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AAHP 370 Rhonda Johnson
African American History Project (AAHP)
Interviewed by Génesis Lara on April 11, 2015
1 hour, 10 minutes | 36 pages

Abstract: In this interview, Rhonda Johnson discusses the culture shock of moving to White Springs and compares the racial environment during the 1970s to now. She stresses the importance of schools in small communities, as well as describes the main economic industries in White Springs. Ms. Johnson denies that we live in a post-racial society, and what lack of opportunity means for people of color in White Springs. She also expands on the role of church in her life, due to her family legacy in her home church in Jasper.

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SAMUEL PROCTOR
ORAL HISTORY
PROGRAM
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AAHP 370

Interviewee: Rhonda Johnson

Interviewer: Genesis Lara

Date: April 11, 2015

L: Good Morning today is April 10?—It's April 9th?

U: 11th.

L: Oh—I'm sorry

J: She's already deceived me.

L: Oh I am sorry, okay, good morning. It's April 11 2015, my name is Geneis Lara on behalf of the Samuel Proctor History program. We're here in White Springs with Ms. Rhonda. Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview.

J: You're welcome

L: If you could please tell us your full name and when and where you were born.

J: You want my middle?

L: Yeah, by all means.

J: My name is Rhonda Olivia Johnson. And we are of course in White Springs, Florida. I was born in Maywood, Illinois. [Laughter] I know, it's funny. My parents were military, and we arrived here in 1976. Due to my father building a home here. We arrived and I attended South Hamilton Elementary.

L: So your father after he retired, he decided to come here and build a house?

J: Actually no. Midstream he was stationed in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. His mother lived here. My mom's mom lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And when he was stationed in Fort Sill, the middle point, we moved here to White Springs where he built the home.

L: So then your father's family is from here?

J: Yes

L: Oh wow. So what was that like coming back to move here after—

J: Culture shock.

L: Okay.

J: Yes, culture shock

L: Can you describe what that culture shock was?

J: We went from the fast pace of the city to a caution light, a post office, and a convenient store which was the SMS, an elementary school, African Methodist Episcopal Church, our home church Greater Pauper Springs Missionary Baptist Church in Jasper, Florida, eighteen miles away. And having to grocery shop in Lake City, Florida, twelve miles away. From being able to go to the corner store in the city, literally.

L: That had to be a very big adjustment

J: It was. We also, we were stationed in Fort Dix, New Jersey, which has since been closed.

L: Okay, and so you moved here and you said your dad was still working for the military, and so was your mom?

J: No, my mom took care of us.

L: Okay.

J: And then when we moved here, from being culture shocked. We had been here maybe the summer. When we started school that fall, like that October, by Thanksgiving my mom was working for South Hamilton elementary.

L: As a teacher?

J: No, as a paraprofessional

L: Wow, okay. So I guess, how would you describe how you were welcomed? Was it a very welcoming town?

J: The town itself was very welcoming for the most part. It was different. I was referred to as a Yankee. I had not a clue what a Yankee was, but I soon knew what a Yankee was. But at first I didn't know what a Yankee was. I was taught what yes and no meant. The difference in yes and no. I was taught what yes and no, the difference in yes and no, and yes ma'am and no ma'am. I was just taught to answer "yes" and "no" in our household. That was correct. But once we moved here, yes ma'am and no ma'am. My experience was it was an act of disrespect to answer someone "yes" and "no." Who knew? Blatant disrespectfulness to answer "yes" and "no."

L: So you moved to the south, so then you had to get acclimated to southern culture.

J: Yes. Quickly

L: And do you have any memory of what that was for you mom, because I imagine that had to be a big change for her?

J: Well actually no, because my mother grew up in Pitts, Georgia, and then she moved to Jasper. So she went to school in Jasper, and then graduated from Jasper, and then moved up North. So her childhood was in the South.

L: Okay, and then what was it like, can you describe your childhood in the schools? What was it like for you as a kid growing up here?

J: Hm. Well we moved here when I was nine. I had the best of both worlds. My younger childhood of course was on the military base, so I experienced my

primary on the military base such as my pre-k, and kindergarten, first grade I experienced on the base. That was a wonderful experience. I experienced taking ballet classes, YMCA, all of those things going to the Presbyterian Church, and bowling, those different things, and then acclimating and transferring over to coming to the South where we then had to go to Boys and Girls Club in Lake City, and my mom and a couple other parents here carpooled to Columbia County to make sure we still had that experience, my sisters and I. So it was still somewhat—yeah.

L: So did you like going to school? Did you like the teachers here?

J: Yes. There was one teacher in particular who—she called the roll, and I answered yes, and she saw that as being disrespectful. I didn't understand. And everyone went "Ooooooooooh!" And as I sat there with a stunned look on my face, she snatched me up by my arm and marched me to the then principal's office. Me still stunned, not realizing what I had done, I answered, "Yes, present." And she snatched me up and said, "You come with me, gal," and to the principal's office we marched as I stood there stunned still asking what did I do? Then second grade me, and I said I needed to call my mommy. And she said to me, "You have a phone?" And I said, "Yes," and again she said, "You will stop addressing me as, 'Yes,' Missy. It's 'Yes, ma'am.'" Then I realized what I had done. And I said, "Yes ma'am, we have a phone. I need to call my mommy. "And I dialed the rotary phone, and I called my mother, and my mother came to the school, and as I said, within the next few months my mother was working at the school and remained working at the school from that point on.

L: Okay, So then how would you describe your household? Like were there chores?
I mean how—do you have siblings?

J: I two other siblings. I was the middle child. Yes, we had chores. We had chores every Saturday. Saturday morning we could not go out to play until we had chores, which was fine with me. I was terrified of bugs. So that was fine with me. The neighborhood kids enjoyed playing with us. At that time we had the only brick house on the street. As we still do. It's a red brick house on the entire street. So yes, we had chores. We were taught to vacuum and clean the bathroom, dishes, your basics.

L: Okay, so then you had the only brick house. Where's the house at, what street?

J: It is known as Sunrise Drive.

L: Sunrise Drive? Okay. Who lives in the house now?

J: My mother.

L: Your mother? Okay, awesome. So what games would you all play as kids?

J: We had a croquette set that we brought with us. Our parents taught us. We had a croquette set, we had a badminton set, ping pong set, at one time we had a basketball goal in our yard. We had bicycles. We were taught to skate.

L: You must've had a really good childhood then.

J: We had a really excellent childhood. We were blessed, immensely blessed.

L: Okay, so can you describe—I imagine the church was a big part of your life growing up. What was any special traditions from the church or any special memories that you have coming into this community and getting accustomed to the church when you were a child?

J: Well we had, of course we went to Sunday School, BTU, Red Circle, the Association, we also were a part of the union and choir federation. The choir federation is where all the choirs would get together on the third Sunday afternoon and sing choir anniversaries where all the choirs would get together and celebrate through music and culture. My mother was a church musician, so we learned hymns and we sung hymns. Now I never played the piano, but I know quite a few hymns. We were taught that way. I always assisted on and off through the church culinary. And I am now our church's. I serve currently as our church's decorator. So I know how to dress a communion alter. I assist in all that with baptisms, baby dedications, the Shepherd's care board, which aids and assist the pastor and pastoral duties. Such as aiding him in things with juice and water, and different things as that, as he has guests and their wives come.

L: The church is a very big part of your life?

J: I love it.

L: So given how—you moved here in the [19]70s right? That's what you said.

J: I'm sorry?

L: You moved here in the [19]70s, is what you said, and moving to the South did you—I guess, were you aware of any racism or segregation when you first moved here?

J: Yes ma'am.

L: How? I mean can you describe that to us?

J: My mother kept us shield, my mother and father kept us shielded from that as much as possible. It's the strangest thing. It was there, but you really—it wasn't.

To me in the [19]70s, it wasn't as prevalent then as it is now. That is so weird to me.

L: How would you explain that?

J: The diversity and how prevalent it is now?

L: Yeah.

J: I say, I blame that on the media, the build-up of it. I promise you, I never knew. It's more of a culture shock now. You know that is a taught thing. And I'm not gonna even say it was by my parents by us being military. We all went to the same places. You know on the base you're all thrown in there together. It's like one big melting pot. You have no choice. So you don't see it, to be honest. By the time we moved here I had gone to school with everyone. As you know on a military base you all go to the same church. You are taught oneness. That's all you see. On the bases we have Vietnamese, Koreans, it's everyone. So by the time we moved here, that wasn't odd to me to share the same restroom with, to share the same water fountain with. That was not strange for me.

L: So when you moved here it was still separate water fountains for people, or had that been done by then?

J: All that had been done. *Recently* done, but it had been done.

L: Did you feel um—

J: There was a little tension, but I didn't know what the tension was. You understand what I am saying?

L: Yeah, yeah, you were young. Right, yeah.

J: So I didn't catch that.

L: Did you feel like there might've been any—because you said you had the only brick house on the road. Do you feel like there might have been any tension because economically? You know? That thing?

J: Everybody was like so excited. You know they were like, Oh yeah! And they were so excited by simple basic things. We had a glass door. You know, a sliding door. And they made such a big whoo-hah out of it. The strangest things that you take for granted. As a matter of fact we don't even use that door. It's covered with like draping and stuff. We never really use that door. It's always covered with draping.

L: So how long did you dad serve in the military for?

J: Thirty-five years, the Army.

L: Okay so when he retired how old were you?

J: Oh my goodness. He just retired. So—

L: Wow.

J: I'm forty-seven now. Forty—one, forty-two. It's like been the past few years.

L: So you mentioned the church being a big role in your life. Did the school also play a big role in the community here?

J: Yes.

L: Okay.

J: Oh my gosh, yes.

L: Okay.

J: It's always been a safe haven.

- L: Okay, so can you describe a bit more of what role the schools play in the community?
- J: I cheered. I cheered. Yes, I loved. I cheered, and we always like did different things. Always. Cause like I said my mom by her working there, you could always—we read there. Like did different reading programs, the PTO. It was always something going on when you could go to the school. It's just always been a safe haven for the children. You know—just community. You could always—it's always been right there, where you could walk there. It was always convenient. And a community without a school—
- L: It's not a community at all.
- J: No, no.
- L: So is it very much—we drove through here and I was reading up on the town before we came, and I saw it's a very small community. So is it very much that you would go to school and the teacher isn't your parents and the type that as a child, you had to be careful because somebody knew something that was gonna get back to your mom and dad?
- J: Yes, yes, tattle tell. And before you would get home. It was like—Just think, cell phones haven't always been. You know that's the strangest thing. Cell phones haven't always been. And to this day everyone didn't have a phone, like a landline. So how do they know these things? They know.
- L: Did it ever happen to you that you did something?
- J: Yes.
- L: Can you describe a story for us?

J: Yes. I pinched one of my classmates. Actually what I did was I took the pencil and I poked him. I don't know why I poked him. I just did, I don't—you know—just mischievous. And I poked him, and then he turned around and he said—and I poked him again, and I poked him again. I don't know why I was poking the child. The child hadn't done a thing to me. Just maliciously poking him. I was bored, and I just kept poking him. And that final time before I could poke him, by the end of class my mom knew. My teacher never left the room. Never left the room. There was no video camera in there, nothing. The boy never left the room. My mother knew.

L: That's creepy.

J: Scary. Scary.

L: That's terrifying.

J: To this day I don't know how she knew. I don't how she knew, but she knew. I got into a lot of trouble about it. I don't know. Yeah.

L: So your mom was definitely the force to be reckoned with in your household?

J: Yes.

L: Okay.

J: Yes, she was, she was. Because see dad was, you know, in the service. And I would look forward to him coming home. And the big thing was, when he would come home on leave and come to the school in his uniform—oh my goodness. That was exciting.

L: Okay so all the kids were like—that must have been something for you and your sisters.

- J: It was, it was. We'd be like, Oh my gosh, that's our dad! You know, big shiny uniform.
- L: Oh, wow. It's like your dad was like Christmas?
- J: It was, he was. He's cool. He um—actually while he was in there, he received his master's degree in criminology. And when he retired from the service he then started working for probation and parole. And he retired from the state also.
- L: So your dad's always been a public servant.
- J: Yes. He has. And then my mom was doing that. She went to school, she went to nursing school. So that's what she did. But I never pursued any of that. I just always just liked doing what I do, laid back, being a parent, and going to church, doing my civic duties and decorating.
- L: So after you graduated from high school—so what was the name of your high school?
- J: Hamilton County High, Jasper.
- L: So what was your high school like?
- J: I never cared for going to school in Jasper. I loved my school years at South. I always enjoyed White Springs, and never ever cared for going to school in Jasper.
- L: Why not?
- J: It was just different.
- L: Different in what way?
- J: Jasper is different. It's a lot different from White Springs.
- L: It's like a feeling. It's different?

J: White Springs is very wholesome, laidback, clean cut. It's just different. Just as clean as I can—it's just different.

L: And so do a lot of the students from White Springs go to Jasper for High School?

J: Mmhm.

L: Oh, okay. So after you graduated high school, what did you do? What were your plans?

J: Well, I had my children, and I raised them. And I worked. And that was pretty much the sum of it, and I was married.

L: How old are your children now?

J: They're thirty-one, twenty-nine, and twenty-five.

L: So they're grown up, and what are your children doing now?

J: One works at **Saitan**, and he's married, and they have two children—that's my oldest. And the middle son lives in Live Oak, he and his wife, and they own a daycare, and they work. And they have four children, I'm sorry—six children... step parents. And then the youngest daughter, she works and she has one son, Matthew.

L: It's just wow, you look too young to have grandkids. It's just I cannot believe it.

J: Well thank you, thank you. And I have a great-granddaughter.

L: It looks like you have a very beautiful family. That's really special.

J: I think so.

L: That's incredible. So you said you were also working while raising children. What type of jobs did you have?

J: Well, I worked sales as a cashier. Customer service. Yippie!

L: You were working to care of your family.

J: And I did construction

L: Construction, really? My dad does that. My dad's like a handyman so—

J: I did construction, and I did contracted work for PCS. Yes, I did.

L: That's incredible. So while you were working and also taking care of your children, who helped you take care of them?

J: My mother.

L: Your mother? And did you feel like you had a community that would help you raise your children while you were working?

J: Yes.

L: My family is from Dominican Republic, from the Island. So when my mother here—

J: So you from the DR?

L: Yes. Another thing is my mom, she had to work a lot of factory jobs, and it was hard for her to find people to watch the children because—

J: Reliable people.

L: So I imagine here it feels like the community is here to vouch for your children.

J: It is. It truly is. It's like an open door policy. And that's a good thing. It's hard to rely on that. And that's another thing. It's like an open door. When I grew up, you could go somewhere and like leave your door open. And know that everything was there when you got back. You can't like do that now. You understand what I am saying?

L: So even here in White Springs things have change a lot in that nature.

J: Somewhat, somewhat. The difference in White Springs and Jasper. You get what I am saying?

L: It's like you know the people here, but there—

J: It's wholesome. It is just so—I have been a lot of places Genesis. A lot of places. But there is no place like home. I am just comfortable here.

L: My grandma says the same thing about where she used to grow up. You could just leave the front door open, and you didn't have to worry about a thing.

J: Yeah you don't have to worry, you don't have to worry.

L: Okay, so I guess did your children attend the same schools that you went to?

J: I'm sorry?

L: Did your children—

J: Yes, they did! And so the funny, is in our school right now, there are pictures of me in a showcase, there are pictures of me in my cheerleading uniform, in my basketball uniform. There are pictures of my children in their cheerleading uniform, in their basketball uniform. It's a lot of history. There are pictures of my mother when she worked there. And I'm like, Lord—

L: Wow! Your family has a long tradition in this community.

J: And so that makes a difference.

L: It does.

J: And I don't know what I would do if something happens to that school. Cause I'm like, that's a lot of history. And now my grandson attends that school. He's the only one of my grandchildren that attend that school because the other ones live in other counties. My other grandchildren.

L: So you said White Springs is so wholesome and so safe. I guess what are big community events that happen here that you feel bring this community together?

J: The Folk Festival. The Florida Folk Festival, which my mother is a participant and has been participating in for right at thirty years. She plays and does like music, and then they cook. It's just the Folk Festival. And now she comes and she does like, she comes down here to the Azalea Festival. It's just so—I love it.

L: If you want to get involved in the community there are definitely things to do here.

J: And you know what? And the difference is, since we had Mayor Miller, she is such a vital force in the community. It's such a difference. It has been—she has made such a tremendous difference. She is such a people person. She gets out, visits, she talks, she's shown such an interests. I mean she does things more than wears the title. She gets down with the people, and that makes a difference. It's more than wearing the title of.

L: I remember because, Randi was mentioning when they first drove through here to get to know people here that they were driving with the Mayor, and she was driving through a neighborhood and people just came out to wave to her to say hi to her. They really wanted to interact with her. I was surprised like, wow so she really has that bond with the community.

J: She really does.

L: She's fostered it.

J: She's good. She's good and I mean, that makes a difference. That makes a difference. And it's not a political ploy. She's just genuine. Her and her husband. And she's earned that. You know, it just happens. She's earned that.

- L: So since you've grown up in this town the majority of your life and you've obviously been a very big part of this community here, what do you feel has change the most in White Springs in your time living here?
- J: We've grown some. We've grown. I want businesses. I've seen some businesses come, but I want more businesses. You know. Growth.
- L: Growing up here and you're young, a lot of the students here what colleges did they attend if they decide to go to college?
- J: They do attend UF, FSU, and FAM.
- L: The three community schools. Those three rival schools, and that's where everyone goes to.
- J: I know, and um—Gateway. Well what used to be Lake City Community College. They do go to Gateway.
- L: So and then once the students go to college, do they come back here or do they go elsewhere?
- J: Sad part is—because there's nothing. What would they do? The sad part is, what is there for them to do here? That's the only problem we have. We need them to have something to do here. Well if they come back they could teach. Well if you take a school, where are they going to teach at? You need a school for them to teach don't you?
- L: Has there ever been talk of making a high school here so your student don't have to go to Jasper?
- J: That's what I want. That's what I want. If we'd have had a high school here, I wouldn't've had to go to school in Jasper.

- L: It would create—you know, you'd have principals, you'd have to hire a lot of people. Add growth to the community.
- J: See that would be wonderful. Give people that experience. Have a high school here instead of a high school in Jasper. Have one in White Springs. Safe, wholesome, White Springs.
- L: And so do you think—What do you feel the town would need to do to keep its youths from going away?
- J: Economic growth.
- L: So you would need more businesses, more tourism attractions—I heard this is a really big tourist town
- J: It is, it is—It's beautiful!
- L: It's stunning.
- J: Now I would like a couple of spas, personally. [Laughter]
- L: Okay so, one of the things they were talking about here is the Carver School?
- J: Yes.
- L: It was built in 1906. So do you have any stories or any recollections of the Carver School?
- J: Well let me tell you, when I was younger there used to be a summer program. My mom taught sewing at the Carver School and there was a couple of summer programs there that she actually worked there at the Carver School. And we attended, and after they got it like up and running, that's where we went instead of going to Lake City to the Boys and Girls Club. I miss the Boys and Girls Club. Of course she supported our community and we had to go to the Carver School.

It was nice, but I enjoyed the Boys and Girls Club. But we did go to the Carver School, and it was okay.

L: So it's a big community center?

J: It was, mhm.

L: It was or it still is?

J: Because they did it. It's huge. It was like right around the corner. And the area, I mean it's like, huge. It's a field. You can do anything. It's a school.

L: Wow okay, so did it close down or is it still in existence?

J: What do you mean, can it be in existence?

L: No is it still operating? Nope? Why not? What happened to it?

J: People, economic.

L: There wasn't enough money to keep it open anymore? That's very sad. Do think—how do you feel the town feels about that?

J: If we had a grant and the right people behind it. That would be a wonderful thing.

L: It's been around for a while, it could be a historical marker.

J: Yes.

L: So you feel like more should be done to preserve those types of places?

J: That would be a wonderful thing.

L: I want to go see pictures of it, like see it now. But the building is still there?

J: Yes.

L: Okay, it's just not in operation. And before, so it used to be just run and organized by the community?

J: Mhm. It's beautiful

L: Do you know a bit of history about the school? Why was it built? Or any of that?

J: No. It was up and running when I got here, honey.

L: I mean if it was built in 1906, it was here, you know, a while. [Laughter] It has been here for a nice little minute.

J: [Laughter]

L: Okay. So we've covered the churches, the school, and the Carver School. What other big community organizations are there here in White Springs?

J: Um—I don't know—charter schools—

L: Are there any lodges or anything like that?

J: Yes, but I am not a part of any of those. [Laughter] Yeah, there are.

L: Okay. What do you like to do for fun Matthew?

M: Go see the water.

J: We won't be going to see the water today.

L: So is that the Suwanee River?

J: Mhm.

L: So did you play there a lot when you were a kid?

J: No, I did not.

L: But do a lot of the kids here go play out by the river?

J: Mhm.

L: It's a big community place.

J: Mhm.

[Break in interview]

L: What type of activities do people do at the river?

J: They sw—when there's water—they swim, they canoe, um—they actually lay out and they get tans. Whatever or what not. They treat it like a beach.

L: Well I saw everyone was sitting out the entire time.

J: It's nice out there. I need to get some sand but I—

L: So you're saying when there's water, so the water levels are really low?

J: At times. I've always been iffy about it, you know, as a child.

L: I understand. I lived in New York and moved to Miami. Completely different.

J: I have always been iffy about it, as a child, so.

L: So for the people that live here and grow up here, what are the main economic industries for people to work here?

J: PCS, the prison, the schools. Occidental, the chemical company, the prison, the school system, pretty much.

L: Hunting and fishing, is that a part of people's survival here? So people that have to hunt to supplement their household food?

J: I don't hunt. I don't fish. We need a fish market in the area. There was one. And then they closed it. But I don't hunt and I don't fish. But I'm sure they, you know—

L: Yeah people do—

J: Right. I know they do. You know what I am saying. They're avid hunters and fishers. I just—

L: So it is a big part of the community?

J: It is.

L: So you said it's the chemical plant, the school district—

J: The prison.

L: And the prison.

J: Unfortunately.

L: Okay, and people are still working into those industries now?

J: Mhm.

L: So those are the only options that you have here? For employment?

J: Oh, medical, definitely medical.

L: What types of cash crops are there in that area? If there's any.

J: I think they do—What is the peas? They farm. They do um, farming, um... now you you have to remember more than by way of—I don't really.

L: It's okay. I'm trying to get a feel for what's growing here.

J: Agriculture-wise I'm—

L: Okay, so you said your church is eighteen miles away?

J: Mhm.

L: And the store that you went to was eight miles away?

J: I'm sorry?

L: The grocery store you said that you went to was eight miles.

J: Twelve.

L: 12 miles?

J: Lake City.

L: Lake City. And you still have to go there?

J: Yes, I love Lake City.

L: So you still have to drive pretty far out to get—

J: But it's not far if you think about it.

L: It's not far?

J: Because if you go... from White Springs from to where we go, and it's this little new road off of 41 um—you turn—you make a right out like by Lowes, you're there within minutes, and I do literally mean minutes. And it puts you out by Wal-Mart, Lowes, Publix. It's like bam, you're like right there. And by the way, Publix number two for their produce and meat in the nation for best produce and meat, in the entire nation. They ranked number two. Number two in the nation for cleanest stores. That was just on the report yesterday. So, yeah. And Wal-Mart ranked the lowest in the nation for cleanliness in their produce.

L: So in those prisons, sorry I keep going back, so the prison, the education and the chemical plant, white and black citizens here in White Springs would work in those same business sectors, working together? So there's not like specific jobs for the white citizens or for black citizens, everybody just worked together?

J: They don't have a choice. You know for those who don't have a course a record, blah blah blah. You know. Now, the strange thing, strange and oddly enough, certain county jobs, certain city jobs or in-house. You know. Grandfathered in, per se. If you notice.

L: So when we talk about—plus I was going to ask a lot, so like the mayors all those, is mostly—has there ever been a black mayor here?

J: Oh yes, there was a black mayor here before our current mayor, a male. Joseph **McConyers**, for years, years—and years—and years.

L: Okay, but even if you have a mayor, and I saw you have the governing body of White Springs. Does everybody—Do you get to have a say in the governing of White Springs. Does everybody have a voice?

J: No.

L: Okay. For a small town, I would imagine you would have a bit more of a say in things.

J: No.

L: How did decisions get made in the town? Like voting, when you are trying to implement things in your policies. Are there community meetings or town halls when you get to express things?

J: Mhm.

L: So you express, but then there's no follow-up action.

J: Uh-uh.

L: Okay, I get it. So we're talking about how tourism is a really big part of White Springs. So is the Blacks community able to really benefit from the tourism trade as well?

J: I'm uncomfortable.

L: Okay, that's fine. Are there anything else you want to cover about White Springs in the town, in the governing?

J: You can ask other questions.

L: Well how about let's talk about Black History in the Obama age. Overall. Let's talk about that. So do you remember the 2008 election?

J: Yes.

L: Can you describe that?

J: I cried like a baby. I was—I think I was like Oprah. Did you see the segment where Oprah beat the man, and was all over the man? And everybody wanting to know who is this? She was all over—she didn't even know who the man was. Yeah, I was like Oprah. My mother was so anxious. I stayed with her that night, and she just went to bed. She was like, Oh my God. I said, No mom that means he won. It's okay. Yeah, that's how it was.

L: What did his election mean to you?

J: I never thought I would live to see the day that a person of color would go into the White House and make a difference. And even though they will not give credit, he has made a difference. We have to keep in mind that he inherited a lot of the foolishness that he inherited. And truly he has made a difference. Um—and there is no way he could have changed some of the things, even in his lifetime, in the eight years that he has—there's no way. But he has truly made a difference and it meant so much to me to see that in my lifetime. The lifetime of my children, for them to see that God saw fit that we could even have color in the White House.

L: How was his election? Was it a big topic of conversation here in White Springs? How did the town take it?

J: Oh honey. Everything was so quiet. Quiet. Solemn. Quite solemn here for a while. Just solemn.

L: Okay so, there's kind of—going off of that topic, a lot of people that say that since we have president Obama elected, that we now live in a post-racial society. Would you agree with that?

J: We live what now?

L: Post-racial society.

J: Lies. It's a lie. Post-racial? Racism is at an all-time high. Racism is high. It's higher than it has ever been. It's higher than it has ever been. And let's just be honest. And it's no need to put a band-aid on it. It's like you spring a leak and you gonna put a band-aid on it rather than call the plumber to plug the gap. Repair the pipe. Replace the whole pipe. Don't put a band-aid on it. Don't try to wrap it, because it's completely broken.

L: So let me ask you a question. Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, for the nation it's been a really rough couple of years. How have—has there been discussions in White Springs at all about the deaths of those young men?

J: Among ourselves. Among ourselves. Not openly. Recently, um—recently my nephew has been racially profiled. He came home on leave. And uh—he was driving his brand new 250 SE Mercedes, and he was stopped by one of our very own local police. Asked whose car was he driving, and what was he doing driving it. What do you mean? What is he doing driving what? He's driving his car.

L: That he paid for.

J: Thank you. It's his. What are you asking him?

L: So then you as a mother, a grandmother, an aunt of black sons and nephews. Do you feel that they're safe?

J: No. And—excuse me [crying], a lot of sleepless nights. A lot. It's sad. A lot of sleepless nights.

L: Is it a conversation that you have with other women?

J: It is. Um—I have an aunt that I am very close with. I have several aunts that I'm close with, but one in particular I'm extremely close with. And we talk about it on a daily basis. It's crazy.

L: I understand that there's a funeral in town today?

J: Today at 1. I didn't know how long—you know—I went ahead and said well—

L: Who is the funeral for?

J: He's a young black male, and he was shot.

L: By the police?

J: No.

L: He was a known person of the community?

J: Yes.

L: Did you know him?

J: Mhm. Yep. A waste. Young black male.

L: We were talking about the lack of opportunity for young people here, and I guess, what do you feel specifically that men and women of color in White Springs need? Do you feel like there is more that can be done for them in the community? Like in terms of education, opportunities?

J: It is. It's got to be something. It's got to be something. It saddens me. I am a mother of sons and a daughter. But I'm a mother of sons, and it saddens me, you know. Like I said, my nephew came here on leave. Which means of course he's in the military. My son. My oldest son was in the military. And he was in an accident reporting back to his base. And the officer who reported to the accident

was more concerned about whose truck he thought he was driving more so than making sure he was okay.

L: You know when President Obama came into office, one of the first things that his wife Michelle said was that my first job is to be a mom. And some people gave her a lot of criticism for that. She's like, you know, I'm a mother first. Melissa Harris-Perry, who has that show on MSNBC, she was defending Michelle Obama. She was saying it is such a rare thing to see a black woman on national TV taking care of her daughters, not her as a black woman—

J: Aren't they gorgeous?

L: They are beautiful.

J: The girls are gorgeous.

L: You know, not having a black woman in the terms of taking care of white children, but taking care of her daughters. How does that feel for you as a black mother to have her up there on that national stage putting her daughters as a priority?

J: That's what she should do. You know and I think she's gorgeous, too. Um— again, a woman of color. And see you can relate. Because to be honest, being from the DR, you do know that you are a black woman.

L: Oh yeah. I was showing Randi my family photos as my mom is like Randi's color, so yeah.

J: You're a black woman, and so. It doesn't make you full whenever there's like a tragedy? It's like, Lord here we go again. Here it is again. Here is something else.

Oh, another tragedy. Another bad story. On the news. Another flash of—it get's—
I just get full. Are you a mom yet?

L: No. I have younger brothers, though, so—

J: Oh, okay. Well wait until you become a mom, you're going to be like, [sighing]
here we go again. And you go always telling yourself keep a lil piece of tissue,
I'm telling you. You see ya fold up the sides of—it's like always full—but she is
gorgeous. I saw her on Black Women Rock the other night. I said, look at her!

L: She got a lot of heat from the press for going.

J: Why?

L: They were saying why is she going to Black Women's Rock. Shouldn't it be
White Women Rock or shouldn't it be All Women Rock, like why is she going to
that?

J: Because she's a black woman that rocks. Because she's a black woman that
rocks.

L: She got a lot of negative criticisms.

J: She can't change her color.

L: She can't.

J: She can't change her color.

L: So what are your hopes for White Springs?

J: My hope for White Springs is that we grow economically, and that positive things
come out, even this interview. That positive things come out of this, and that
there's something for him to do later to look back on and that we're not still

stagnant years from now. You know? Something, jobs, opportunities, maybe even a high school. Something, something.

L: Okay. And it does go on in the South. And you mentioned that when you came down they called you a Yankee.

J: They did. That was the first thing. Like I said, I didn't know what that was.

L: So does the town have—Do they Civil War commemorations and Emancipation Day celebrations or anything?

J: We do. We have Emancipation Day. Well like I said, I know now. But then I was like, what in the world? Little by little, all of that's like dying off. Thank you, Lord. Because people do die. They're becoming more liberal. I've seen that like evolve. Because it is what it is.

L: So can you tell me about—you were talking about all the things that you do now in the church. So I see you're the head decorator, you said, for the church?

J: Yeah, I love it.

L: So can you talk to us a little bit more about that?

J: What happened? How did that come to be?

L: Yeah.

J: I just saw where we had a need. There was a lady at my home church that did it and her mom. My God, her mom's like in her 90s, Madea, and she got sick. And so she went home, and I just saw that we had a need, and I just took the initiative and started doing, and as we did like different anniversaries and celebrations or whatever, they would get me to do it. And so our church is kind of—we're like for the area that we live in—well, my home church is in Jasper, as I said. My

grandparents are like the founders of it. And so it's like one hundred thirty-eight years old—one hundred forty years old. Anyway, I just saw a need. And it's large enough where we actually—I'm on contract there. We have several people employed at our church, and that's what happened.

L: So your home church is one hundred and thirty-eight years old, founded by your grandparents? So your parents has a long history here? That's incredible

J: I love our church, and our pastor Reverend. J.T. Billy Simon. He served on the Hamilton County School Board for well over twenty years. And he since retired from the school board.

L: How does it feel going to a church that has such a big legacy and history and such a personal connection for you?

J: It's a wonderful thing. He's also—our pastor plays such a tremendous role in our family life. He's dedicated, blessed all of my grandchildren. The last—the youngest grandchild that I have is a year old. And Sunday, Resurrection Sunday, Easter Sunday, we had one blessed. It's just a warm secure feeling. He's been there for like all of us: funerals, counseling, dedications, you name it.

L: But it does. You have that continuity in your community. So that's incredible. Do you think it's something that your children value as well?

J: I think so, I think so. Now they come to like certain things. But each one of them they have their—now my daughter, she's a member there, but my youngest son he attends African Baptist in Suwannee County. That is the oldest black missionary Baptist church in Suwannee County, and then my oldest son attends

New Bethel AME Church. African Methodist here in White Springs, the oldest African Methodist Church. So—choices, yeah.

L: So you said your oldest son's in the military?

J: He was. He was in the Air Force.

L: He was in the Air Force, and now what does he do?

J: He works at Citel.

L: And then your daughter?

J: She works at Lake City Cedical Center.

L: And then your youngest son?

J: He works at Pilgrim Pride in Live Oak.

L: So they've all grown up and had their own families?

J: Right, they have their own families. And they also own a daycare.

L: Wow, all three of them together?

J: No, no, no. Just the youngest son. He and his wife, Eva.

L: That's really nice. So I would say you—going back to your role as mother and a grandmother—matriarch of the family—what hopes do you have for your children and grandkids?

J: The hopes that I have for them is that they pursue any dream that they have and complete it. You know what I am saying? Whatever that is. And that of course they do be as good a parent to their children as I hope that I was to them. And that they're always supportive to their children as I was to them, and always keep God first. My youngest son is actually in need of a kidney. He's on the list. He's

actually in renal failure. He was diagnosed with *glomerulonephritis*, the Brights disease, as a child. So—he's in renal failure, and he takes dialysis at home.

L: Looking back at all the things that you've done with the role that you serve in your community and where your children are, are you proud of the life that you've lived?

J: Yes I am. I am. I've been through a lot. I've seen a lot, but I'm proud of it. I'm proud of the woman I've become. And I wouldn't have it any other way. I wouldn't go back and change a thing. I live with no regrets.

L: So I don't have any further questions, so—

J: Okay Ms. Genesis.

L: Well this is the point at the end that if there's something you felt that I didn't cover or that we didn't cover in the interview you would like to add it now. It's your final say.

J: This is like a first. It's been different. You have any suggestions?

L: Is there anything about White Springs that we didn't talk about, anything about maybe your family you would like to add?

J: I have two sisters.

L: What are your sister doing?

J: One is a director of nursing at Balepoint—that's the younger one. And the oldest one is a vice-president of **Biomedical** Insurance in Atlanta.

L: That's really nice. Are you still close with you sisters? Do you talk often?

J: Do, yes, one—like I said one lives in Atlanta, and one still lives here in White Springs, but she just works in Lake City. And I have one brother-in-law. Don't let me forget him. That's my younger sister's husband.

L: So you all get along and you still make time to you know—

J: We do.

L: And how's your relationship with your mom?

J: We're very close. Extremely close.

L: So is your mom still like—you know—really still involved in the community? Still doing a lot of things?

J: Oh God, yes. She does everything. I can't keep up with my mother. I try to keep up with her. I cannot keep up with my mother. I try.

L: We should interview your mom. She sounds like she's a fascinating woman.

J: She is. She is so fascinating. To only be like her when I at least get her age. To have half the energy.

L: So how old is she?

J: She is seventy-one.

L: And she's still kicking?

J: Still kicking. Very high. Still kicking very high. She's extremely active.

L: That's really good to have.

J: I love my mother. And she's a lovely person. Like I said, only to be like her.

L: Okay, so then—how does she—you know—She has to have a lot of grandkids and a lot of great-grandkids, so how do you think she feels that the family all came from her?

J: She's very humble. She has a very, very humble spirit. Rich—rich. She's not a boastful person.

L: The mayor, how many years has she been in office?

J: You know, I don't know. I don't know. It seems like just yesterday, but I don't know. A couple of terms maybe.

L: Does she speak a lot to people like your mom that have been around here for a while for their advice and their suggestions.

J: Yes, and she values others' opinions. The mayor, oh my goodness, yes. Very—endearing. She is. I love her.

L: So what are the new plans that are in the works for White Springs? Like what new things are coming?

J: Well I'm hoping that we have like a developmental—at least like a shopping plaza. I'm hoping we get that. I'm hoping that we get Carver up and running. I'm hoping that we're able to keep the school open. These are all hopes and aspirations. And if we could just get those three things.

L: So and the elementary school is in danger of being closed?

J: They were talking about it. Because the superintendent wants to build one big school to consolidate. Why? Why? We need a school here. Seriously.

L: Yeah, it's a community school?

J: Thank you. It's crazy. Who wants a community without a school? That's what makes a community.

L: So those are your big three hopes for White Springs? I think you guys have a good chance.

J: Hoping.

L: With these interviews that are being conducted, what are your hopes—what value do you think they're going to have?

J: Maybe someone will see them. [Laughter] I don't know, I'm just honored. I was like, Oh my Lord. What are they going to do with them? Who's going to see 'em?

L: Nothing bad, I promise.

J: Okay. I'm real giddy. Oh my gosh. And it's just a recording like voice?

L: Yeah, there's not a secret camera in there.

J: It's been so nice talking to you Genesis.

L: I love this interview. It's been going really well.

J: Was I your first?

L: Interview?

J: Mmhm.

L: No.

J: Oh, okay.

L: My first for the day. My first in White Springs. Well, if you have nothing else to add—

J: I don't, but thank you now.

L: That concludes this interview.

[End of interview]

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