

A TEI Project

Interview of Alice Harris

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1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1A March 18, 2007

STEVENSON

OK. Good afternoon. I'm interviewing Alice Harris on Sunday, March 18. First, could you tell me something about your parents, grandparents, and your siblings?

HARRIS

My grandmother was -- she lived in Alabama, that was in Alabama, Demopolis. And they lived in the country part, not in the town, it was always in the country. And they were farmers; they owned their land, they had 186 acres that they always farmed. And we always liked to go there; we'd always get to go there when school was out, and play with -- because we could ride the horses, and we could go down to the spring and get water, which was different from us, because we got [inaudible], and now here's the spring, so we was interested in that. They was always saying, "Watch the kids, because they'll knock the cotton," if it was cotton in there, "if they run," -- when we ran in the fields. And that's usually what we would be doing, running in the fields. The [inaudible], you know, we'd slip and bust one, but all we wanted was the heart, not thinking that my granddad's going to come back and find it. But those were some of the things that we did that was my mother's mother.

Now, my father's mother, I didn't know that much about her. She lived in the same town we did, but my father's mother was a midwife, and his two

sisters were midwives. So they were the ones that was catching all the babies, and this was in Gaston, Alabama, because that's where we lived. But they was catching the babies there at that time. And my mother -- I told you about my mother's mother. And then my mother was a schoolteacher, and so she was educated; they sent her to Birmingham, Alabama, up in the city, for her to go to school. So she went to school, and my grandparents only had two on my mother's side. My father, on my father's side, my grandmother, she had five children. It was three girls and two boys, Uncle Jamie and Uncle Richie, both of them have deceased now. So Uncle Richie -- Uncle Richie lived in New York, but Uncle Jamie lived right in the back of the school ground where we had to go, the school where we had to play. So I got to see Uncle Jamie practically just about every day, he's sitting on the porch. And I'm not too sure what Uncle James did. He had to be working with the [martial there], but I think what they did was they sold vault that the coffin goes in. And so we never did go there, but we would here about it. And of course, when he say dead people, then we didn't want no more part of that anyway. So we always thought Uncle James was the dead people's person. (doorbell ringing) Come in! Come on!

1.2. Session 1B

March 18, 2007

HARRIS

All right. OK. Go back to my great-grandparents. I didn't know my great grandparents; they was already deceased. But my father's mother, she was a full-bred -- what's the Indian? -- Cherokee Indian. She had long black hair, it was beautiful. I don't know why I didn't get some [inaudible], but I didn't. (laughter) But anyway, she was a midwife, and then she trained my two aunties. And so we had three midwives in that town, Gaston, and so everybody knew us because of the midwives. Then as I got up some size, one of the aunties then would take me with her, and we'd call it "going to catch the babies," because that's what they would be doing, catching babies. And of course, I would have to start to find -- be sure they had towels, and be sure everything was clean, and if they had children, and didn't have no babysitter, then I would be sure that the children wouldn't come in to see what was going on, because they would really be nosy, they really wanted to know, because their mama in there crying, and it always looked like, "You beat up my mama! You beat up my mama!" Until they would get big enough to know we wasn't fighting the mother, we was catching the baby.

STEVENSON

Right. How old was you when you were doing this?

HARRIS

I was about nine. About nine, eight or nine years old I started, even, as far as I can remember back, I would do that. And the reason they chose me to

do that, because I had something about sick people. And if anybody was sick, I would go and sit with them, and I would sing and pray. So when they couldn't find me, they would ask who's sick in the community, and that's where I would be, singing and praying with them. So they chose -- picked me to go with them to catch the babies, because a lot of the neighbors all knew me as the singing and praying girl. Now, I was -- I can remember -- in my mind, I can see myself and look like I might have been about four, four or five, because I can remember sitting up on the slabs of wood, and on Sunday mornings, and then I would sit up there and I would sing. And everybody sometimes they would open the windows to hear me singing.

STEVENSON

So how did you start being the singing and praying girl?

HARRIS

I don't know. It's something I did; it wasn't nothing that my mother and them -- it was a gift from God, let me put it that way. 'Cause my mother and them, sometimes they would get aggravated because they couldn't find me, I'm somewhere, when I should have been in there washing dishes, I'm singing and praying with somebody that's sick. And I still do that. I know why I do it now: it's God. I love it. It just -- something about it, I can make a difference. If I go in and sing and pray, you're sure you're going to get well. And so it makes a difference, even now. People will call me -- I had to fly to Texas to pray for one of the soldiers -- they thought he might have been losing his mind, but he was just scared; he'd been over there where the war is, and he just needed some attention. But you better believe, they called me down and I talked to him, and he thanked me for coming and he's all right. So God works through me doing that. It has to be, because I didn't go to school for it, and I've been doing it all my life that I can remember. So that was on my father's side. And then my mother, of course, they farmed; they had this land, and I told you, 186 acres of land, so they farmed on the land. My mother didn't stay in the country; when she got old enough, she went to Birmingham, Alabama, and she put her through school. And so my mother was a schoolteacher. Then my mother married -- I have a sister and a brother; my half-sisters and brothers. And then my father had five children. His wife died in childbirth. My mother's husband died -- I think it's from a heart attack or something, but he died. And so when my mother and father got together, they got together with seven children. Then they had my three brothers and me. So we was the late four that came in. And my mother, her first husband had bought a home, so when my mother married my father -- so his mother then brought his five children to my mother. And I think about two weeks after they were there, they set the house on fire. And I'm sure it wasn't by [inaudible], just playing with matches. But then my mother and my father had to then get a house, and my mother had never rented before, because my uncles in Birmingham, they owned their home. My grandmother, her mother, owned it all there, so now she's

renting, and I think she got pregnant with me and couldn't go back to work. And I think that must have bothered her. It would have bothered me. But I never understood that until after I got grown and looked back into my mother's life. We always knew my mother was mean, and my mother didn't take no mess; she would beat you. So we knew -- we just thought she was mean. But a week about my mother passed, she called us to the bed, and she said, "Why didn't you all have me admitted?" We said, "Have you admitted? For what?" She said, "You know I was mentally ill." I said, "Oh, Mama, you weren't crazy." She said, "I said mentally ill. I was. And if you all had had me admitted, it could have you some." And I said, "Oh, well, that's over with now." But I guess that was one way she was confessing. But despite being so many, 11 of us, you couldn't have outsiders in the yard; we all stayed to ourselves. And of course, we would split out the yard every once in awhile, and you gonna get a beating for that if you get caught, and we would try to look out for one another, but -- see, we were the young set, and my step-sisters and brothers were the older set; they was much older than we were. So that mood in that house then, World War -- was it World War II, or World War I, but it was in the -- because I was born in '34, so this had to have been in the '40s. The war starts, had a war, and everything was [inaudible], because I can remember --

1.3. Session 1C

March 18, 2007

HARRIS

Ready? Now, she was saying about the million-dollar smile, and she said, "I'm gonna bring it out." Well, I had already been practicing in the mirror, trying to find out, what does a million-dollar smile look like? And I'm just grinning, and kind of -- and what it really was is, I'm walking around there sad all day long, frowning all day long; all she wanted me to do was smile. And with me practicing, trying to find where the million-dollar smile is, now I'm learning how to smile. Because there was nothing for me to smile for; I'm all I can be, I'm through with life. That's it. And I definitely don't want another man; that's out. I'm through with that. And here I am smiling. And about a month, she said, "When you put the children down to bed," she says, "I need to talk to you, but I'm not talking about firing you, so don't go to crying." And I said, "Oh, all right."

So when I put them down, she said to me, she says, "I have already went down and made the arrangements. I have a beautician, and she can teach you how to pass the state test. She could teach you to do that. Now, she knows that she's going to have to start out with three and four letter words, so don't be upset. She already knows that you can't read that well. I've told her everything, so you don't have to be upset with her. She's going to help you." She said, "Now, when you put the children down tomorrow, then the

chauffeur's going to take you down to that beauty shop," -- she never did say what beauty shop; she just said "down to the beauty shop." I sort of thought she was talking about a white beauty shop, if they had beauty shops too. She said, "When you put them down, the chauffeur's going to take you, and it's going to -- about two hours. So the maid will keep her eye on the children while they sleep, and the chauffeur will then take you down there, and wait on you, and bring you back. And by the time you get back, the children will be awake." Oh, that sounded good. But she didn't say -- "I'm going to be at a white beauty shop, they're going to be teaching me how to pass that test."

The next day, and the chauffeur had told me he was ready to take me, and then took me to Mary King's Beauty Shop. Oh, man, this is the shop here? How did she get me in here? Poor folks don't come up in here; this is the upper-class in here. She met me at the door, she called my name, and she says, "We going to show the world that you can see anything you want to see. You can do it, and we're going to show this, that you can do it." Oh, man. I felt so good. And I didn't have nothing to hide; she already knew I couldn't read that well, so she started with the words, working with me with the spelling. And she had some children's books that I started out reading, so she could catch on to where I needed to be at.

And it went on like that for about a year and a half, and some of that time, if Miss [Coen] didn't go out on the weekend, I could go work in the beauty shop for that Saturday, and she would give me money, 'cause I'd have to give it -- Mama got the checks, she'd get all the money, but when I worked on Saturdays, I could keep the money. So I went and put paid down on me a bedroom set, because I wanted my own bedroom set. So that Saturday's money paid for the bedroom set. And about a year and a half, I took that state board test and passed it. And she said, "Now, you are a what?" I said, "Beautician." She thought I was going to say [inaudible] beautician. She said, "Now, you can work in a beauty shop. Remember my children is large enough that whoever I get, if they do wrong to it, they large enough to know the difference. So you want to get a beauty shop, it's all right with me. And that's really what you need to do, 'cause you need to make a living for you and your son."

I said, "Well, Miss Coen, what can I do to pay you for what you have done for me?" She said, "Number one, I'm going to tell you what I like. I like that million-dollar smile you got." I said, "Did I ever get it?" She said, "You got it right after I said it. You got it." She said, "I don't know last time I have seen you frown. You're just so full of joy, all the time. You got the whole house full of joy." I said, "Well, what can I do? Because you've done so much for me." She said, "This is what you can do for me. Whenever you see someone, looking at them, and was like you, do for them what I've done for you." I said, "That ain't no problem. I'll do that. Just what you say and more."

So remember, I'm already praying and singing, so I start looking -- now I'm working in this beauty shop, working in her beauty shop. Now, all them people in there, they didn't need me. I'm talking about the part of town they were in and what have you. But I started helping in the church, because remember, the church I went to was a poor church, and they would all look up to me, because I worked in Mary King's Beauty Shop and I was a beautician. I might have stayed there for about a year, and year and a half, and then I went to Michigan, because my cousin came from Michigan, and she was telling me how much money -- 'cause at that time, you could get a press and a curl for a dollar. In Michigan, it was \$2.50. So I said then, "I'll go there and I'll work in a beauty shop there and make more money," and my mother agreed that I could.

Now, but when I got to Michigan, I found out that my license was no good; I had to go back to school, because I had to take some more hours. So I worked at a car wash for awhile, and then if I'm working for a car wash in Michigan, it's cold. But I was determined that I was going to go back and get them hours, because fixing hair -- that's how I was going to make my living. So I did go back. Now, I worked in a car wash on Seven Mile Road was where it was at.

STEVENSON

In which city?

HARRIS

Detroit. Detroit, Michigan. And this was on Seven Mile Road. Schaeffer's Car Wash is what it was. And so when I was working there at the car wash, I was trying to make money to go back and take those hours up in beauty college, and of course, when I got enough money, that's what I did, and I went to beauty college there to make up my hours; it was called a brush-up course. And so I was worried because I always thought the reason I passed that test was because Mrs. Coen and them was rich and it was something they did. So now I'm here by myself, I ain't got Miss Coen then, and I got to pass that test.

Well, I got in a study group, and we start studying -- that was in the brush-up course with me. And the biggest of the girls in there was just coming out of high school, and they was coming into beauty college. And this beauty college had a brush-up course. Well, I was in the brush-up course, but I got in with the other -- to get a study group going; some of the rest of them had joined a study group. So on Saturdays and Sundays, we would all study. And I think it could have been about 23 or 25 students. But out that 23, 25 students, 14 passed that test, and I was one of the 14. I knew then -- "You got it, girl. You got it." I passed that test on my own; I knowed I wasn't dumb no more. Because I'd always figured it wasn't me, it was them. Now, it's me and not them.

So that was in Michigan, and so I started working at a beauty shop there, and I worked at the beauty shop for the lady there, it was down on Hastings,

the street was Hastings. When I was going to the brush-up course, the instructors told us there's a restaurant down the street there, and they had six side dishes. And, you know, two of you could go in, and that's enough to feed both of you. Well, I couldn't -- I didn't have money to buy food like that; I had a quarter a day. I would take that quarter; I would get a bowl of soup for \$.15, and two cornbread muffins was the dime. I would eat the soup and wrap up the cornbread muffins, because that was going to be my supper. So that's what I was living off of, that quarter, because that's all that I had. But one of the girls said, "Come on, you can go down with us." And so I went there, and while I was there, the phone rang, and the owner was saying the employment was calling him, and he was saying he needed this waitress. So me and one of the girls that was sitting there -- her name was Mary -- we betted -- because it was six of us -- and we betted which one would get that owner first. And I just knew I was going to get him, because I needed to eat. But whoever got him, 'cause we'd say he was cute, but whoever would get him had to feed lunch for them, that was the treat. That was the bet. And this might have been on Thursday or Friday, but that Saturday, I was off, I came up to meet him, because I had heard on the phone he needed a waitress. And so he remembered us, and when I came back, and I was saying about, you know, "I heard that you needed a waitress," he said, "I wanted to ask you, but I knew you all was from that beauty college up there, so I didn't want to say anything. But you, I wanted to ask you to come work for me." I said, "Well, I can work on the weekend," and I said, "If I work in the evening time, somebody would have to take me home, because it would be too far for me to catch the bus." He said, "I'll take you home." So I started working; we got out of beauty college and 2:30 in the evening, and I would go and work for him starting at 3:00 or 3:30, and then I would work until about 7, 8:00 in the evening, and he would take me home. And we must have done that -- I must have did that I don't know how long we courted, but I got him. And then I gave them girls a dinner. I'm trying to think if we went together -- it might have been three, four months, but we got married, and Lansing, Michigan is where we got married at. And he was so nice to me when I met him, when we was going through this courting stage. And, you know, he would tell them, whatever money I wanted, just give it to me at the register if I come there and I wanted some money. And then he would buy me some -- he bought expensive clothes. He's the man. And he was 29 years older than I was, but I'm thinking, this is the man. Now, my mama told me, don't you two marry, because he's too much older than you are. I'm thinking, mama's back in Alabama; she don't know what's going on. So my mother had left Alabama and went to -- came out here to California, because I had a brother out here. And that was in '58, 1958 -- '59, it might have been '59. I came -- she came out here. Then once we got married, I guess we might have been married about a month or two, our first fight. I'm thinking, "Wow." And then

he was so jealous; I couldn't look at nobody else. Now, I'm working in the beauty shop; he'd ride by there 50 times peeping in. So those operators would go tease me about, "There he is; there he comes," something like that. I'm thinking, man, I couldn't go nowhere. So I finally got tired of fighting, just said, "This ain't gonna work." My mother got sick out here, and my brother called me and said he was coming out here to see about my mother, and I said, "Then come pick me up, because I'm going too." And my best girlfriend name was Tommy, and I said to Tommy, "Now, you got to help me get out of here." Now, I wasn't dumb; I always saved money on the side, that was for sure. I had my money; I think I had about \$4,000 that I had saved up on the side. And so I said to Tommy, "You've got to help me, I've got to get out of here. On Tuesdays -- on Mondays, the restaurant was closed. So I said -- and then I had had babies, so it had to have been a year and a half gone, because I had had the baby, and he said he wasn't his, and he had never had no children. I suppose I had the mumps or something, I said, "I don't know what you had, but he's yours." But anyway, when he was born, he was convinced it was his. But anyway, I told her that I had to get away. So I figured out, if we go to Belle Isle -- Belle Isle was where everybody went in the summertime, a big -- like Griffin Park, this was Belle Isle. And I said, I'm going to go there, and if I go there and get him drunk, then when I come back -- because Tommy and my brother -- my brother got the U-Haul; they was to get my furniture out of there while I was gone, as much as they could get, get the expensive parts. And then my brother was going to be parked, and I knew what street he was going to be parked on. And you know, my heart is just bumping, because if Robert knew that, he'd kill me; I knew that. So I said, it was time for me to meet him between 5 and 6:00. So at 4:00-- and sure enough, I got his liquor and got him high, and then he took a nap. And then around 3:30, I woke him and told him I had ran out of milk for the baby. Now, he would do anything for the baby; that was his heart. We ran out of milk and we were going to have to go. OK. Now, when we got to the house, I told him that I had left the pacifier at the park. Now, he knew Robert had to have that pacifier. I said, "Down the street at the \$.10 store, go down there and get a pacifier, and we'll go on up in the house." We got our and when he pulled off, we made a beeline round the side of the house, because there's a pathway to the next street. And we ran to that next street, down the street, and got in the -- my brother was there, the U-Haul, got in the car and he's shoving off, and man, you know we was on pins until I got -- I was scared even until that next morning, my brother stopped to rest. I don't know, we might have been in Kentucky somewhere, but anyway, that's how we slipped away. And we had our dog, because he wouldn't stop following us, and I didn't want to leave him, so we put the dog in the car. And I never knew the dog passed gas, but he would go -- and you could hear him passing gas, and my brother said if he passed another time, he got to get out of here. (laughter) But when we got to

Alabama, Gaston, my sister, we gave her the dog. And of course, we rested there, and then the -- went to sleep, but I think late that evening, we left, because we had to go to Mobile, Alabama to pick up my other brother, 'cause he was coming out here too, 'cause mama was real sick, so we were actually all coming. And I told my mother that I was moving out here, but I had a girlfriend that lived here, and she would -- when she had come home, we had met one or two times, and she had told me that she worked for the Jordan Downs Housing Projects in the office, and if you ever come out there and need an apartment, I can help you. I had that, that I would get a place to stay. So -- and I had called her and told her, so she knew we were coming, and I knew I had an apartment, I had the address and everything written down there. Well, we had never lived in projects, so I didn't know anything about a project. Just, if it's people, it's people. So anyway, we went and got to Mobile. When we got to Mobile to pick up my other brother, when his old lady saw that U-Haul, she knew he was leaving her, his girlfriend. And so it was real nice, we laid down, I went to sleep and we rested overnight, but when we got ready to go, and for some odd reason, she knew he was going; she started throwing them pots and pans at him. But he went on somewhere, my brother knew where to go meet him at, and so we got him, and so now we headed this way, coming to California. Now, this time, I got three children, two and the baby. And I knew if he found -- how crazy he was about that baby, if he found me, he'd kill me, but nobody knew I was coming to California, and I never discussed to him that my mother had come out here to visit with my brother. She didn't come to stay; she come to visit, but she got sick. And anything, he would have thought I went home, and that's what I'm thinking: I'm going to throw him off. But I was out here in California about a year -- no, I was out here maybe about two years before he found me, it was two years, because I had called my lawyer -- and back there, they had ran an ad in the paper about divorce. So I had got my divorce from him because he left and went to New York. And I think it was my sister that he caught up, and she had heard from my sister in Alabama that I was in California, and that's how he caught up with. But it was -- he caught up with me, Allen and I was married, and start back having babies. I think when he caught up with me, I might have had one more baby.

STEVENSON

What year did you --

HARRIS

'59. I came out here in '59. And then when -- I was out here about three days, getting my stuff, in two or three days, then I went to my mother, went to see about her. But my mother thought we was coming to move in with her. Well, you know, we know about that childhood, you can't stay with Lu, because Lu had two sides, and you don't want to meet the other side. You want to know Luvenia, you don't want to know Lu. But anyway, when I went and let her know that I was here, and she said, "Well, where's the suitcase?"

I said, "No, Mama, we have an apartment." I said, "Oh, Mama, we got an apartment." She said, "Where?" I said, "Jordan Downs Housing Project." "Oh, my God, is that black sheep done got back in you. You can't stay there; those people'll kill you." Well, I had met some of them, and remember, I'm a beautician, and I have to have clientele. And so, come on, I fixed one or two heads, so I know that one [inaudible], I just thought that was -- mama, it wasn't going to happen. So -- and that's why I know God sent me here, because I didn't have no idea. If I had known it was supposed to be have been bad, then I wouldn't have settled here. But I settled here, and it looks like I can't get out of here. Let me show you about my park.

STEVENSON

(tape interference) Before we go on further, I have to apologize [inaudible]. OK. You mentioned the 186 acres, I think, your grandfather --?

HARRIS

My grandmother. That was my mom's mother. [inaudible]

STEVENSON

OK. I'll wait 'til you get back over here, because it won't record.

HARRIS

All right.

STEVENSON

Well, I'll use this opportunity to change my tape. God, you're so --

1.4. Session 1D

March 18, 2007

STEVENSON

OK. If I could ask you about your grandmother's 183 acres, how did they acquire the land? How did it come to [inaudible] that way?

HARRIS

I think my grandmother's mother, they are the one that -- I think the master, they called him the master, my grandmother was the master's child. And the master, I think, before he died -- something happened, but it came through the slavery way. That's all I know about it.

STEVENSON

All right. Also, could you tell me to what age you went to school, or maybe tell me about your schooling?

HARRIS

Oh, I went to school when I was -- I guess we started school at six, and I was smart, because I had been promoted once, and when I came -- had to come out of school, it was the sixth grade. But I didn't come out of school 'cause I was pregnant; I came out of school on hardship, because my daddy was sick, and I had to watch him. So I came out under hardship.

STEVENSON

And also, you mentioned your mother was a schoolteacher, and that she went to school for that. What was her particular training? Did she go to a teacher's college, or -- what was her training?

HARRIS

She went to college, and if -- I'll think of the college -- Tuskegee [University], to be a teacher.

STEVENSON

I see. OK. And last follow-up question, as far as the place where you grew up in, two things: one, it was an all-black area.

HARRIS

Oh, definitely so. Nothing but black and white, but black had their quarters, and the white people had their quarters, but their quarters -- in the white neighborhood, you had the rich, you had the upper rich, the rich, and the poor. So the black neighborhoods would be around the poor white; they'd call us niggers, we'd call them white trash.

STEVENSON

At what age would you say you became aware of race as a concept, or the differences in race, or how it impacted your life, your family?

HARRIS

It didn't impact our life, because we didn't communicate. In other words, if you went to their neighborhoods, you was going to work, and they knew you. If they come to your neighborhood, they was bringing you home, and that's it. The little town, everybody shopped in the little town, so you could see them from that. But we had -- the grocery store was Piggly-Wiggly [LLC]. If we was there and they were waiting on me and a white person come up, they would stop waiting on me and wait on that white person. So we knew about it, but we was always trained to stay from around them.

STEVENSON

I see. OK. And also, you've mentioned the upper-class blacks, and poor blacks. How much did you those -- I guess I would call them class divisions. How much did that impact everyday life as you perceived it back then?

HARRIS

Which one? Are you talking about both upper-class and how much -- how did the --

STEVENSON

Yeah, how did it impact day-to-day life, both with upper class and the poor class in the black community?

HARRIS

Well, it's again -- the upper class blacks, they live in homes that you was buying. And the low class lived in rented homes. We knew the difference in that, but remember, we were buying -- we always had a home; I never lived in an apartment or rented home, it was always our home. But I do know how they did -- I know how -- because I had friends that lived in the housing project. And when I left home, I moved to the housing project, to -- one of

the times that I left home. But it wasn't mine; it was a girlfriend of mine. The same one that lived out here, we was real good friends, but she left and came out here. But I left home, ran away from home, and I lived in the housing projects. So I can hear them talking about how they are men, the blacks don't accept -- the poor blacks don't accept the upper class blacks. And remember, I told you about the church, poor people didn't go there. And I have learned over the years, and I'll be 73 in December. But I learned over the years that people are people. They don't change. If you poor, every class have a class. Now, the poor have a class, and the middle class have a class, and the rich have a class. And in those classes is three different classes. I'll tell you about the poor: you got the poor, poor-poor, poor-poor-poor. Now, let me give you the difference. The poor-poor-poor: those are the ones that lives up under the bridges, sit around a barrel of fire, and drink wine. The poor-poor are the ones on the welfare, some fixed income. The poor are the ones that's working for minimum wages, and there's one step from being poor-poor. So they communicate with the poor; the poor-poor communicate with the poor-poor; and the poor-poor-poor communicate with the poor-poor-poor. 'Cause now the ones that's on the fixed -- you know, was on welfare or what have you, you're not going to catch them sleeping up under the bridge around a barrel of fire. The ones that's minimum wages, you're not going to catch them too much being friends with the ones that's on welfare, because the conversations are different. If I come around you and you my friend, that means that you know about me, I know about you. And we talking about -- the poor-poor, we talking about the welfare, how the [inaudible] did, what you got to do. Minimum wages, when they come around, they talking about how they can get a raise; how better to go on up the ladder. And the poor-poor-poor would be talking about, what's the best hospital; what's the best shelter; are there any shelters that I can get in? First, how many have you been in? Because they have a record. So the conversations are different. And that's the same way it is with the upper, with the middle class. It's three classes. I learned that by living it, living around it.

And now it wouldn't -- I don't pay it no mind. But when I first moved to Watts -- I wouldn't say I lived Watts; I lived in LA. "Where you live?" "LA." Because they talked down to you to live in Watts. When you live in Watts, you supposed to be nothing. Everybody's supposed to be killers, and that's not true. I ain't no killer, and I'm here. And everything you do, you got 5% gonna be bad, even on the job. 5% gonna be bad, 'cause ain't nothing perfect. And that 5% bad gets all the attention. You never hear about the good ones, like you writing up now; nobody comes and write up nothing good; we want to know about the bad. If you want the police real quick, tell them somebody got a gun. That's 'cause you want them quick. But if you tell them there's an argument, there's about to be a fight, ain't coming. If they do, it'd be two hours late. Man's out here and got a gun, bam, helicopter's

right over there. So -- and learn how to work it, but there's misconception that in the poor neighborhood, and I'm talking about Watts, everybody in here bad -- number one, Watts is surrounded with five housing -- four housing projects, five housing projects. Surrounded. Five -- let me see. Did you -- I got the paper on the camera they just put down here.

STEVENSON

Ah, I heard about that.

HARRIS

I got the paper on it. I'll let you see it and then tell you how many people is here. But it is way overdue for them to have given us some help. People is not dumb. They -- to come and tell me I want to start a gang program, so we can see how we can get rid of gangs. Now, you know I don't have to set up in no meetings and tell you that, but it's going to make me feel good to think you want to do something. If you really want to do something, you do what you just did, put them cameras and things around there. Is everybody going to like them? The ones doing bad, no, they not gonna like them. But we appreciate them, because it makes us safe. So I'm glad the mayor has stepped in, because we do need -- we do need help. They know. But like I'd tell them all the time, if everybody would straighten up and stop doing bad, who would be out of a job? Who would be homeless?

STEVENSON

Police, probably, if everybody were doing good.

HARRIS

No, no, the jail folks would be, 'cause you close them down.

STEVENSON

OK. Let's go back to when you first came to Los Angeles. You're in Los Angeles now; could you maybe take it from there, as far as what you did when you got here?

HARRIS

I'm in Los Angeles now, and I'm in the housing project. And remember, we had a U-Haul, so I brought my furniture, but I didn't bring the bedroom furniture, because we couldn't bring the mattresses and things, we didn't have enough room for that. But now we got living room furniture; I got a Grundig, a Grundig is about that big, it's a record player. But at that time, that was the latest, was the Grundig. And then I had the breakfast room set because it was marbletop. So I brought that, and then our clothes and what have you. So now we're in the projects, in there, and we gonna make a pallet. Now, I went out and bought mattresses for the children, but I just kept a pallet for me, because I knew I would get a bedroom, so that wouldn't be a problem, me getting that. Because I was going to fix enough hair and do that; I knew how to work and make money. And the what I did was I had Vera to introduce me to my neighbors, my girlfriend's name was Vera, to introduce me to the neighbors.

And word of mouth is powerful. If you do good with one or two, then that word spreads, so what I did with the next-door neighbor, when I saw her, I said, "You know what? I'm going to be a good neighbor to you; I'm going to fix you hair free." But I was getting clientele, and I did and gave her a good style. And then in less time -- now I wouldn't only fix hair in the projects; you don't fix hair, or have any kind of trade there. And of course, you didn't know -- and now my license is not any good; I got to back and get another brush-up course. And, well, I've done that in Michigan; now I've got to do it here. And if I go to Hawaii, I have to do it there; I said, well, when I get it here, that's it. So [Thomas] Jefferson High School is where I took the brush-up course, there at Jefferson. But meanwhile, I was fixing hair, and I began to know the people, and they knew me, and I had a good clientele.

So I really didn't have to go to work; I was already making good money for fixing hair. And then after I fixed the girl's hair, her name was María, and she didn't have the money, but she was one of the riders that rode with my mother when my mother was walking to work, and my mother had told her I was coming, and I was a beautician. So I fixed her hair, and her boyfriend was going to bring me the money that Thursday. And when the boyfriend did bring the money, Al was with him; my husband was with him. And so we ate pavement and we talked while I was fixing hair then. And they wanted to know if they could take me around to see the city. And the next -- that Friday. And they carried me to the -- Al! What was the name of that dancing hall on Century, upstairs, that we went to? You know, where they go dance at?

AL HARRIS

[inaudible]

HARRIS

What's the name of that dancing place we go to on Century [Boulevard]? Everybody went there years ago.

AL HARRIS

Dooto's [Walter "Dootsie" Williams] Music Center ?

HARRIS

No, it's down on Century. You know, it's one way up, all them stairs you go up.

AL HARRIS

[inaudible]. Five Four Ballroom.

HARRIS

OK, the Five Four Ballroom, we went to there. And I liked to dance, so that was all right. Mama, she'd babysit for me. And then the -- I think the next week I had to call Al, because remember, we coming from Michigan, all our clothes are heavy clothes. And it's hot here. So I called him to see if he would take me shopping so that I could get the children and me some lighter clothes, and he was nice. And I thought to myself, mm-mm, that's how I got messed up with that first one, he was nice. Now I'm gonna have to watch

this one, 'cause he seems to be nice. Now, this one here, I'm four years older than he is. And he was just got out here from Mississippi, so he was from the country. And man, he really was country.

But he carried me to the store and all, and then the next week, he said, "Have you ever heard of Las Vegas?" I said, "No;" he said, "I heard about it, but I haven't been. Let's go see it." And I said, "Where?" He said, "It's not far from here." And so I said, "All right," and my brother, he was staying with me, so he'd babysit. And man, looked like we drove forever. Talking about not far! We drove, and finally we got there, but then they were the prettiest lights I ever seen, and they had a great big old man with a cigar, said, "Hey, buddy, hi, buddy," one of them casinos. But anyway, we saw -- and they was nice, the casinos were nice, the lights was nice. And at that time, they had some penny slot machines -- they might have some now; I know they had some then. And so I was going in and tried to use pennies. Went in, tried the penny slot machine; I hit a jackpot, and I think the jackpot paid about \$20, and I thought that was heaven. Al said, "Let's play the nickel," -- "Ah, no, I ain't losing my money." And we came out of there, we saw a building that said Marriage Chapel. And I said, "Look at that, Al. A marriage chapel." He said, "Let's go get married." I said, "Oh -- I --" He said, "Well, you know, we might as well." I said, "OK." Went in and got married.

And I got back home; he went home to his mama, because he was staying with his mother. And I went home, because I had to first let the children know what had happened, just can't bring them right in there, because I don't do that -- even now, I don't do anything over my children. But anyway, the next day, I told and Brenda what had happened, I got married. I said, "The man that come here," -- because he had carried Jane [inaudible] to get his hair cut. And they liked him. And I said, "Well, you know, we got married." And then I showed them the paper, we got married, they're like, "Man, you sure can get married quick here." So I said, "Well, you get married quick, can you get a divorce quick?" He said, "I don't know if you can or not, but we ain't gonna need no divorce, because I asked God to give me you." And it was at that time I knew he was the one, because when I left Michigan, I said, "Lord, if I get another husband, you send him to me. Don't let me pick him." And when he told me that, we had said the same thing almost, and I said, "Well," to myself, "I guess the Lord sent him. I'm married now." And it's been 47 years ago. 47 years.

But anyway, we came on back, and from then on -- I'm still fixing hair. And if the children needed something, like they had to go on a field trip, I would always work with the teachers in the schools. Then I would sell barbecue and potato pies; I would sell them, because I got a clientele. And if I tell them that I'm selling barbecues and potato pies, they'd buy it all, I made the money. So I would make money in order to take that class on a picnic, and that's how I got in with the schools. And after awhile, the teachers knew that

I did hair, and I began to do their hair. And then started having babies, so I couldn't get back in the shop, but I did get my license. But having them babies, couldn't get back in the shop -- had six girls. And I thought, "Oh, my God."

And two of them, three of them -- Dar was an asthmatic, and she wasn't supposed to live to get 12. T.J. and Alvenia had Grand Mal Seizures. And I was going with Dar out at Crenshaw [Boulevard], was where the allergy doctor was on Santa Rosa [li Drive], in that medical building. And I was going there sometimes three and four times a week, and they'd give her a shot, and sometimes we'd have to go to the hospital; she'd always go to Children's Hospital [Los Angeles]. Al had got laid off from work, and when he got laid off from work, and I went in the hospital, I had the baby, Katie, but she lived three or four days, and then she died. But -- and Al had got laid off. So then we had to get on the county; Al went down and applied, told them. And then the worker came to the hospital where I was, and so it was easy to get on there; everybody else said it was hard, but it was easy for us to get on there. And then -- and I told the lady, I fix hair, just that I can't now. Then Pete had -- throwed a rock over a fence and hit somebody. Anyway -- another child.

Anyway, the -- I don't know how the worker got it, but the worker came here about that incident, and she was saying, with three -- and then I had another, Linda had nosebleeds. Said with three -- all these sick children in the home, something wrong with the home, something is wrong. And she said, how do you do this? I said, they my children; that's how I do it. So she left, and the next thing I know, I was getting a letter to come to the office. And she had looked into -- 'cause I had told them where the doctors, the doctors they go to, and the doctor had told her that [Levinia] -- and they had long time homes for asthmatic and heart patient children that's not going to live, and you send them to Arizona, or another's in Denver, Colorado, but you send them there to wean them away from the family, and it makes it easier for the family, because they not going to live. I heard him say that, but I also -- I'm a Christian. You don't know when I'm going to die; you just know what you think, but you don't know what. And I didn't pay him no mind. That worker -- that doctor had told that worker, that would be easier for me if I would send her to that home. [inaudible] this worker back up; she just knew she had some -- I think she was trying to help me though, I really do. And she told me that the doctor had said that, and that I really should take advantage of that, because all the other children is sick. I said, I ain't gonna do that. She said, "Well, don't let me take you to court." I said, "That's your next job."

And sure enough, I got a paper -- I don't know how long it was, but I got a letter in the mail, come into court. And I said, "My goodness." And one of the members at the church had called me, and I was crying, because I didn't have money for no lawyer; I just didn't think it was fair, you're going to take

people's children -- I want to take care of my children. And so she told Sister Williams; Sister Williams came down here, and we prayed, and she said, "No, baby, they can't do that. You in the body of Christ; they can't do that. You a Christian, God gonna take care of you." And sure enough, we talked, and read the Bible, and had the Scripture. And then I was already going to Bible class every week anyway, but it just started making sense. And I said, I ain't playing with God now; I'm for real. You know, the folks that want me to come to court and bring the other children with me. And I'm saying, "They got to be crazy." I thought about it -- well, I should go back to Michigan. No. Go to Alabama -- no. I ain't going nowhere, and they not gonna take my children, and I'm not gonna send mine nowhere. That just ain't gonna do it. And I just stood firm; I ain't gonna do that. Just stood firm.

Sure enough, here come the court date; I got my Bible and went right on, and all the members of the church, they fill up the court there with them. And the judge said when they called us, he asked me did I have my lawyer, and I said, "Yeah, here it is," and I raised up the Bible. He said, "Oh, my God, not another one of them." And everybody laughed, but I didn't know what he was talking about. And he says, "Well, now, you know if you don't have money for a lawyer, we can appoint you a public defender." I said, "But sir, I got the lawyer; that's all I need." He said, "All right, then. [inaudible] start, come on up here." And they had some of the doctors and the nurses, because she was always in and out of the hospital. But they never had to dress her; they never had to comb her hair, because I was there every day. And wherever -- and sometimes I'd have three at one time in different hospitals, but I made the rounds. If I had breakfast, dinner, and supper, it was just which one time I would get to the other one and comb their hair. I'm a beautician anyway; I'm used to hair. Anyway, when the nurses, they all said I'm there, I'm a good mother; no problem. And then the doctor got up there, and I heard him say "dust-free," the room, if she had a dust-free room, it would have been better; I heard him say that, but I didn't know what he was talking about. So when I got up there on the stand, called me, I answered all their questions.

And finally, the judge said, "You know, Miss Harris, everybody that has come up here has said good things about you. They haven't said nothing bad about you in the hospitals where the children stayed. One thing that puzzles me, I'm concerned about: why didn't you dust-free her room like the doctor told you?" I said, "Your Honor, I heard him tell you that, but I don't know nothing about it. I did everything anybody told me to do, not only the doctors, anybody else; I did it all. They said stand outside the tree and measure the tree, and then let her move, and then you put a nail in it; when she outgrows the nails, the asthma --" I said, "I tried everything, all kind of [inaudible]. I heard that doctor say it." The doctor said, "Wait, your Honor, wait. I've got proof, because she have to sign it; she have to sign the

papers, so I got proof. Let me find it." He went to flipping back in there and flipping, and finally, he said, "Your Honor, I'm sorry, and I have to beg her pardon. The papers here, the nurse must have forgot to give it to her." The judge said, "Now, how you think the mother feels? All this you all have said -- how do you think she feels? And then the county and them got up there, they done went in the house, and they told all this she needs, and this lady's doing everything. Now, what I want done: everything that the county said she needs, I want them to give it to her. And I want y'all to let her alone." And he told me he wanted me back there in a month, six weeks, four weeks to six weeks, because I want to know that they give you what they have put on this paper that you needed. And is there anything else you know you need that should be on the paper?" And I said, "Yes, sir. If he says I need to dust-free the room, I've seen those air purifiers; I just didn't know they would be -- I needed one, 'cause if I'd knew she needed one, I'd have gotten it. I got an air condition; I'd have got that." He said, "All right. See you back in four to six weeks." And he told the county, "Y'all here me?" And it might have been three days later, they was there with their piece of paper from that court. I said, "Now, see, y'all told them that I needed dust-free mattresses. Now, I got mattresses, y'all see that. But now y'all got to get me some new ones. Well, I appreciate it. Just bring them on in, bring the mattresses on it," because they had to be dust-free, and that was more expensive than the one that I had bought. But anyway, we got along with them; that got them off of my back.

And then the doctor says she wasn't gonna live to get 12, and she was born in '65, and she's still living. She's having some problems now though with her sickness, 'cause she was driving the city bus, and the fumes and that dust trick that asthma back up. Now, the ones that was having the seizures: T.J. drives the school bus for the handicapped; Alvenia runs a childcare center. Married, they all married; they all finished school. And it took Alvenia about five years to finish college, 'cause that made her slow; she was always a slow learner, called them LDs [Learning Disabilities]. But I never let her know that; it'd just take a little longer for you than I do with the other children before the lessons. But all of them finished school, finished college, and they married, got their own home. Now, this is the stuff -- if I had to [inaudible], but it was a heavy burden on me during that time, because of them being sick, I didn't need to have to worry about them gonna take them away from me. So I said, "I don't want another mother to go through what I went through. Not another one, with not having -- knowing nothing, not knowing -- having no resources at all. I don't want that to happen. So that got me doing the work with the mothers, to help them. And so I went back to school and got an AA [Associates in Arts] in sociology --

STEVENSON

And from what college?

HARRIS

Compton. And I got the BA [Bachelor of Arts] in Dominguez; that's in child development. And then I got an MA [Master of Arts] in psychology. But I got this so I would have -- I would know how, and the resources I need, to help the mothers that need help. And now I've been a parent and teacher for the school district for 27 years. And all of my parents are referred from social service. So you see, I had to get -- God had to get me ready, 'cause I know how they feel. I don't have to wonder, when comes and says, "They taking my children out of my home," -- I know how they feel. But I also know how to get them back. And they're going to get them back, too; I don't lose. I stay up all night figuring out how to win. I can't lose for them, because then I'm all they got. And I know how they appreciate that. I got a house across the street over there; if they don't have a home when it's time to get them children back, and the worker got to come look at the house, they move in over there. Because how they going to get a place when they took the children out of the home and they don't have no income? But when you get the children back, they'll have income. Well, that's intended to be. So you have to always know how to work with the district.

STEVENSON

OK. Why don't we stop --

1.5. Session 3

May 27, 2007

STEVENSON

I'm continuing an interview with Alice Harris on May 27. I'd like to ask you, in your many years of community work, what is your assessment of African-American officeholders, and are there any that sort of stand out in terms of addressing community needs?

HARRIS

Ask that again?

STEVENSON

OK. What is your assessment of blacks who have served -- and I'm not just talking about local government but state government, federal government, in terms of those that have stood out in terms of addressing community needs, in the many years of your community work?

HARRIS

It's difficult to say some things, because you don't want to make people look bad. But I will say to anybody that looked at these documents, I'm in the Watts area, Imperial [Highway] to the south and 92nd [Street] to the north, Alameda [Street] to the east and Century Avenue [Boulevard] to the west. We don't have but one swimming pool, and that's the Ted Watkins [Memorial] Park, which is -- in the area that I'm in, the children can't get there; they'd have to catch a bus, and walk down so far to catch a bus. You don't have a playground in this area. You have one junior high school, and

that's [Edwin] Markham Elementary School. 12 elementary schools feed into that one junior high school. You have one high school in this area, that's [David Starr] Jordan High [School]. And so whatever feeds from Markham feeds into Jordan High, so it's always overcrowded. Test scores are the lowest.

I believe in letting your work show for you; I could brag on anybody, but if you come up through here -- now we're set in the middle of four housing projects. Nowhere else in a community that four housing projects surround that community in that small a space. You have about 85 on a fixed income, and whether it be welfare, [general relief], SSI [Supplemental Security Income], but they're on some kind of a fixed income. We have the highest police crimes in this area. The highest killings in the area. We had Juanita [Millender-]McDonald as a representative; she just passed away. Merv[Mervyn M.] Dymally, he's one of the representative, and Maxine Waters is one of the representatives. Linda Sanchez is one of the representatives. Now, I hope I answered that question.

STEVENSON

Yes, you did.

HARRIS

I went to Inglewood here the other day with Mayor [Roosevelt] Dorn, and they was fighting him so hard to keep a Wal-Mart out in Inglewood, but he was smart, a smart man; he wanted to do something for the community. And now he has built Inglewood up like a little city, it's simply beautiful. We go over there to --

FEMALE

Excuse me?

HARRIS

Yeah, baby?

FEMALE

[inaudible] do you have -- oh, how you doing, miss?

STEVENSON

Fine.

FEMALE

Do you have a screen for --

HARRIS

Ask daddy.

FEMALE

Where he at? In here?

HARRIS

I don't think he back there

STEVENSON

I think I saw him go around the side.

FEMALE

Oh, there he is.

HARRIS

OK. Tell him what you need. And so we was -- I went with Operation Hope, John Bryant, and they fixing to do some more -- the Hollywood Park is fixing to not be Hollywood Park, so they're going to be building beautiful homes in there. So we went on a bus ride, and we drove all around up in the hills and back down in the city, and then they gave us lunch -- and I meant to say, we go over there to Red Lobster; we don't have to go to -- usually you have to go to Cerritos, but now we just go to Inglewood. So I saw such beautiful sights. I came back home where I live, and I like to cry; I was almost ready to say I need to get out of here. And I thought, no, God put me here, and I have to stay. But it did hurt, because it did let you know how little -- and then Janice Hahn is our city councilwoman. Now, the most we ever got in this area was from her daddy, Kenny Hahn. Most we ever got. It took us after the '65 riot, it took us 12 years -- 20 years to get a shopping center, and you ask me, do our representatives help us? Well, speak for yourself, that's all I can say.

STEVENSON

OK. And since we're talking about black elected officials, you talked -- when I asked you at our last session how you got named "Sweet Alice," you talked a little bit about former Congressman Augustus Hawkins, your association with his over the years he was both Assemblyman and then Congressman, as you know.

HARRIS

I didn't have that much association -- I was in business five years before I knew that I was supposed to have a 501c. I didn't get into business to go into business; I got into business to make a difference, to give us some resources in the community, because we had had a constant fight in front of my house. And when I got home, the neighbors ran to me and were scared; they were trying to move the car, and nobody would listen to them, and they were scared that I would move, and they didn't want me to move. So they came over telling me how hard they had been trying. Well, I work for the school district. When we wanted anything done, you pick up the phone and you call that department and it's done. So when they said it, I laughed and said to them, "Don't worry, I'll get it moved."

It took me three days. Calling -- every time I call one place, they said call another; call that one, call another; call that one -- so I got mad. Just don't make sense. I'm going down here and I'll meet the mayor. And I know I'm going to jail, because I'm not going to move until I get some action, even if it's in jail. And I hadn't been to the City Hall. Knew about it, I went, and I found the way to the Mayor's office -- I mean, the Mayor was Bradley, Tom Bradley, and I found my way to his office, and I went in to go there, and there was a guard at the door, and so I went to pass, and he asked me, did I have an appointment. And I said no, I don't want to sit down, I just want to talk to the mayor just a few minutes; he said, you gonna need an

appointment. I said, uh-uh, ain't gonna need no appointment; I'm going to talk to him. And he went to get up, I just sat down, because I didn't want him to scope me out, so I just sat down, and went to yelling and hollering. And a young white lady was passing by the -- and she actually thought, 'cause he was standing over me, and I'm sitting down there screaming, that he had hit me. And so she threw her pocketbook, and the others coming through there, they went to throwing things at the guard, and the guard went to hollering.

Next thing I know, I heard this nice voice saying, "What's the matter?" And I said, "I want to see the Mayor." And he said -- no, first he asked the guard if he hit me. He said, "I didn't hit that lady; I just told her she needed an appointment." So the other staff was telling other people to quiet down. Then the Mayor said, "Well, pardon me, get her in here." They couldn't pick me up; I just rolled over and got up. Went in, and they got me some water, and they got me some tissue, because I was hurt, I was crying. And I had fixed a sandwich, two sandwiches in a bag, because I didn't want to eat no jail food, and I figured if I went to jail, I could have sandwiches. And so he asked me about the bag -- he might have thought I had a gun -- I told him no, I said, I come to go to jail, and these are my sandwiches. He said, "You hungry?" I said no. He said, "Did you eat this morning?" I said, "Sure, I ate." "Do you have a family?" "Sure." "Do you have children?" I said, "Well, I carried them to school before I came here, and my sister-in-law is going to be watching them if I don't get back. He looked up at -- the whole room was full of people. And he finally looked up and said, "Cancel the call; she's not mentally ill." They was going to take me to the mental hospital. I told them "No, I am not mentally -- I work every day."

And then I began to tell him the problem that we were having in the community, that you couldn't go in and had take the children in the evening because they was fighting, killing so bad. I said, "They stealing and setting cars on fire, and we don't have no resource." He said, "Well, if you promise me you won't do this again, I'm going to give you a key, I'm going to give you a number, and wherever I am, that number will find me." He said, "Now, don't mistreat it, but you just look like you mean business." I said, "I mean business, 'cause what I'm gonna do, I'm going to get off on sabbatical, I'm going to take me a year off, and I'm going to start some kind of program there at my house to bring in resources so this won't have to happen again." He said, "Well, if you gonna take a year off your job," and I told him I worked for the school district. He said, "Well, now, if you gonna do that, I'm going to give you this number. You can always find me, wherever I am. And anything you need done, we can [inaudible]." I came out, I felt so good. And then they gave me a ride home, they bring me back home, so I didn't catch the bus.

I felt so good, and I come, I said now, we've got [inaudible]; I was glad to be able to call a meeting and tell the neighbors that now I'm going -- where

my office was, they called it the Little House. I had a Hispanic lady staying in there, but she wasn't paying no rent; she was just homeless. And I said I'm going to take that house, and I let her have the bedroom, but we gonna take the living room and the dining room and the kitchen and bath, and we're going to start us a community center. And whatever we need, we gonna do it, because I can take my own house, because it's paid for; it had been given to me for waiting on people that was there, and then one died and they took the mother to Chicago, so then they sold me the house. They just -- almost gave it to me, for like \$4,000. I told them that I started the program; I said, because if I can't pay the light bill, we'll meet in the daytime. And if I can't pay the gas bill, when it gets cold, we'll just wrap up. So I know we have a community center. It ain't costing nobody nothing, and we ain't asking for nothing. I got Mrs. McDrummond, and I said to Mrs. McDrummond, "Mrs. McDrummond," -- the community then was basically, at one time, the community was Hispanic, and the housing project was Afro-American. But Afro-Americans, during the '65 riots, the Hispanics move to Cudahy and Bell and all. So you could rent a house cheaper than staying in the housing projects, so the blacks began to move up into this community. So during that time, we was getting mixed, and that was a lot of the fighting going on with the black teenagers fighting the Mexican teenagers. So I started a program, Parenting Made Easy. We started with the young ladies, because if you start working with the young ladies, you can get them to make them young boys behave themselves, because they [inaudible]. So I told Mrs. McDrummond, "Now, whatever we do for the brown, we gonna do it for the black. And we gonna name it Parents of Watts [POW] Working with Black and Brown." That way, you didn't have to mix up nobody's name, say the wrong thing. Black and brown is who we was. Whatever we do for the black, we do for the brown; what we do for the brown, we gonna do for the black. Mrs. McDrummond said all right, so we got started, and we started with potluck. Everybody bring a little dish, and we'll meet and come up with what we need to do. But after about three months, there wasn't nobody coming in there but blacks. And I said to Mrs. McDrummond, "Mrs. McDrummond, you know we made a pledge. Now, this ain't for just blacks, we got to have the browns." She said, "Listen," at that time we had a huge tree in the front yard, so actually, our house was private, because the tree had a lot of ivy, it might have been 200 years old, and ivy was everywhere. But you could see, once you got inside the gate. So I liked it because it was private, and a huge backyard there that we go talk about putting some swings out there for the children to swing it, that was going to be a playground. But Mrs. McDrummond said, "[inaudible], I can't bring my people, because if they get here, and someone get angry, you call in immigration, they can't get back to their family. So they have to be where they can see them." I said, "That's no problem. We'll just cut that tree down." And she said, "OK, we cut the tree down."

So I called the man out, [inaudible] cut it down; when he got through, it was \$3,000. I said, man, you got to be kidding. I can't even write \$3,000; I know I don't have \$3,000. He said, "Well, I'm doing this a favor, because it costs me about that much to haul it away after cutting it." He says, "This is a big job. To see what y'all are doing and what it's for, then I want to help you." I said, "All right, [inaudible]. Let me talk to my husband when he comes home from work. I'll get him to borrow the money from the credit union, and then I'll pay it back." So when my husband came, it was coming up Thanksgiving, because my son lived in Oakland, so we was all gonna drive to Oakland for Thanksgiving, and I had cooked tamales and what have you, so I said, "I ain't gonna tell him 'til we get there. So that night after Thanksgiving, I got all the children, we all laid down, and some of them went to see a float show, and the house got quiet. We laid down, and I said to my husband, I said, "Honey, you know when we get back home, we got to move that big tree, because we can't get the browns to come up, because it's blocking the view. And I called, the man came out, he said it would be more than he's charging me, but he wants to help do it, he was a Hispanic." And he said, "Well, what is it gonna cost?" I said, "\$3,000." He said, "\$3,000?" I said, "If you borrow it from the credit union, I'll pay you back." He said, "How you gonna pay me back? You quit your job." That's the first time I didn't have a job. [inaudible] It had never dawned on me I didn't have a job. Well, I'm at my son's house, so I [inaudible], and I kept talking, and then I asked him to give me, and I said, "I turned you off five minutes ago; five minutes ago, I turned you off." [inaudible] my son's house. I said, well, I'll wait 'til I get back home, because he gonna have to do that; he gonna have to get the money. I'll figure a way to pay it back.

So on our way back, I was real nice; I think we stopped and bought a bushel of peas, and I was shelling peas all the way. And I thought then, I'm going to be real nice, and he'll do it. And [inaudible] about two or three weeks, I didn't argue with him; whatever he said, it was all right, and I'd get the children settled down easy, quick, quiet, because usually when he comes from work, he likes to take a nap, and then he'll wake up, and then he'll take the children, and whatever I have to do, I'll do it, but he'll take over. I didn't have him take over; I'd get the children ready for the bed and all -- we had nine children now. So after about the third week, I said, now, he likes pork chops and gravy and rice, so I'm going to fix him a good dinner, because he got to get this money. I'm still figuring how to get him to get this money from the credit union. I said, so I'm going to fix him a good dinner, and I had got me some candlelights, I'm going to have some candlelights. And I was going -- I had it all fixed in mind; I always had some satin linen, but you don't use it every day, but you got it. You bought it, it's just sitting there for whatever day, we always say a rainy day, but I'm going to put this satin linen on there, [inaudible] good now, everything's pleased. And we had this big dinner for it.

So that morning, I got up to go get my stuff at the store, and it was cloudy, so I decided to -- I'd take them to school every day and go pick them up, and so I'd carry them to school, and I'd come on back by the store, and it's cloudy, so it'd rain that night, make it a little better, it's gonna rain. So when I got out the car, there was big drops of rain falling on the car, so I come on in and got my laundry ready, got it on, finished cleaning up, and was just getting ready to go in the kitchen. And I knew it was raining, and it was raining hard; I was in the house, and I knew I had to go get the kids. Phone rings, said, "Mrs. Harris, that big tree fell on top of the Little House." And the girl that lived next door, it was her mama that I was letting stay in there. I said, "The tree fell on the house?" I said, "Did your mother get hurt?" She said, "No, she was here when it started raining; she came here with me. She's here." I cut the TV on; they said, "It's a tornado. Everybody stay in; don't nobody get out. It's a tornado." I don't know if you remember.

STEVENSON

I remember.

HARRIS

And we had one since, but you had that one. It took out half of that music center's top. I was working over on 117th, the school had an office there. It took off some of the windows out of that [inaudible]. It came on by Broadway Federal Savings, and that's where I had my little small savings account, when I had anything saved, it would be there. It took out the whole front window, and then come over to Lou Dillon, and took that tree down, knocked that tree down. I said, God, that scared me to death. First thing in my mind -- you know, you always got an evil spirit and a good spirit, and I said, "There goes your class. It wasn't meant for you to have it." Now, that's in my mind, but I never did ask them; I just called the job and told them to tell my husband to come home, that the tree had fell on top of the house. Well, he was scared, because he thought the tree -- we had a big avocado tree; he thought it had fell on top of our house. And so they was -- it was dangerous for them to be on the street, but by the [inaudible], I got to go see about my family. So he [inaudible], he said all the [inaudible] trees in the street, he would have to go another route, but he got home. And when he got home, I had never went out there, I wasn't going out there. And I told him, I said, "It wasn't here, the big tree on top of the Little House." And he says, "Well, it looks like -- you said you needed the tree down." Now, he knew if that tree fell on top of the Little House, that house was going to be mashed in. So he said, "Let's go see the damage." So we came, and we went outside, and it was a driveway, so we went down, pushed our way through that driveway, and then he took and broke enough for us to get to that back door, and when we opened the back door and stepped inside, not a picture on the wall had fell. When the tree fell, it fell like that. Now, if it had fell and cracked like that, it would have smashed the house. But it made a [inaudible]. Called the insurance man, he said, "Do whatever you

have to do, and send us the bill." Now, not only are we getting the tree moved, but we got new carpet on the floor; we remodeled the little windows and got some nice windows in there, got us a new refrigerator, remodeled the bathroom. So when we opened back up, we was ready. And they were just as clean and clear, got a new fence around the house. That's how God [inaudible]. I knew then, God had [inaudible]. I knew then that I would always make it, whatever come up, I knew I would make it, because I was there, God had put me there. And he'd always see to it, as long as I behave myself and don't forget who I am; I'm just a servant working for those that can't help themselves.

STEVENSON

OK. Let me ask you: when you formed the Parents of Watts, a couple of questions -- one, what was the mission or goals in what you were trying to do? What were the critical needs you were addressing?

HARRIS

Our mission was to bring the Afro-Americans and the Hispanics together, and stop them from killing up one another, because that was what was happening.

STEVENSON

And what year was that?

HARRIS

That was in '76, '77. Somewhere in there. '76, '77. Al, you remember what year that tree fell on that house?

AL HARRIS

It would have been the early '70s; I don't know exactly when.

HARRIS

OK. Somewhere in there. I knew God had paved the way for us, and he'd always be there. No [inaudible]. And we've been there ever since. Now, we've been there since we started in '74, '75, and we've been there ever since. Nothing else has happened. Nothing. Now, when the storm came here, it didn't touch up there; it flooded me here, but it didn't flood nobody else. Not in Compton and not in Watts. And the flooding was Compton and Watts, but it only flooded my house. Well, I got a new one, and got all the neighbors down there -- every one of them got new stuff. Every one of them fixed up their homes and got whatever they need. If it hadn't flooded mine, they wouldn't have gotten anything. I could fix up my house, I was still working; that wasn't the problem for me to fix my -- in fact, I had just about finished fixing it. That's how God works. And you know he did it, 'cause I didn't do that. Wasn't something I did; he'd bring those storms in.

STEVENSON

And when you formed Parents of Watts to, as you say, keep blacks and Hispanics --

HARRIS

[inaudible].

STEVENSON

-- to bring blacks and Hispanics together, what were some of the specific programs?

HARRIS

Parenting Can Be Made Easy, remember? That's the one we was working with the young women. And then we were counseling. Our goal was to stop the teenagers from fighting and killing one another. The browns killing the blacks and the blacks killing -- if you was on this side of the street, and it was a brown over there, and a black was walking on this side, they could cross one another's path. That house on the corner was a gang-infested house; I bought it to get them out of here. That's where all the guns and the ammunition was held up, right by that house.

STEVENSON

So did you deal directly with gang members?

HARRIS

Uh-huh. See, they my neighbors. I don't see them as gang members; I see them as my neighbors. And a majority of them now, I know when their mamas was born; definitely knew when they were born. And they're [inaudible]. So if they have -- some of those groups across that track come over here every Sunday, and they [inaudible]. But they know me enough, [inaudible].

STEVENSON

How did you establish -- you said they were your neighbors, people you've known for years. What common ground did you come to try to stop the killing, stop the hostility and the violence?

HARRIS

We started -- got a teacher, and I bought the house that was next door, that's the classroom. And we started an adult school, where the teachers come here. They didn't have to go to school to get their high school diploma; we had the school there for about 20 years. That was one of the things, we was getting them in school and in college. We carried 63 to Morristown, Tennessee, and I got the pictures up there now, the newspaper write-up, but we carried them and got them all in college. We carried -- how many did we carry to Hawaii, hon?

AL HARRIS

[inaudible]

HARRIS

About 45, carried to Hawaii. That's when I got the second name, "Sweet Alice." By the time I got back from Hawaii, every kid around there was saying "Sweet Alice." Well, remember they live here, so we got in the neighborhood [inaudible].

STEVENSON

Several of the other interviewees, people I've interviewed, have talked about how the whole character or makeup of gangs has changed, say in the last 30 or so years. Would you discuss that a little bit from your perspective?

HARRIS

I don't think the [inaudible] person changed. 30 years ago, it was -- maybe 40 years ago, it was alcohol and cigarettes, and then they got into weed, PCP [Phencyclidine], and then it got to be another one [inaudible] cigarettes, I forget the name, that drug. But people act according to what they take, what they've had. If I sit here and get drunk, and I go outside, I'm going to act like a drunk person. If I sit here and get full of dope, or however they take it, when I go out there, I'm going to act like I'm on dope, because it's going to tell me what to do. So that's what the action is, when they change, they change from alcohol to drugs. And when they have alcohol, they were fighting. When the drugs came in, they start to have chains and sticks and bats. That was in '65, when they was using that. In the '70s, they started using knives; in the '80s, they use guns. Now, that didn't have anything to do with the gang; it had to do with what they're using. Now, the drugs, they come into the community; you don't grow them here. So they have to be brought into here. But have you ever thought, if all our teenagers and young folks straighten up and do right, who would be out of a job?

STEVENSON

Drug dealers.

HARRIS

You would have the probation, the jails, the lawyers, the social workers; all of them wouldn't have a job. So some lifestyles is based on people getting in trouble.

STEVENSON

So you would call it, it's actually profiting off the community, exploiting.

HARRIS

That's what they do. That's what's done. Every day the train boxcar was over on the track over there, and it stayed over there for about -- they said it was about two or three weeks just sitting there. They finally broke in it, load of guns. So everything got a gun around here then.

STEVENSON

When was that?

HARRIS

When did that thing happen? It's gone -- that ain't been six months ago. But before then, in Nickerson Gardens Housing Project, there was a big truck left over there. And they finally, after set so long, they break in them. And they were full of guns, automatic.

STEVENSON

You think that was on purpose?

HARRIS

What -- wouldn't you think so? Nobody's gonna lead -- drive a truck in the housing project, get out and leave it and don't come back. Come on, [inaudible]. That's ridiculous. Sure that happened. The same like -- well, you know that's so far-fetched from being the truth. Well, if you go overseas, they put bombs on those teenagers around there just standing by you because they know they fixing to die and blow up. So sure, it happens. And we here, we see it. I've seen enough to write a book. But I have to be almost ready to leave when I write it, because I've seen a lot.

STEVENSON

Could you talk about some of the other programs that Parents of Watts have instituted?

HARRIS

We have social programs [inaudible]. We just finished doing one for Pasadena High School special-ed students. They graduate, and they're started their own video show thing; we just gave them a luncheon. We'd have mothers that say -- we are counseling with these mothers, and I am counseling with one now, but they already married. But one, if they say they're not married, and we counseling with them, they agree to get married; we take them to the home, and we give them -- it don't cost them anything; we give that to them. The professors at Pepperdine, when they have their lectureship every year, their out-of-town professors stay at our home. So it's social, it's really a social -- for the less fortunate, that we can carry them and make them see something. They'd say, if you get an education, you can have this too. We built it, we owned it, it's paid for. You can do the same thing. Because so often if they see it on television, they said, "those folks." When we take them up there, and they get to spend the night, and they get to see this, they can't say "those folks;" then they have to say "us." And it's a 10,500 square foot mansion; we built it.

STEVENSON

And where is that located again?

HARRIS

In Altadena. That's one of the programs. The next program is the training, job training. And it's free, we train them. The next program that we had is the mentally ill shelter for the men and the women, it's two shelters, one home for the men and one home for the -- Kenny Hahn helped me with the down payment to buy one of the homes, so we could -- nobody else would keep -- they say "crazy people." Mentally ill don't mean you're crazy; you stressed out. Time to time, all of us stressed out. But we had that program, that contract is with the county, and we [inaudible]. And we had a crisis, that house there: it's a crisis center. I have a young lady over in there now, she has a handicapped daughter that's 30 years old and looks and acts like she's five, and she's in a foster home. So I got the mother and her other daughter staying there, so -- and I'm a parent still, a parent and teacher and

a counselor, so I'm telling this social worker she has a home; we're trying to get her reunification back with her. So she's staying over there in that home. And then we have a crisis center where if somebody gets burned out over there in the morning, then the fire department or the police would call us. My daughter there's running for the 52nd Assembly seat; she's going to be in-house -- what's called the inland security, and that's when a crisis happened, they call them to meet them at the site. So we, my daughter's resources when she get to a site, she automatically knows that if they need a place to stay, if they need counseling -- if it's counseling, she'll call me, and my husband will take me to the site. If they need a place to stay, she'll call me, and we will have the police or somebody bring the family. That crisis.

Now, on holidays, I cook for the shelter. But all of them that has been in the shelter over the years, they know I do that. So they going to be coming in. And I take off, the staff takes off, but I stay to cook, 'cause I want them to know it is a holiday, and they part of that holiday. And so we have the holiday around here. You see me fixing over here now, nobody stay here with me and my husband. But you see me over there just as busy -- holiday tomorrow, I want them to have a holiday. We gonna put that pit up and that smoke gonna be there, we gonna be eating ribs, eating barbecue. That's what I do on every holiday. Every Sunday evening, I cook for the shelters, for the ones in there, and I think right now we got about 21. But I cook 'cause I want them -- I know they don't have one good dinner, most of them. So usually I put some on before I go to church, but then when I come back from church, I finish cooking it, but [inaudible]. I like to do that, because I know how good it makes you feel when people think you care. Lot of time, that's all they need to straighten up, is to think somebody cares. They done burnt the bridges from their families. They been put down, and so now they just think it's too late, don't nobody care. I do care. Their homes, if nobody ever asked me what programs I got, you would never know it was a mentally ill home; those are family members. And that's what they're called; it's a family member. You see them come by here and that's one of my family members, go there. If you see somebody across the street, they'll say, "That's one of Miss Harris' family members." We don't label them because they're human, they just made a mistake. Everybody has made a mistake, all of us. I tell them all the time: there's two classes of people in the world, only two. One's been caught, and the one didn't get caught. No difference.

STEVENSON

Let me ask you this. In speaking about your services to the mentally ill, I did an interview with Dr. Hiawatha Harris, and one of the things we talked about in that interview was getting over some of the stigma associated with mental illness and we were also talking about also with the disabled, and how for a long time we took care of those individuals within our families and didn't talk

about it. Did you find any trouble getting over -- is it still regarded as a stigma? Do you have any problems in that regard?

HARRIS

Keeping the mentally ill?

STEVENSON

Right. Or, like I said, getting people to seek help: do you experience any problems with that?

HARRIS

No.

STEVENSON

No.

HARRIS

Number one, I was a teenage mother at 13 myself. And I was -- ran away from home, and I was homeless when I was 15, 16. And by the grace of God, this nurse -- one in the hospital that lived next door to us, and I had a chance to go babysit for the Coens, they had a bridge party that particular day, and I was so good they kept me. That was the grace of God that gave me a job. I was supposed to be the bad girl; nobody's gonna give you a job if you're bad.

And I was so good to them, Miss Coen was so good to me, and she said to me one day, she said, "What would you like to be when you grow up?" I thought I was all I could be; I wasn't living for me. Then now that I had the job, I knew I had to straighten my life up, because I didn't want to lose the job. So I'm just living to keep the job and my son. And I told her I was all I could be, and she laughed, and she said, "Your whole life is in front of you." I sort of thought she was trying to make fun of me at that time; it's supposed to be white folks, and then [inaudible], I thought maybe she wasn't probably going to need me no more. But anyway, she told me, she said, "You got a million-dollar smile, and I want to bring it out. What would you like to be?" She asked me again, I said, "Well, maybe fix hair," because I did fix hair; I'd do the hair around there. "Oh," she said, "you want to be a beautician." And I said, "No, I want to fix hair." She said, "Baby, the word for that is beautician," and she had me pronounce it until I pronounced it right.

But she wasn't hard with me, she was easy with me, so she didn't scare me, but she was hurting me, because I was thinking that she was going to fire me, and I needed the job and I loved the children, and this was about a year after I had worked with her. I went home that evening and I cried all night long, 'cause I couldn't hardly read. I learned how to read, I couldn't spell, but I could sound the thing out a little. And I knew I couldn't get no job. Crying, and then I thought about it, and she said I had a million-dollar smile, I look in the mirror and I don't know what that is. And the next day I went back -- I didn't want her to see me 'cause my eyes and turned red and swollen, and I was trying to dodge it, and she told me, as I was getting the

children down for bed, she came in there and she said, "Young lady, what is your problem?" I looked at her and I started crying again, 'cause she was going to fire me. She said, "Why are you crying? Number one, you can't walk around in my house and not speak to me." I hadn't spoken to her all that morning; I would see her and go the other way or something. She said, "Why are you crying?" I said, "Because you gonna fire me." She said, "Are you pregnant again?" "No." "Well, why am I going to fire you?" I said, "'Cause you can't help me." "Why can't I help you?" I said, "'Cause I can't read." She said, "That's why I want to help you. I know you can't read. I still hear you trying to read to the children. And one day, they might not need you, but your son will always need you. And I want to help you, because I know you have not learned to do that." Oh, man. She said, "You can't do it by yourself, but give me your hand," I gave her my hand, walking down the hall, she's saying, "You see, I'm going to help you do what you need to do." And I said, "You can help me learn how to read?" She said, "Yeah. That's not hard to do, it's just you learn to do it. But I'm going to get somebody to help you learn to do that."

I said, "Oh, my God." I could have shouted, but I know I had to keep my cool. And I smiled, and I wasn't dodging no more. That was a good evening. And when I got home that evening, man, I looked in the mirror; she said I got a million-dollar smile, I was trying to find the million-dollar smile. And then in about a week's time, she said to me, "My God, you found that million-dollar smile." I said, "What do the million-dollar smile look like, so I know when I look in the mirror, I can see it?" She said, "If I had taken your picture before I told you that, you were young, but you walking around looking like an old woman. You were too young to look that way. I knew if you started smiling, your youth would come back." I'm still smiling; I never did quit. I still smile. I said, "Oh, my goodness."

And she did, she got the lady at the beauty shop, [inaudible] beauty shop; we was too poor to go in there. That was the lady she got to tutor me. And she started me with three letters. C-A-T, D-O-G, came up from that, and then on Saturdays, if I didn't have to babysit for them, she had me working in the beauty shop; she had [inaudible] in the beauty shop, and she was the owner of the middle-class, the upper-class and middle-class black people's beauty shop. And I got to know them, where they wouldn't give me the time of day, you would never get to know them, because they was teachers, doctors, lawyers. There I was fixing -- washing their hair. And they got to where they were saying, "Alice! Alice, when you gonna get to me?" I was somebody. The ones I was running with, I didn't have time to even go that way, because I would be working, when I wasn't working on my job, then I would be working in the beauty shop, and every day I put those children to sleep, the chauffeur carried me from down there in for tutoring.

Now, to show you how rich they was, they had -- I was their nurse for the two children; they had a cook, they had a maid, they had a chauffeur, and

they had a gardener. Five around there every day. And Mr. Coen's mother owned a Saks Fifth Avenue in New York, so she wore the best clothes, and I could wear her clothes. So when she didn't want something, she'd give it to me. So that meant I was dressing the best. Now, you know, there I was now working in the best beauty shop, dressing the best, because I'm dressing like the upper-class; mine are hand-me-downs, but hand-me-down from some places, they weren't in no Saks Fifth Avenue, because we didn't have no Saks Fifth Avenue; we had a Duncan's, which is the same as something else like that.

So that was something that my mother would tell me sometimes, she'd say, "Gosh, it sure is good, sure has brought you out," changed my whole atmosphere. I was going to the upper-class people's church, I wasn't going to the poor church, because I knew them, they knew me, and I was having to work on some of their heads sometimes, and I'm just getting tutoring. But she likes me so well, on my off day, I could work in the beauty shop on the weekend; my tutoring was Monday through Friday, but on Saturdays, if I worked in the beauty shop, that was sure enough all right. And I did finally got to take the state test and passed. And I left and went to Michigan. But when I left her job, I was going to work for the same beauty shop, and I asked her what could I do to pay her, because I owed this to her, and I want -- whatever I can do to pay you back, just let me know. She said, "Well, there is something you can do to pay me back." I said, "Just say it." She said, "Look at that million-dollar smile. I like it." She said, "Whenever you see somebody that was in the same shoes you were in when I met you, you do for them what I have done for you." That made all the sense in the world, because then it made me know what she had done for me; I hadn't thought that thought. And when she said that, it let me know, sure enough, what she had done for me. I said, "That ain't no problem, I'll do it." I've been doing that ever since. No job don't bother me, I enjoy it. Don't ever get tired of it; I enjoy it. I tell them, I play all day long, and I win.

So the question is that I don't -- when I see someone like me, I don't have to say, "Can I help you?" I don't have to say, "Well, what's the problem?" I know what it is. So I go in to win. If a mother comes in her now to that door, and say she has two or three children, and she comes in. "Come on it," 'cause the door ain't never locked. And she's looking -- I'm looking at her, I saw her before she got in here; I saw them children before she got in here, and I ain't gonna look at her no more. "Just come on in." And she comes in, and she gonna tell me somebody told her about me, and they told her if they find me, I might can help her. I say, "You got that right, you come to the right place." I said, "Just sit down here and let me tell you I can help you." Then I tell her about me; I tell her what it took to bring my life back together. Then I said to her, "Now, come on over here and let's have us a sandwich, because I'm hungry, and you might not be hungry but I want you to eat with me." I really want to feed her and them kids, but if I asked her

when she first come in here, "Come on in, would you like to have something to eat?" -- she would say no.

So you have to know how to help a person without them knowing that you are helping them. You just have to know; it's just something you have to know. And I always do it; I don't ever ask them. You see, I got a picture in there, a computer lab over there that I train social workers that is coming out of college. And I would train them, you can look in a child's eye, and it will tell you what's going on in their house. Every day, every time. And I've done that so many years, but it all comes back to me. I wore the shoe, I'm going to help you then. And I'm not ashamed to tell anybody; I've been as bad as I was good. Reason I know you can change, because I changed. It makes all the sense in the world; it ain't like -- it's just like -- I told you about the PhD, and the PhD -- that's what it's like. You read it, and I experienced it. If I have experienced it, I can tell it better than you; all you did was read it. I got a story behind it. That makes the difference. When that mother walks through in here, walked in here and sat down, I've been there. I know exactly how she feels.

But I know she have pride also; I know she's ashamed to tell me all everything, but I'm looking at her; she don't have to tell me nothing, I'm looking. I'm looking at the children half-dressed -- I had one the other day, and she might come Thursday; she lives in Imperial Courts; I went to her baby's funeral. She had twins, and one died at three months. She came in here the other day, the lady brought her in here. Hi, baby. That's my son. The lady brought her, and she reminded me that I came to her baby's funeral, and that made me know her. She has five children, living on the county, but she has actually never had a house for all of them, but she'd lived with families with all of them. And what else did she tell me? Whatever she told me led me to know she was a bad act, and I sat right there and broke her down. And then I had to tell her why I broke her down, because she has to take the responsibility. She's been a bad mother; it's her fault, and she gonna straighten up. If it's my fault, I can do something about it, but if you cause me to do it, I can't do nothing about you, but when it's me, I can do something about it. And that's the first time I had broke one down in a long time, and I'm just thinking about it, telling you, just thinking about it. But I sure did. She's supposed to be back Thursday, because she's got to come to class.

STEVENSON

What is it that you teach in your parenting classes? What are the -- where you're teaching particularly the young mothers in our community?

HARRIS

Young mothers, usually I have an open enrollment, so I've always got somebody new and somebody old. But -- and then I got a girl that's been following for a year, taping. Mostly in the class now are [inaudible], I've got two in there. But usually, the -- it depends; it's hard for me to say just what

I teach, because I teach so much. Responsibility. The first thing I always teach is stress. What is stress? Because if you're trying to hold onto stress, and I'll give you an example, what I give them, tell them. I always asked them what stress is, and they don't know what -- I know they don't know what stress is, they'd be trying to say what it does. And I'm trying to tell them what it is, and then I'd say to them, well, you know -- this is an example, because Christ always gave examples -- and I'll tell them that me and my husband ain't married, and we been staying together, 'cause I want a big wedding, and I want to have a five-mile train, and I promised mama before she died I was going to do this, and so until he make enough money, there ain't gonna be no wedding.

Finally one day he come in, he give me that ticket; he done hit the lottery. What am I going to do? I'm going to have this great big wedding, because I got plenty of money now. But don't nobody know about this five-mile train but me; that's my secret. So when we get to the bridal shop, I tell my best girl, "Now, you know what to do, I'm going into the designer's room." I'd go in there and tell this lady I want this five-mile train, and she said to me, "But you gonna have to have ten people on one side, ten people on the other side, get you some teenagers." I'd go back out there and tell the best girl, "Hey, I got to have ten teenage boys, ten teenage girls, tuxedos and the gowns, get it ready." I don't have a problem, because I got the money. Now I go over to Beverly Hills and rent out the whole penthouse floor. Doesn't take me long, because I planned this so long. But remember, I know the President of the United States; I know the governor, I know the mayor. So I sent all these letters out, and now I'm getting phone calls: they gonna attend. Now, they gonna attend 'cause it's in Beverly Hills; they ain't scared of that.

All right, now I got two days to the wedding, we go trying out gowns, everything is just so pretty, but nobody -- this is my secret -- then they -- I tell them, "Now bring the bridesmaids one hour before time; bring mine 15 minutes to the time," because I don't want nobody to see mine. And I don't want them to put there's on and go to [inaudible] and say we know the sisters. And so now here's the day of the wedding, and everybody's excited, and I see this band, oh, I just can't hardly believe this is me, but it is. And then finally somebody's telling me, "Y'all better go in there and start getting dressed, because the President and his wife are [inaudible]." And somebody come and said, "Guess what! The governor, [inaudible]," -- ooh, I'm so excited. And finally they come and tell me, "Guess what, the gowns are here." I said, "Don't let them out of there; make them all go in there and start getting into gowns." I got a maid over there for the teenagers so they know what to do. So they all get dressed, finally the girls said, "Now, Miss Harris, come on, let me get you, because you got to have some brown, [inaudible], blue," and I'm sitting here getting my hair ready, and I'm just so

excited; this day has finally come and I'm glad it's here. And I look at my watch, ten more minutes, my gown's gonna be here. And at the time, the phone rings; I pick up the phone, "Miss Harris, where was your wedding at today? We had two weddings today; we got one in England, and one in Beverly Hills." I said, "Mine's in Beverly Hills." She said, "Guess what, the delivery boy has picked up the wrong package. He picked up your gown, and it's going to England, and the plane has left already." Now, what can I do about that dress? Nothing. That's [inaudible]. I can't do nothing about it. I can't do nothing. I can jump out the window and kill myself; that ain't gonna bring that dress back. I can knock upside the walls, [inaudible]. So I go down there and tell them that: they done sent my wedding dress to England. But just give me 20 extra minutes, and the wedding will start." Come back in, and I'm so hurt, but remember, don't nobody know about this train but me," and I said -- "What'd they say?" They said, "Ooh." But I get dressed -- remember, I got plenty of money; I got a gown up there for the reception. So I pulled that gown, and they go telling me how pretty that gown -- the governor says, "Oh, Miss Harris, that's pretty, this is pretty," when I'm thinking, it ain't that long a train. But we get started, finally we get started; I get to the top -- now this reception dress is plan B. The wedding dress was plan A. I can't do nothing about plan A; now I got to get plan B. I get to the top of the steps to go out, and the governor stood and the President and look up and say, "That a girl." I know they're smiling. I go on down the stairs, and I look over there, and I see the governor and his wife, and she says, "My goodness, you look beautiful." I'm feeling good. I go on down there and see some of my homie girls, and they said, "God, look at that dress she got on! Mm, that's pretty, she got to give me that." I'm steppin' high. I get onto the aisle, and my husband, he says, "I know you wasn't gonna let no dress hold you back from us all these many years." I'm smiling. Then the preacher come out. He says, "Before we have this wedding, let me tell everybody about this lady here. This man is marrying a hell of a woman. She lets nothing stop her. Ooh, I'm feeling good. I'm feeling better with plan B than I would have with plan A. I'm feeling real good. So you see, sometimes plan B, God'll put something in the way to give you a B, because A wasn't what you needed in the first place. All I wanted to do was make a show, and didn't anybody know that but me no way. But B just made me feel good. That's how I do it.

STEVENSON

OK. So that was a good example of stress, but you also, I think, have told me how maybe you're teaching these young mothers to deal with stress.

HARRIS

Uh-huh. But once you [inaudible], then they can go home and think about, I got to have a plan B. Plan A might have been taking the children out of the home. Plan B, you got me, and I'm going to help you get them back, because I don't lose. So you working with B, and that's me. Oh, we'll have

no problems then. Me, with a social worker too, I'm changing the social worker. It's ridiculous how this social worker has done this mother and father, got their children tied up, and he's telling them, writing to the judge that they got a drug problem; they done took 18 tests and every one of them is clean. But he ain't told that; he's telling that they're not taken them, we got proof. He was supposed to come the other evening, and they're making him come, and I'm monitoring him. He didn't show up, calling, but [inaudible] with the big boss. Calling, and he gonna say the mother called and cancelled -- how the mother gonna call and cancel the trip when she here with me? Why are you lying? So I called the big boss. Then when I said that, he said, "Oh, shit. I'm listening." I said, "You messing with the wrong one now. Messing with the wrong one." So he got to come, we set up a meeting Tuesday, and I'm going to get rid of him. Even the judge knows he's lying, and he done penalized him, and making him pay \$1,500, and then he got to come testify why he been sending all these wrong statements. Then when I met him the other day, he done tell me the reasons he's having problems, 'cause his mother is white and his dad is black, and he's always been not accepted. I said, "You crazy. That ain't no big thing; everybody got that now."

STEVENSON

OK. [inaudible]

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