I had to leave, and I had five children and people didn't want five children, and let alone children of color or families of color.

42:08

So that was when I began to feel the real impact of bigotry, race, prejudice, whatever you want to call it.

JM: So you couldn't find a place to live.

MH: Couldn't find a place to live, and I became involved with Action for Opportunity, because Reverend Durant was working there, and I had to go to him, decided to get some help. There was a barber shop on Dewey Avenue, and my father was there all the time. Mr. Oakley had the barber shop, and he had a house that sat in the back of the barber shop, so we went to this house on Dewey Avenue that sat in the back on the river \*, and for my kids, because they used to always be kind of awed when they'd come down for haircuts, it was like, oh, another world and all that, and it became different [ph].

JM: Suddenly, they're part of it.

MH: They're part of it. So all of those events had an impact on my decision, and also thinking about the children, because I knew there was a Boys' Club, and I knew there was a Girls' Club, but I know I was single, and I was going to have to find some way to be able to manage five kids. And, at the time, I was working at Sprague's, and it got difficult, because I had to be there for 7:00, and my oldest child was about 14 then and had to take responsibility when I had to leave early in the morning.

JM: That's tough.

43:46

MH: And it didn't last too long in terms of Sprague's, because my mother had come to babysit for me. I had to go in the hospital, and she came to babysit, fell down my stairs and was in rehab six months here in Pittsfield, the stairs in the house, so my whole life changed.

JM: Oh, my goodness. That was a tough, tough time.

MH: It was.

JM: So you made this big decision: you're going to take the bull by the horns, as they say, and move your family.

MH: We were in Pittsfield when all that happened.

JM: So you're already in Pittsfield when that happened.

MH: Yes.

JM: So was she in Berkshire Medical Center or Pittsfield General or whatever it was called then?

MH: Yes, whatever it was called, at the time.

JM: So you had another responsibility.

MH: Yes.

JM: Your mom.

MH: But I found Pittsfield very supportive, because even, at that time, when I was in the hospital, there was Morningside Baptist Church, and my oldest son, they had a camp up in Maine, and he was one of the students—I guess they took them from

Berkshire County—who was given a scholarship to that camp, and the Turners were the pastors at Morningside Baptist Church, and they became involved.

45:23

They were right there during that period when my mother fell and all that, made sure he got to camp and anything they could do to help. It was Laddie Turner. They called her Laddie Turner.

JM: So many things you've mentioned here. So the Morningside Baptist, and Reverend Durant, so you went to Reverend Durant.

MH: At AFO, Action for Opportunity.

JM: Can you talk about what that was, Action for Opportunity?

MH: I think it was an overseer agency for various community organizations. We had OCA, Organization Community Action. It was on Dewey Avenue. They were—how do I want to put it—Head Start, Action for Opportunity, they were all very connected organizations. They had the three community action centers in Morningside and North End, and so they were very politically active, very supportive of the community needs, people needing clothing, stuff like that, a lot of what the Christian Center was doing after and all of that.

JM: So the community center was a little bit later than that, right?

MH: Oh, yes, the Christian Center.

JM: I mean, the Christian Center.

MH: The Christian Center listed [ph] first, because even when I was a student going to Camp Ashmere, the Christian Center existed long before the Community Action.

JM: So it sounds like the city had a lot of this network of community—

MH: Organizations, yes.

47:30

JM: That were helpful.

MH: Yes.

JM: And not to mention the church and the churches.

MH: Right.

JM: So did you become a member of a church when you moved to Pittsfield?

MH: Off and on I went to the First Baptist, because I had to come down here and sang at weddings and stuff like that, but I didn't join a church until I joined Price Memorial where I'm at today, the Zion Church.

JM: So you sang at weddings too.

MH: Weddings, funerals, and then church and choir.

JM: So when did you actually join the church? When would you say, when your children—

MH: Around '72, 1972. I had started to be influenced to go into the Muslims, Black Muslims, and they spoke so much about Jesus while recruiting. They spoke so much about that, and so rather than go to the revolutionary way, I decided to go the love way.

JM: Interesting. So where were the Black Muslim—was there an actual church in Pittsfield?

MH: No. They had a mosque in Springfield.

JM: In Springfield, and so you were playing with that.

MH: Considering playing with that.

JM: It looked good.

MH: I liked the independence. At that time, it was towards become independent, opening various stores, doing all of that, economic-based.

49:17

JM: Empowerment.

MH: Yes, empowerment.

JM: Is that when you decided to join the AME Zion instead, around that time?

MH: Yes, after that time. It was the more I got involved in the church.

JM: What was it like with five children, a single mom, and did you have to work?

Did you work?

MH: That was the best thing in my life. Jean Hunter was the director of Head Start, at the time, and she's my mentor. She's passed now, but she was my mentor, and so it was through there I became—I started off just as a parent and going to sessions that they would have for parents and all that, and then I became a parent advisory council chairperson, and she used to take me—I got on one of the commissions, poverty commissions for Governor Sargent on a local basis, and she took me to Boston, and then as the chairperson initiating the follow-through program in the public school system, which was an extension of Head Start in public schools to grade 3.

In doing that, I took my first airplane trip to Washington when we had to do some negotiating down there, because Congressman Conte was very much a part of the implementation of follow-through, and so that was where I got my real work experience, and it just opened the world to me. So with the five children, at that time, if I had to travel, do anything like that, my parents still came. My parents were always there.

JM: That's nice. So you started doing things for Head Start, advocacy for the follow-through program, things like that.

51:42

MH: Right, and then I was hired to work as a parent coordinator for the follow-through program.

JM: So you would interact with the parents. What did you do with the parents?

MH: Involved the parents, being the parents. When they first started bringing in paraprofessionals, they would come into the classroom, and I recruited them to come to the classroom. They would work there and receive a stipend for doing so and opening up their minds to education in a different way.

JM: So you really got the parents involved in education.

MH: And we got involved politically, politically involved. We had the government contracts. This is what you must do, so we went through some times there, rebellion in there [ph]. They had the major walkout, at that time, at Taconic High School.

JM: Teachers?

MH: No, kids.

JM: Kids?

MH: Poured out of Taconic, poured out of Crosby.

JM: And what were they pouring out for?

MH: There was an incident that we were reacting to at Taconic between the teachers and students. A student was expelled, and they got into a verbal confrontation, but both people were doing the same thing, cursing and all that, but the student got expelled, and

so we felt it was wrong. It wasn't supposed to turn out the way that it did in terms of the two schools pouring out of there like that.

53:31

I had set up a meeting with Tom Roach [ph]. He was one of the assistant superintendents, and there was only supposed to be about 25 students, and we'd sit down and have this conversation, but it took a twist.

JM: You never know where it's going to apparently.

MH: We \* and got the call. \* coming out of \* West Street, and there they were, but they were in perfect order, and so we had a meeting on the City Hall steps and all.

JM: So you had the support of the students, for sure.

MH: Well, the students were there, but the problem was \* conflict, because I was working for the school department, and yet we were reacting as parents, but if you can't advocate for yourself, how can you advocate for others? So it came from that perspective.

JM: And how did it turn out?

MH: It turned out they were out for quite a while, and maybe a week or so. Also we were supposed to be getting support from UMass, and they were organizers out of Action for Opportunity, and when it came down to what really happened in the end, it became, I believe, the base for the alternate school, because we were talking, at that time, and the cities, they were having schools starting out of storefronts and all of that kind of thing, and so that was going to be the hope, that we would start another school system, and they didn't materialize.

JM: But there was an alternate school for a while.

MH: There was an alternate school.

55:25

JM: I forgot about that. Where was that?

MH: That was a long time—I think it was Hibbart, over there.

JM: I had completely forgotten that.

MH: Hibbart Avenue, is it?

JM: I'm not really sure. I can't even picture where it was. I may not have ever been there.

MH: It's one of those areas between East Street and Elm. I think it was Hibbart.

JM: Hubbard? Hibbart? I don't know. Can you picture it? I can't picture it. So you were really involved in a lot of local activism too.

MH: Yes.

JM: As a young person, as a young woman, a young parent.

MH: Oh, yes. We advocated for people who were getting evicted. One time it was the Afro-American Society that existed, at the time, and, at that time, we did things like we did two community productions two years in a row at Berkshire Theater Festival, *Mirrors* [ph] *Black* and *People of the Sun*, and we got buses and organized transportation so people could get down there. It got good writeups too from Milton Bass [ph].

JM: So the BTF had these two productions.

MH: Uh-huh, and were nice to them and took over City Hall one time when a family was being evicted, and they had people letting down ropes and pulling up food. I've got to go home to my kids. There was a lot of activity back then. That was when gather-in [ph] first began, initially began.



JM: So you remember the first gather-ins.

57:21

MH: It was fantastic.

JM: Where was it?

MH: \*

JM: Same?

MH: Durant Park now.

JM: Do you remember what it was like, the first one?

MH: It was a festival, all kinds of vendors, artists, musicians, professional musicians in a big tent. It was a lot bigger than it is now, because they had vendors coming from New York State, various places, Springfield, all over, and it was really fantastic.

JM: Now were you still singing? Did you sing at any of these events, at the gather-in?

MH: At the gather-in events, with the choirs, yes, and all that.

JM: So they would sing inside the tent.

MH: Local, on the outside stage, when the city finally got the outside stage. That was years later, I think.

JM: It sounds like fun.

MH: It was.

JM: And, meanwhile, your kids are—

MH: They're growing up, and then the advantages of that was in Williamstown as a child I never conceived any of my children going to college, never conceived it at all, but one graduated from Wesleyan. Simon's Rock, It's Harvard; Fletcher School of Law and

Diplomacy. I'd have to see his obituary to remember, and then my son, Bobby, graduated from Middlebury, and my daughter Valerie graduated from UMass.

59:12

JM: They were really academically-oriented, weren't they? Those are some tough schools to get into.

MH: My oldest son started off through Simon's Rock.

JM: Oh, really?

MH: Yes, but that was all coming out of the activism and all that that was going on. The community was working together in various ways. At OCA, they would connect children with the private school where you can go horseback riding.

JM: Which one? In Pittsfield?

MH: Yes.

JM: There's Miss Hall's. Whatever private school?

MH: I think it was Miss Hall's. I think it was Miss Hall's.

JM: So interesting, so there was some real activity around helping kids.

MH: There was that, but also, at that time, it was because any incidents that happened, especially with teenagers, once Taconic was established, then you had the war on between Pittsfield High School and Taconic, and so they had major confrontations after football games and stuff like that, and so you were always in the middle having to work those situations, whatever, and kids getting involved and getting in trouble, because events that would occur, at that time.

JM: Amazing how just separate them into two different schools and you've got problems.

MH: Yes, because you never had any incidents, any racial incidents or anything tagged that way when my husband and Don Morehead, when they graduated from Pittsfield High School, when they went to Pittsfield High School. You never heard those kind of confrontations going on.

JM: So now just thinking about it really, the Pittsfield High School, Taconic High School demographic, was it originally based on where you lived?

MH: Yes, I think.

JM: So it was geographic.

MH: Yes.

JM: So did Taconic end up being more African-American than Pittsfield, or was it pretty much even?

MH: No, because the percentage of African-Americans in Pittsfield is still very small. You know that was at the times of James Brown, *I'm Black and I'm Proud*, and that was when everything that was coming out of the Civil Rights Movement was being—with these kids, all of a sudden, they were somebody big. They were somebody, and they weren't taking any mess from anybody any kind of way, that kind of thing, and so it got to be very aggressive.

JM: Interesting you saw the shift.

MH: Yes. The difference was in Pittsfield. I've never lived in a neighborhood in Pittsfield like I did in North Adams, so reflecting on all this was really making a contrast in community, growing up there, and there's more of a division, even though the population was probably the same.

JM: So there was more of a division in which town?

01:02:47

MH: Pittsfield.

JM: In Pittsfield, even though the percentages might be the same, you felt more connected to other—

MH: Yes. I was always grateful for that, because I could always see both sides of the question.

JM: So in Pittsfield, there was less integration.

MH: Yes.

JM: See, we didn't have a community like you had in Pittsfield, where Western Mass. is now, which used to be Deering Street, Mill [ph] Street area, which was really a concentrated area, but African-American, and on Dewey Avenue and John Street and all, but then I think there was the moving on again that began to disperse people, so you have the heavy population of African-Americans, more of a population, I should say, in the Morningside area now than you did before. Other communities changed drastically. We had the Spanish population, African population, Caribbean population; very diverse.

My first experience of that was in Chicago when I went, and it was the first time I ever went there, and it was amazing to see that concentration of people. I mean, you'd see people who were Caucasian, but they weren't talking the same. They weren't acting necessarily the same.

JM: So the diversity of people who are Caucasian as well.

MH: Yes.

JM: I remember someone saying it to me once. He's a Caribbean professor at BCC, and he's from the Caribbean, and he says, "There's a lot of diversity here. It's just there's a lot of white diversity," and I really hadn't thought of it. It's interesting.

01:04:52

MH: It is. When I'm talking about Mechanicville, I can look back from my experiences later on in life to see the diversity that was there, how people could be together in such personalized relationships. You associate with somebody on the job and all that.

JM: You were in each other's homes.

MH: Homes and all of that.

JM: Naturally coming and going, especially with your best friend and your little friend.

MH: Yes, and all that.

JM: So do you think that there's less of that now, or do you think that was just the place? In Mechanicville, it was one thing; in North Adams it was one thing; and in Pittsfield, you had a totally different experience.

MH: Totally different experience, yes.

JM: Did you get involved with the NAACP?

MH: I had been involved with the NAACP back in the day, but then it kind of dissolved and went away. I remember now, but since Willie Singleton and Dennis and them came together, it was practically nonexistent for years. If you had anything you had to deal with, you'd probably have to go through Springfield or something.

JM: So how do you see the role of the NAACP in someone's life? If you were moving into Pittsfield now, would that have a role? Would you go to them?

01:06:39

MH: Back with the Black Panthers and all that was going down, Southern Christian Leadership, all these other organizations, and people were down in the NAACP until you realized it's historically the role that they played, and so any legal aspects of getting things done for African-Americans is you had to come to that place. Like I said, I was looking at the Black Muslims, so, at that time, no, I wasn't thinking NAACP.

JM: Of course.

MH: Coming through and being able to look back what the real impacts were and just realizing that life is a cycle, and it goes around and around.

JM: I'm so glad you talked about that, because the split between the Southern Christian Leadership and the NAACP, I know there was this kind of disagreement about how to proceed.

MH: How to proceed, and then Stokely Carmichael, it was a lot of different ways to perceive what was going on.

JM: Very dynamic.

MH: It was. It was, but very alive.

JM: Yes. So how would you describe the time now that we're living in as compared to that dynamic, alive time?

MH: Alive time? How would I compare it?

JM: You know with the influx of drugs in the community, I can only remember when it came into Pittsfield and came into the area, and when I look back at the story

behind the Black Panthers and what they were doing in the community and the activism and feeding people and dealing politically and knowing how to be able to react to police actions and all that kind of thing, I don't know how they disappeared, but we know it was the violence, people being killed off and all of that, and so it changed considerably.

01:09:29

JM: So the drugs and the disappearance of the activist groups that were really there, so, at the same time, did that sort of seem to happen around?

MH: You don't see the organizing going on. Back when it was Organization Community Action and AFO, we were being trained by Saul Alinsky agents, who also trained Obama, and they would send out their instructors and all from Chicago to AFO and all that, and so the experience was just—even [ph] community organization, how to organize a community.

JM: And nobody is doing that now.

MH: Back to the drug influx that affected our kids' generation, if you tried to leave a legacy, the drugs just wiped it out again.

JM: You're not the first person to say that. It seems like that seems to be really on the hearts of people.

MH: When you see the Black Panthers' story, how the (ECFBI) linked up with the cartel—that's what they called them, the mafia or whatever they called them, at the time and all of that—and poured it into the communities. I believe that happened. That was a reality, because I saw what happened in our community in Pittsfield. Heartbreaking.

JM: What did you see first? What did it look like when it started coming in?

MH: It was down in the neighborhoods. I even think there was the move to bring in young people too. It was just crazy.

01:11:51

Back in the day, if I would beat my kids, because I didn't want the police to be beating them, that kind of thing or something, was one thing, but then it got to the place where you had to help, because they came in, and they were taking young girls.

JM: Who was doing that?

MH: The people coming in from New York or wherever.

JM: So there was an influx of people coming in, and they were bringing the drugs, and they were totally changing.

MH: And totally changing. The community changed drastically, and you're feeling the effects with so many of our young people dying today, long-lasting effects.

JM: Now the drugs now, is that still an issue?

MH: Oh, absolutely.

JM: And you're still seeing it in the neighborhoods.

MH: Seeing kids killing kids. The whole murder scene is just—

JM: And it's all drugs.

MH: Yes. You can never fathom our church having bullets piercing it, because one of the kids is murdered right there by the church, next to the church.

JM: Now we need some community organizing or something.

MH: Yes.

JM: What about the church? Now kids don't go to the church, right? Are the kids going to the church?



MH: We've got a great children's ministry right now.

01:13:32

JM: Oh, great, because that seems like it could be an answer now.

MH: Yes. We're trying, working hard to really establish a whole different foundation, really getting out and getting into the prisons, at this point, right now, again, and organizing from that aspect. I had been personally involved in the prison ministry for a few years, maybe about ten years ago or so. Reverend Scamin is still there, and he's the chaplain, a Protestant minister, and I'm hoping to see if we can try to establish a ministry there.

JM: So this would be at the jail?

MH: Yes.

JM: Would you be doing that for your church?

MH: Yes.

JM: So the jail and the youth, sort of a preventative, getting youth involved in the church when they're young to get them strong.

MH: Yes. Do you know Nikita [ph]? Have you ever heard of Niakeida Bethel-Smith?

JM: Yes.

MH: She grew up in our Sunday school.

JM: What is she doing?

MH: She's youth ministry now. She's an ordained pastor, and she moved to New Jersey.

JM: Yes, her name is familiar.

MH: She's very, very involved with Shirley, very involved with Shirley Edgerton, Africa, done all of that.

01:15:19

JM: And she grew up in Pittsfield. How did you know her?

MH: Through the church.

JM: Through the church. Was she part of this youth ministry?

MH: No. She was a child, and also, at that time, the church had a camp. It was called Barber Camp out by Old Boston. You familiar with Old Boston going out towards Waterbury the back way? It's like that, and it's just around the corner and it's Old Boston.

JM: A little tiny village.

MH: Up in that area, up in there.

JM: Yes. So it might be down sort of near where you live in Monterey. It might be sort of down there.

MH: Is it New Boston or Old Boston?

JM: It might be New Boston.

MH: It might be New Boston.

JM: I don't know if it's Old or New, but it's something Boston, and it's a little tiny village in South County on the way to Connecticut. So you have all these threads running through your life, all these things that you've been involved with, the church, the community action, the organizing, community organizing, raising your family, working. You were busy. You've been busy. You're still busy.

MH: Yes.

JM: What do you do now? What's the thing you like now?

01:16:56

MH: TV, movie fan.

JM: You're a movie fan.

MH: I'm still involved with the church.

JM: I'm glad. It sounds like they could use people like you.

MH: If we can get motivated and you can find that other generation that can participate.

JM: Getting the young ones. I'd love to get a couple of young ones involved in this project, in this NAACP Oral History Project.

MH: The NAACP had youth councils, and there are students. The students that were involved in basketball, you could draw a really good pool of students from that aspect, and just with the schools, you have some kids who are doing well in school and all of that.

JM: Somehow getting them involved in things like this.

MH: My youngest grandson, he's at Taconic now, and he's going to be turning 16, and he plays on the basketball team now.

JM: What's his name?

MH: Quincy Davis.

JM: Quincy Davis, okay. I'll look for him. How many grandchildren do you have?

MH: Oh, Lord, okay, not that many, but enough.

JM: To have to stop and count.

MH: Stop and count, yes. I never even thought to look at that. I've got Dance, Schuyler, Gillian, Quincy, Sharrod, and then my daughter and son-in-law adopted two of his brother's children, girls, Erica and Glenda. I've got the great grandkids.

JM: Congratulations.

MH: It's good to be on this side of life; never had to see my parents go this far. My father went to 84. My mother died at 73.

JM: It's good to be on this side of life.

MH: It is, it really is.

JM: Now the NAACP wants me to ask a couple of questions. Ready?

MH: Historical? What?

JM: What was it like when the U.S. elected its first African-American President for you?

MH: Awesome. That's the only word I can say is awesome. Never, ever, ever, ever expected that to ever happen. I guess the thing that's interesting, though, is the fact he's biracial. You still try to figure out how that becomes where he's not recognized as the person he is, so I don't know. I know how we felt, because he was a person of color, I mean, I felt, because he was a person of color, but it's just interesting at that how people could be so hostile towards him knowing his makeup. I could never understand that. They almost obliterated the other side of him.

JM: The white part?

MH: The white part.

JM: It's interesting how you had to be sort of one or the other. There isn't any room to be both.

01:21:34

MH: Just be human.

JM: Just be human. So the other question is, I'm not sure we even need to ask it, because the whole interview was about being African-American in the Berkshires. I mean, we talked so much about that, but one of the questions they want me to ask is, what's it like being an African-American in the Berkshires, but I think you've sort of— unless you want to say more.

MH: I think I have found it enriching, enlightening, and really gives me a very broad perspective of society, period.

JM: I think we're through, and I think the person who wants to take your portrait is here, Julie McCarthy. We'll do that after. We're going to turn off the thing. Is there anything else you want to say? There was a lot of energy in that interview.

MH: Oh, really?

JM: We probably could have gone for hours and hours. There was so much energy in that interview. I mean, a life condensed down to an hour-and-a-half, but your life especially, because you were so active and had so much. I feel like we just touched on little parts.

MH: Yes. I just thank God all day for my experiences and all the doors that I personally feel that He opened in my life, because I look back at my life like 16 years of doing baby talk. I had children and there was baby talk, looking out the window and saying, "Where are all these people going?" because I lived in Williamstown on Main Street, and the kitchen window faced—I could see Main Street there. Cars would be going and cars would be going there, and I'd say, "Where are these people going? What

do they do?” and all of that and realizing that it was a hard time and sad circumstances and going through a divorce process and all of that.

01:24:18

But my life opened wide open, and when I looked at 16 years of doing this, and then, all of a sudden, it was the first time flying, going to Washington, D.C., and even testifying before a committee, because we were trying to save the follow-through program, so we had to go before a committee down there, a bus load of parents and all. It’s just amazing.

JM: You just communicated that very well. I could feel what that might have felt like.

MH: Going to Boston, major conventions and all that, and I look at the travel in my life and my children and myself and my grandchildren and all that, and my mother. My mother, she went from North Adams to Mechanicville by train back and forth. That was it.

JM: That was more than some people.

MH: Grandchildren, great experiences.

JM: Well, I want to thank you.

MH: You’re welcome.

JM: We all thank you. We’re grateful.

MH: Good for me too.

JM: Good. That’s the hope. Thank you.

[end]

