

SACR-4

Interviewee: **Gwendolyn** Duncan

Interviewer: Matt McKenzie

Date: October 26, 2005

M: I'm with **Gwendolyn** Duncan at the St. Augustine public library. The date is October 26, and we're talking about the civil rights movement in St. Augustine. First off, when and where were you born?

D: St. Augustine, Florida, June 28, 1956.

M: What's your educational background?

D: I went to Excelsior Elementary School. It's in the heart of historic Lincolnville, first through fifth grade, then due to forced integration, I was sent to Orange Street School and completed sixth grade there. Seventh through ninth grade at _____ High. Tenth and twelfth grade at St. Augustine High. I graduated with my diploma, honors diploma. I went to St. John's River Community College and received an Associate of Arts degree, and got married, had kids.

M: How long has your family lived in St. Augustine?

D: Since the late 1800's.

M: Where did you live when you were growing up in St. Augustine?

D: Right on Central Avenue, which is now Martin Luther King Avenue.

M: What was the area like when you were growing up?

D: Well when I was growing up it was segregated. Blacks owned many businesses, and only when we went out of the neighborhood were you faced with the problems of segregation. Now some of the streets were occupied by white people, and then there was some occupied by blacks. I was, oh white people **live in a pub**. Then when you ventured downtown you experienced the segregation

because we had our own shops, had our own stores. The church was the center of activity. Like I say growing up, it was just wonderful growing up as a child in Lincolntonville.

M: What were the interactions between blacks and whites, especially the ones that lived in your neighborhood? Were they friendly?

D: No. There was no interaction. In fact we didn't grow up with white kids. Whites that were in our neighborhood were police officers that lived right on the corner or elderly people. You never really saw white children growing up, unless you ventured downtown.

M: Do you still live there in Lincolntonville?

D: No. We recently, my husband and I, moved two years ago to Palm Coast, Florida.

M: How is that community different?

D: It's no sense of community. There is no interaction between neighbors. You don't really know your neighbors. People are not really as friendly as it was when I was growing up in Lincolntonville.

M: Have you lived any other places in St. Augustine? Just Lincolntonville?

D: Yes. From Lincolntonville to Lincolntonville. I was putting roots in Central Avenue, where I grew up, in Midas Street for a long time, and then built a house on Midas Street.

M: This will be mostly directed before you moved here, before you moved to Palm Coast, rather. You said when you were young there was no interaction between white people, at least in a friendly manner?

D: Right.

M: In the last twenty years how has that changed? Has that gotten any better?

D: Yes, it has gotten better, but for kids, because due to forced integration they have to intermingle in schools. I'm a teacher's assistant so I see that white kids and black kids are becoming more friendly towards one another.

M: What types of interactions do you see between blacks and whites?

D: Are you talking in the school setting, or overall?

M: I'm talking overall, the school, professional, the workplace.

D: In the workplace, you're friendly towards one another, but as far as socializing I don't see much interaction in socializing. On the other hand, the organization that I'm involved with, Fortieth Anniversary to Commemorate Civil Rights, there are whites and blacks in our organization, and the recognition ceremonies that we do together there's interaction, but otherwise you don't interact.

M: Have you seen, except the Civil Rights movement in 1964, recently have you seen or experienced any racial tension or discrimination?

D: Yes.

M: Can you elaborate on that? What were they?

D: When you venture into the downtown area, you would think you were maybe back in the 1960s because there's not many black people socializing or interacting in the downtown area. Sometimes you see a school bus full of kids or on a tram or trains. This is my experience. When the king and queen, King Carlos and his wife **Sofia** [the king and queen of Spain visited St. Augustine on April 1st, 2001] came to St. Augustine. . . .

M: I was here for that, actually.

D: You were?

M: Yeah.

D: My thoughts on the matter was when he looked over the city of St. Augustine he probably didn't think any black people lived there.

M: That's true.

D: My daughter, she went to the University of Florida. I don't know if students were trying to, a lot of white kids that she was socializing with, they didn't know black people lived in St. Augustine. That was the atmosphere. They asked if she lived in the fort because of people coming to St. Augustine, unless you went to West Augustine or in the heart of Lincolnvillle, you wouldn't think blacks live in St. Augustine.

M: Have you noticed any decrease in racial tension or discrimination?

D: No.

M: It's pretty much the same?

D: It's overt I'd have to say. There's a lot of discrimination in St. Augustine, a lot of racism. I believe if the professional people come back then there may be some changes, but there's a lot of racial tension in St. Augustine. It's like an invisible vapor that just covers our existence up. You go in to a place, you know you are not wanted, you feel it. It's there. It's not as open as it was when I was growing up, but it's there. You feel it.

M: You mention when professionals come back. These people with professional occupations. Were they seemed to have been driven out of St. Augustine?

D: Driven out, driven out.

M: Do you have any examples of that?

D: I'd rather not say.

M: Ok. That's fine, that's fine. You mentioned West Augustine, which recently has at least gotten some press and some effort has been going into it with the Federal Weed and Seed Program, the Community Development area, the West Augustine Improvement Association. What do you know of these programs? Are they working, are they effective?

D: Well it sparked an interest. I guess I think they're improving it a lot. The problem is, it gave them some new hope, that they have not been forgotten. I guess that could happen since Congresswoman **Coleen Brown** came and said it looked like a third world country.

M: What do you see, well eventually it gives people a sense of hope, what are they doing in particular that gives them hope and what are they doing to keep it going? What are they doing in the communities?

D: West Augustine, for example, they're tearing down all the little shacks, and all the little shacks that are being torn down and they're building them new homes. But those homes are not affordable to a working class person that's probably just making minimum wage. They seem to think a \$100,000 home, (I guess, [they think]), is affordable. A \$100,000 home is not affordable for a person making minimum wage. Especially in St._____.

M: So are you saying they're focusing on the wrong things?

D: Yes. Not only the wrong group of people, [but the wrong things]. After a while,

gentrification is going to drive those people out. Out of their homes. Taxes are going to increase, they can't afford them. And its going to drive blacks, African Americans out of the community.

M: Now you mention that professionals have been driven out of St. Augustine. What jobs do you see black people working in St. Augustine?

D: Same as I did growing up. Teachers, not many doctors, not many engineers. You can probably count the lawyers on your hand. On one hand. I don't think you can say we have more principals, black principals, than we had in the sixties, when we had segregation.

M: When you had to have the black principals for a black school.

D: You had to have a black principal.

M: When people from St. Augustine, go to get educated...

D: They find other places to go.

M: Is that from discrimination, or just lack of opportunities?

D: Discrimination and lack of opportunities. One of my friends who I know had a Master's Degree from the University of Florida in Administration. His wife had gotten her Master's degree later, but they gave her a school and her husband had the opportunity to have a school to be a principal, happened very late in his life, his career, almost near retirement. I see there's racism against the black male, against the black female, but not as much as the black males, and they do leave. There are no black dentists. Like I said, attorneys. Professional men in the sixties, the late sixties, after that they left the town.

M: Where do they primarily end up going? Just anywhere?

D: Not anywhere. A lot of black professionals go to Atlanta. I know Orlando was on the horizon for black professionals. Miami, Fort Lauderdale area, and some just go north, New York, Detroit, different places, Chicago.

M: Have you noticed any increase in black involvement in City government? Or county government, too.

D: Not county government, but City government, we do have a black commissioner in our city. But the county, [to African Americans] their opportunities and doors are closed. And I don't know if its because of the Republican base, a lot of people who are Democrats don't get to vote in that election. Maybe that has a lot to do with it. The way they draw the county lines, the district lines. A lot of black people do not live in St. Augustine anymore. For instance, I have five children. Two went to the University of Florida. My son graduated with an industrial engineering degree from the University of Florida with a minor in business. He has yet to be able to find a job.

M: In St. Augustine?

D: Anywhere. Unless he goes north, and he wants to stay in this area, but he cannot find a job in his field.

M: Are there jobs available? Has he been interviewing a lot?

D: Yes, he has been interviewing. I don't know what it is. He's gone back to the University of Florida to get a Master's degree in Building Construction so he can build his own business. Another one of my daughters went to University of Florida. She made it on an engineering degree, I mean an engineering scholarship. She did not finish. She went three years and she kept changing her

major. And I have two other daughters. One who just recently attained the Outreach Specialist job at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind. But she started teaching, she has a Master's degree in Administration. There weren't any opportunities for her, she had to leave the state. To even get a teaching position. I had another daughter who graduated from Florida A and M University, [earned a] Bachelors degree in biology. Went to Florida State and got a Master's degree in Public Health_____ research. You know where she had to go to get a job? Orlando. The American Heart Association, she's the director of **priority** initiatives for American Heart Association. She's a director of the Florida _____. But the opportunities for blacks...I was told a few years back if you graduated from schools in _____**county**, jobs would be here for you. It was not so.

M: Moving on to another subject, as I understand it, there are currently no African-Americans working in the city police department, and there are very few working in the county Sheriff's department.

D: Such racism that it drives those that were hired to another [position]...I mean, just to seek better pay, or not even take the harassment.

M: Police officers are being harassed out of jobs? Could you give any examples?

D: I wouldn't feel comfortable.

M: Alright, that is fine.

D: There is opportunity in St. Augustine to be the first black whatever. The first black fireman, he had to Jacksonville because of the money situation, they were not paying him a compatible salary, so he had to Jacksonville.

M: I know that within the last year or two, there have been a few cases of police

discrimination or brutality against black members of the community. I'm trying to get these on tape, what were they?

D: Well, the police tazed a young man. He died from it. They found the police department at fault. This young man I heard was a very outstanding citizen. He worked very hard, his mother was an attorney, but he died. He died at the hands of the police. Another young man, Mr. **Barnes**, there was a fight going on at Anastasia Island at a bar or restaurant or something. And the police broke his neck. He's paralyzed today. My son for an example. This happened a few years ago. They were having a little fair that they have at a little Catholic _____ San Marco. I'm trying to think of what the name that little fair they have every year, but he went down, the day before he went down there was a little racial tension between the attendants, whites and blacks. And my daughters went that night but they did not get hurt or anything, but they were telling me about the little tension at the park between the whites and blacks. And my son went down, he took a stick with him just in case somebody would jump on him, but he went to have a good time at the fair. And, which was really crazy, pulled the stick out and asked a man to hold the stick, because he feared that somebody was going to jump on him. And the reason he feared this was because whites had jumped him one night coming home. The police _____ the riot, the police handcuffed him, threw him in the back of a police car, a hot police car. Kept him there back there for hours. My daughters had called me. They asked me to pick him up, they didn't charge him with anything, but the idea of him handcuffed with his hands behind his back, throwing him in a hot police car and leaving him there for hours and not

charging him with anything, it was another sign of police brutality.

M: Well what has been the community response to this?

D: Well, we still have a few who will rise up and go to meetings and voice their opinions. But there's nothing to come of this. It is so discouraging. I went to a church service they had on the Westside where black people could come after that young man died from being tazed. Many people got up with incidences of police brutality and nothing has been done.

M: Has the Sheriff's Department or the government said anything about efforts to make things better? Have there been at least efforts to reach out and make things better.

D: Well the Sheriff came, Sheriff **Taylor** at the time, he did come and address the crowd and said he would address all the problems and complaints that people had. The NAACP came down, but somehow to this day, believe it or not, there are still people who do not want to get involved as a civil rights movement, they had to bring in people from the outside, from other places, because it is almost like you don't want to start up expecting trouble. You see what is going on, but what can you do about it. It's like, I can't do anything.

M: Well other than those police brutality cases, do you know official charges of discrimination in the city or against the city?

D: The only one I know of is the **Barnes** case, and the city was sued. I was at the Commission meeting when they won their case.

M: Yeah, the governments paying every year, I think. Do you know if those...those [cases] would have been in the last two, three years?

D: I guess when in 2003 was when the **Barnes** case, I'm not exactly sure when it happened, but I remember cause I was at the commission meeting at the time when they were awarded the settlement with the city, it was in 2003. I was there for another purpose, but I was there and witnessed the city approve settling with the **Burns** family.

M: The impression I'm seeming to get is that the cases of discrimination by the police and brutality just seem to be on the rise in the last few years. Do you get that impression?

D: Oh yes.

M: Can you think of any reason why that might be? Is it the personnel? Or just the atmosphere?

D: I couldn't answer that question. It could be the personnel, because where did all the people go that were racist in the 1960s?

M: Actually that segues perfectly into my next question, because I was going to ask the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen's Council were very active in St. Augustine in the 1960s. They seem to be less vocal, anyways, whether or not they're still around. Do you know of any organization like that that are still around in St. Augustine or the surrounding area?

D: I really don't know. I'm sure those people secretly socialize. Because there are still die-hard racists. If they were there one day, where did they go the next day? It's not popular right now to come out as a KKK member. But there are some parts of the country, and they might be in St. Augustine. But there are people you walk by everyday, and look in their faces. Probably the same people that tried to drown the demonstrators at the beach. The same ones who threw bricks. You just don't know they are.

M: You're a teacher's assistant. Were you a teacher's assistant here in St. Johns County?

D: Yes.

M: The school system was officially integrated in 1970. I went to high school in this county, I went to Nease. Using Nease as an example, [that] is a school that's almost completely white. St. Augustine is much more integrated, much more mixed. Actually, I think St. Augustine's the only one that is district for the majority of the areas where black people live in St. Augustine. There's also a huge discrepancy between the quality of the schools. Nease is an A school, St. Augustine is a C school. Why do you think that is?

D: It might be related to the teachers. I really can't tell you exactly, but it could be **the parents**. It's a richer area down near Nease. Children have access to computers and they have them at home, and some of the black children have a computer at school, but when they get home, they do not have access to computers, _____ economics.

M: How long were you in the school system here?

D: Let me see, I started substitute teaching in 1987. As a teacher's assistant, it was 1997, no 1998. Because _____ I decided to work full time while I was going to college.

M: Now one of the few opportunities that black people have had over the years in St. Johns County is working as teachers. Have you noticed any increase or decrease in the number of black people who have been working for St. Johns County?

D: Decrease.

M: Is it just because the opportunities here are so few, and the pay is not impressive, or might it be something systematic?

D: I think it's systematic because I believe if they made a concerted effort to try to recruit black teachers, they would have them in our schools. _____. Black children learn better with black teachers. If they do not see someone like themselves in a

professional manner, they have nothing to hope for. Teachers do not care about that black child, as would a black teacher.

M: The 40th ACCORD [Anniversary to Commemorate the Civil Rights Demonstrations. This is the civil rights group Mrs. Duncan is president of]...did you found it?

D: No.

M: Who founded it?

D:A group of citizens got together after the **interment** of Mrs. **Catherine Kline** who was a civil rights demonstrator. After her **interment** they ate lunch at a certain restaurant and they knew that the fortieth anniversary of the civil rights demonstrations was going to take place in a couple years, so they decided to do something. They thought they should commemorate it. I got an email from David Nolan, a local historian. You need to interview him.

M: Yes, he's next on the list.

D: Really? He's more [knowledgeable] at knowing what happened, that's his job. But they met **Sandra Parks** former city commission, Ms. **Clara Johnson**, David Nolan, **JT Johnson**, civil rights activist from Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. Brown from Spellman college, and a few other people met at this restaurant after that **interment** I was talking about to talk about celebrating or commemorating that anniversary. So when I got an email from David Nolan and I read it to my husband. And I [asked him] do you have any ideas on how we can do this, and I said, well, we can base it on a family reunion. And black people from all over the United States, who participated back to St. Augustine. **Ms. Carrie Johnson** and I, well he gave my response to her and she called me and we decided to just

have a meeting. Call the demonstrators to come forth, share their stories and see what interest we could get in celebrating or commemorating the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s. So people came out and shared their stories and we decided to form a committee or committees. And that's how it started.

M: 40th ACCORD seems to be one of the few civil rights groups in St. Augustine. You're more interested in celebrating...

D: Commemorating and recognizing. It is remembering and recognizing and honoring. That's our mission.

M: Right. But my question more is, there used to be an NAACP chapter in St. Augustine.

D: And we still have one.

M: You still have one?

D: Yes.

M: I couldn't find it on the website of the NAACP.

D: There is a chapter here. We tried and tried and tried. We got the membership, we got the charter. As far as being active, my daughter is vice president, so there is a chapter here. It's not as active as it was in the 1960s, but they're trying to get together.

M: Well my question then becomes what is the state of civil rights in the area? If someone had a problem, how easy would it be for someone to report it? Who do they talk to? Do they know who to talk to?

D: They know who to talk to. First of all, they would call the pastor of **New St. James Missionary Baptist Church**. And he would in turn probably get in touch

with **Endell Reesy**. She is the president of the State Board of the NAACP. And I think she's based in Miami, but there's an office in Orlando. So we know who to contact if there is a problem.

M: What are some of the things you have done to commemorate the civil rights?

D: So many, many things. I wish I had my brochure. You give me your address, and I'll forward it to you. First off all, we celebrated Dr. Robert **B. Hayling** by sitting to declare a date in honor of **Dr. Hayling** as one of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement of St. Augustine. He was a dentist. We got a street re-named after him. That was our first activity. Then we got a commemoration in June of 2004. We had a barbeque, we had recognition services with the St. Augustine Four [Audrey Nell Edwards, JoeAnn Anderson Ulmer, Willie Carl Singleton, and Samuel White. These four were sent to various prisons throughout the state because they refused to stop protesting]. We contacted Jackie Robinson's wife, who sent down artifacts, or uniforms to present to these teenagers, I don't know if you've heard about them from **Jerry Carbon's** book. We recognized Mrs. **Kat Twine**, her husband, Mr. **Henry Twine**, we had a tree planting ceremony in her honor. We recognized Rev. Thomas A. Wright from Gainesville [As the leading religious figure in St. Augustine, he led the way for Dr. Martin Luther King's visit to St. Augustine which capped a long struggle, culminating in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As pastor of the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Gainesville since 1965, Reverend Wright has continued to promote equal rights

and opportunities] and [we] got his celebration. And some of the heros of the civil rights movement, which was about twelve other men that represented the hundreds who were involved in the movement. So our mission is to remember, recognize, and honor them. And we have had displays here, during Black History month, the whole month of February, right here in this library. We _____at **Mason Elementary**. We brought in two of the St. Augustine Four, Mr. David **Newman** and **Miss Carrie Johnson**. We had a program throughout the school. **Eight through five [time or grade level?]**. **We had them** at different times, we had an historical display about the civil rights movement. We had a poster contest in the St. John's county schools, which kids could get involved with. We've just done many things. We had two other events I want to share with you, too. In November, David Nolan will be conducting a civil rights landmarks tour, on November 5th, that's next Saturday.

M: Has he done that before?

D: He does it all the time. So at ten o'clock at St. Paul's Church, we will have an historical landmark tour with David Nolan. And we have had so much interest in the tour that we are having the second tour at 1230.

M: What difficulties have you experienced in celebrating these things? Has there been resistance from various people around town or from the government?

D: No. Our mayor, mayor **Garvin** has been so very supportive. Thank God for him. At a lot of our ceremonies he has been right there. The more recent ceremony we had was the special Civil Rights cancellation service at the United States

Postal Service in St. Augustine main office. We invited demonstrators from around the country. Dr. Hayling was present, Dr. Thomas A. Wright was one of our speakers. We were celebrating the release of To Form A More Perfect Union, ten Civil Rights stamps, and the heros and “sheros” of St. Augustine movement. And I was told by the Postmaster of St. Augustine that it was the largest special cancellation ceremony we have ever had there. We had made some commemorative collages depicting events that took place in the civil rights movement. We put stamps, and they made a special postmark in support of the stamp and they used it to cancel [the stamps] that day. So he ordered five thousand stamps, and they were sold out by **the end of March**.

M: You said you were seven during the Civil Rights Movement. What memories do you have of that event that stand out to you now?

D: I can remember being afraid. And I remember the Ku Klux Klan marching through that neighborhood. And I can remember walking with my Mama, and she told us to hurry, hurry, hurry, to get home. Some of my friend’s homes were bombed. They called them Molotov cocktails or something and I remember people’s houses being bombed. But I remember the term, being seven years old, “bad cops.” That stands out in my mind, until I thought, when I was growing up that **Babcocks** was associated with bad cops, because I heard that term, bad cops. But you didn’t venture out of your neighborhood, you really didn’t experience the segregation until you went down downtown. The church was the center of our activities. Like I said, we had all our stores, socials, everything, it was good

growing up in St. Augustine.

M: Where were the black stores?

D: Washington Street, mainly. Some in our area. Some in **Chatlin** or Grandystain or Central Avenue.

M: What kind of stores did you have.

D: There were grocery stores, shoe shine shops, print shops, one of my uncles owned a shoe shine shop on Washington Street. They had pool halls and bars. Cab stands, I remember two or three different cab stand companies, at least two. The movie theater was downtown, and if you happened to go the movie theater and sat in the balcony, that's when you really experienced the segregation.

M: Was the movie theater where Potbelly's is now? [Potbelly's is a old one screen theater near city hall.]

D: No. It wasn't that. It was down near where the Wachovia Bank is.

M: Just a few more questions. So have you noticed the city government or any institutions within the city doing anything to encourage integration or diversity?

D: Oh. I would rather not answer that. I don't see it. I don't see it.

M: Now what do you see St. Augustine becoming in the future? Do you see it becoming more integrated or less integrated?

D: Less integrated. I see the black population in St. Augustine dying out.

M: Do you think they're being driven out...

D: Economics will drive them out.

M: Economics and real estate prices?

D: Real estate prices and taxes will drive them out.

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M: Finally, is St. Augustine still a segregated town?

D: Yes.

M: Alright. Thank you very much Mrs. Duncan.