

The Center for Columbia River History's Vancouver African American History Project

Students Discovering History

The students in the Vancouver African American History Project spent the first part of the project doing assigned background reading, attending workshops and listening to speakers, and visiting archives. In the second part of the project, they returned to the archives to research their particular topics, and conducted oral history interviews with community members. Below is the transcript of an interview that student Mary Byrd and Project Coordinator Melissa Williams conducted with narrator Valree Jacqueline Joshua. For more information, please contact Andrea Reidell, [Project Director](#).

Narrator: Val Joshua

Interviewer: Mary Byrd and Melissa Williams

Location: Vancouver, Washington

Date of first interview [tape 1]: March 25, 2001

Date of second interview [tape 2]: April 19, 2001

Transcriptionist: Melissa Williams

Edited by: Melissa Williams

[First interview, begin side A, tape 1 of 1]

MB: Hello, my name is Mary Byrd. It's March 25, 2001 and I'm interviewing Val Joshua at her home in Vancouver, Washington. Will you please state your full name, your birthday, and where you were born.

VJ: My name is Valree Jacqueline Joshua and I was born in the great State of Texas, Gilmer is the town. Gilmer's located about two hundred miles east of Dallas, Texas. I was born on August the 23rd and that's as far as I'll go *[laughs]*.

MB: What was Texas like when you lived there?

VJ: Of course, I grew up during a very segregated era. I went to college in Marshall, Texas, which was larger than Gilmer and not too far from my hometown, but I lived on campus. I went to an all-Black college. I had an older sister who went there and I think the years that she was there- or maybe when I got there- it was the first Black president that they'd had at the college. We had large rooms for dormitories, had roommates, a big music hall, and classrooms, but it's all gone now. I enjoyed every moment of it.

One of the first clubs I joined was called the B Sharp Club, and that was a musical club. I was conscripted to get in, I was asked by the minister of music to join the club and I was one of the sopranos. It was a group of ten, and, of course, base, tenors, alto, and sopranos. I also joined the YWCA and I've been a member ever since. I thoroughly enjoyed my four years in college.

Everything was more or less segregated in my hometown- the schools, churches, libraries. I walked past the White school to get to the Black school, which was inclusive of grades one through twelve. The gymnasium was outdoors, there was no gym. There was no library in the building and most of the books we had were books that had been handed down from the White school to the Black school. We had Black teachers and a Black principal.

I attended a Baptist church that was founded by my great-granduncle, I think it was, as an arbor. They called it an arbor where they just had a top, they didn't have a building as such. The church still stands. He also founded the orphanage for Black children and it was opposite the two lands that joined my parent's home. We used to go over [to the orphanage] and play because they had all the outdoor equipment. My mother had a real dear friend who was in the baby department, she was the sweetest lady and I used to go with my mother over there.

Everything in that department was just as clean as it could be. The kids did the cleaning but they saw to it that it was very clean. They used to come over to our house on Sunday afternoon and play the piano and sing, that kind of stuff.

Since I've been in the State of Washington- there was a young man up in Tacoma from the orphanage and I think he came here once or twice, I've been in contact with him but I've lost contact. I was glad to see him and he had really done something with his life. I don't remember what profession he was in but he had certainly moved on.

I married my college sweetheart and we have six children. We came to the Pacific Northwest because my husband's people were here and we came out as a result of that. My husband had a degree and could have been a teacher but chose not to be. I taught one year at my former school and taught kids I had gone to school with. I tell you, I was just as green as could be because I was just right out of the classroom. Plus, I had a class that was not very nice and they told me some things they had done the year before to the teacher. I tried to be brave and strong, "You won't do that to me," and they more or less didn't. The nicest kids I had were kids that were almost my age, they were really sweet because they were kids that were bused in.

I feel that if it had not been for a friend of my mother's who taught there I would not have survived even the first year. There was a husband and wife, he was a principal and she was a teacher, they were very educated but they lacked something in making people feel like they were part of a team. After school my mother's friend would come to our house and we'd have talks, but after that year I had had enough [of teaching], finished!

By this time I had married and we decided we would move to Washington and this we did. Our six children are Washingtonians, they're all here in the State of Washington, from Vancouver to Ferndale.

Ferndale is thirty miles south of the Canadian border and we go up there, it's beautiful country so I love going up there.

MB: How did you feel about the color barriers in Texas?

VJ: At that time you had no choice. Looking back if I had it to do over again [I would have wanted to move away sooner, but] I probably could not have afforded to move sooner because it was unheard of for kids leaving their parents' home just because- there had to be a reason, going to college or to a job or something like that. I didn't like the segregation, but there wasn't anything I could do about it.

My father wasn't a high school graduate but he was very protective of his children. I came from a family of ten, five boys and five girls, and we all lived on the farm and we worked and played, we had a good time as a family unit. Church was about the biggest thing you had after school in the summer months, so I was glad to go to church.

I think my work ethics were learned as a kid on the farm. We had a dairy, acreage of corn and cotton, and a garden. We had a well that we drew water from to water the garden and wash the clothes and do those kinds of things because we didn't have a lot of modern conveniences. Since that time it is developed and, of course, they have running water.

I really feel good about having grown up on the farm. Christmas time was a real big occasion. You could go out in the woods and get a Christmas tree and put it up. My brothers built a log cabin and the kids from the city always wanted to follow us home on Sunday morning, and the boys would want to come out on Saturday night and spend the night in the cabin. Living on the farm my mother would let us try to cook chickens outside in our playhouse [*laughs*], I don't know whether we ate them or not. We had lots of chickens, cows, and I learned to ride a

horse. I wouldn't get on one of those big things today but at that time I loved to ride horses.

After one of my grandmothers died, my grandfather would come over either on Saturday or Sunday and he loved store-bought bread. He would buy a loaf of fresh bread and eat and eat. He smoked a pipe and we loved to smell his pipe. I guess he drank coffee, everybody else in the family did. One Sunday I remember these cousins of ours came out with us and we didn't have enough horses for everybody so we slipped his horse [*laughs*] and went riding in the woods. He was ready to go home before we got back and when we got back he was as angry as could be; he wanted to spank us and my dad wouldn't let him [*laughs*]. I guess he cooled off and went home.

When kids used to come out during the fall months and we had a lot of trees with great big icicles hanging down. We would go through the woods and take a stick and hit the icicles and break them. They had a lot of wild fruit and a thing called a muscadine, it's kind of like a grape and they were sweet and we would gather muscadines and eat them. I used to climb trees and eat [the fruit of the trees] until I got full.

I loved to help my mother, I loved to do the cleaning in the house and make her happy. My sister, who was older, and I used to have to do the ironing and I would pick out hankies [*laughs*] until she caught on and boy it made her angry, she started dividing the clothes. After lunch we would have to do the dishes and clean the dining room and kitchen. I remember that if she had the dining room and she swept her stuff in my kitchen, I'd sweep it back in the dining room [*laughs*]. People thought that I was spoiled because I was a baby girl but I don't think I was.

I just attended a state conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People up at Sea-Tac last weekend and they had a panel on racial profiling, they had some good panels and some good people. When I was a kid one of the things I remember from my

parents is, "You get an education. When you get an education it's yours to keep, nobody can take it from you," and I believe that. Even though my father didn't have a high school diploma, when I wanted to understand something in math, like measurements and that type of thing, he could help me with it when I couldn't get it.

When I was in elementary school we had three grades in one room and a really strict teacher, she had to be. I can understand that now, couldn't understand that then. I was actually afraid of her and I had a sister in the same grade because she missed a grade, and my brother was in the next grade. The teacher would really spank you and my brother got on her one day and said, "If you touch me today.... You can do that to my sisters, but don't do it to me. I'll go to the principal," and she didn't bother him. Since I was intimidated, naturally, I tried to be a little obedient [*laughs*].

I learned some things but I missed a lot simply because if you have three grades and seven subjects for each of those grades something's got to give- you give sheet work here, you do something here, and then you hop over here. It wasn't the best situation, but in spite of I did learn and I think the practical experiences that I learned were not superior, but certainly great for my learning.

After I married and my husband and I decided to come to Vancouver I didn't work but my aspiration was always to continue teaching. I had a friend who was teaching at the Washington State School for the Deaf and she said, "Valree, I think you ought to come and apply." At that time they really needed teachers. I went down with six other people and the superintendent hired us. Of course, we had to take courses in lip-reading and ideology and different things. Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon was teaching the things we needed to learn, I think all six of us went there. I still am in contact with the girl at

Battleground, a man who ministered to the deaf church who lives in Kansas, a person in Camas, and one in Alaska.

I remember I started out in preschool and the kids were so darling. We had a waiting list for children because at that time Alaska did not have a school for the deaf and the kids from Alaska came down, so we had many kids. I learned more than the kids did because I knew nothing about deafness. When I was a girl in Gilmer there were two deaf girls that came to my church and we didn't know anything about deafness. There was no school for them, no education, but my dad went to some of the authorities and got these girls sent to a school for the deaf, I don't know where.

Today, people are more learned about deaf education as well as blindness. It's so good because I equate deafness kind of with the African-American problems that we have here in the States simply because people did not understand, but that is no excuse because if you don't understand you should try to learn. I was in the streets of Paris one day and I saw these kids signing, well I went up and signed, "Hello" to them and they really appreciated that.

I was in Seattle once in a grocery store and I watched this mother standing off and there were two kids signing, so I went up and signed to them. When I got through the mother said, "Thank you so much for saying something to them." I don't care who they are, if they'll sign back to me, I'll sign to them and they really do appreciate it. I have many deaf friends right here in Clark County. When someone passes I try to go to any type of memorial or celebration they have. Periodically, I'll see someone in the grocery store or restaurant and we'll have a talk.

MB: The skills that you learned at the deaf school, how do you apply them to things you do now?

VJ: Well, you've heard the old expression "If you don't use it, you lose it." Well, I don't have anybody to practice with, but we do get together for lunches. If I see a deaf person I try to relate to them by signing and finger-spelling.

MB: You talked about Texas and as a kid the kind of activities you did. Did you find it that easy in Vancouver for your children?

VJ: We felt they should be a part of any activities they wanted to join- social, church, Boy Scouts, crossing guards, baseball, track, cheerleading. I had one daughter who was a cheerleader at Hudson's Bay High School. I think the sky's the limit and my firm belief is this, anybody's resources should take them wherever they want to go- that means if it's housing, education. If you're inclined for that, go for it.

MB: Are Texas and Vancouver similar?

VJ: No, not necessarily. Texas had flash floods, they had thunder and lightning storms. There was a lot of open space and after a big storm we'd get out and play in the gullies because they were filled with mud and water and stuff like that. We used to go out in our fields and pick berries, they had pails and we'd see who could fill them the fastest. My mother did a lot of canning because of the big family and the need to, so we always helped in that way.

We had helpers on the farm and my mother would make lunch for them. She'd say, "Ok, go out and get me a dozen ears of corn," and we'd go out and pull the corn and shuck it for her and that kind of stuff. We all had jobs to do and we were obedient to our parents.

MB: What type of family activities did you have in Vancouver?

VJ: When my kids got in school I joined the Parent/Teacher's Association and I've been practically everything in the PTA. I'm a member of Church Women United. I'm a joiner and today I have far too many activities, but I enjoy everything I do, I did from the get-go. In the past, I didn't feel I was competent and I wasn't a speaker because I was trying to learn the process, but today I do speak out. I'm a firm believer in education and I think that everybody deserves a good education.

For several years now I have been on Hewlett Packard's team to interview kids for scholarships and it's lots of fun. It's so much fun to read their comments and ask them questions and hopefully they'll all get a scholarship. I've done it for Clark College too- their Constance Baker Motley Scholarship that NAACP helped establish.

MB: How did you get involved with the NAACP and when?

VJ: When I was a kid [it] was unheard of in my neck of the woods. My sister was a life member of NAACP but they didn't have a unit in our town so she had to go twenty miles away if she wanted to be part of any goings-on. Every year the sisters used to meet wherever the NAACP met and that was our get-together. I got involved simply because I couldn't when I was in Texas, but when I came to Vancouver I could. I became a regular member, then a life member and from that day on I just decided I wanted to be a part of this because I know it's important to all of us.

MB: How did the race barriers in Texas relate to race barriers here in Washington?

VJ: One that I remember distinctly- in Texas we didn't have a lot of money to go to movies and things like that, but when we did we had to

go up in the balcony, you didn't sit down on the main floor. I never went into the general public library as a student in school in Texas. The only outside jobs that African American kids could have to help get money to go to college was to either work in somebody's home or work on the farm. My dad was a staunch believer that we should *not* go into somebody else's home and work, so we worked on the farm.

In Vancouver, my kids picked strawberries and green beans, all kinds of beans. I used to get up at four o'clock in the morning, drive over there, and we'd work until it got hot and then we'd come home. They earned money and helped to buy some of their school clothes. They spent some of it on football and other things they needed.

MB: Were there any activities or social events that your kids took part in?

VJ: They went to dances. We always lived in a mixed neighborhood and they still have friends they grew up with.

MB: Can you tell me what it's like being a part of the NAACP? What did things did the NAACP set out to do for the community?

VJ: The national was founded in 1909 out of need. Black and White people founded the NAACP and from that day to this day there are people who think it's only an organization for Black people. Here in Clark County we have more White membership than Black. We celebrated our fifty-fourth year in 1999 and we had a big gala down at the quay.

When we first came, housing was segregated- over here was White and over here was Black. The NAACP and the Vancouver Housing Authority worked to eliminate that and then people started buying

homes and moving into any area they wanted. That was one of our big successes.

I am a firm believer today that we need to network more. We can't be exclusive in anything because there are organizations that have goals like the NAACP has, which is to "eliminate racism wherever it exists by any means necessary," that is the NAACP slogan, and I think it's a good slogan. As an NAACP-er I want to help promote that idea. I'll always be a member and support the goals of the NAACP. Whenever I can I go to the conferences of the four branches- national, region, state, and local.

Our national is located in Baltimore, Maryland and our region is located in Los Angeles. Next month they're having a regional meeting in Mesa, Arizona so I'll be going to that. I just went to Sea-Tac for the state conference, and, of course, I'm here in Vancouver for the meetings here.

MB: Moving from Texas to Vancouver, seeing one side of the street was White and one side was Black, how did you feel about that?

VJ: Well, I didn't like it...

[First interview, end side A, tape 1 of 1]

[First interview, begin side B, tape 1 of 1]

VJ: ... can choose my friends, I can choose the places that I go and I don't have to always [associate only with Blacks]. I just believe that if you want to eliminate this type of thing that we have to be a promoter of it and I'm a promoter of networking and people choosing their friends. If I wanted to go to Portland to visit my friends I can go there to visit them.

MB: What are some of the favorite things you did in Vancouver?

VJ: I have gone out to nightclubs and things. I'm not a big nightclub-goer, and I don't go anymore, but I like different things at the auditorium. I like to sing so I sing with two groups here in Vancouver and by the time I go to the YWCA, the county jail, sewing group, and something else, I don't get any time in the house. I have to either stay up nights and do something or forget it.

MB: You sing for...?

VJ: We have a group that started out as the Vancouver Choraliers, the founder of that group is still living and is a good friend of ours. New people came in with new ideas and it became the Brohm Singers. When we traveled to Europe people thought all we did was highbrow music, which wasn't true because we were still doing all this other stuff-spirituals and classical, and what have you.

We got a new director and he worked in the Vancouver School District for many years. We had another vote and they voted to call the group the Vancouver U.S.A. Singers so we wouldn't be confused with Vancouver, B.C. Then St. Joseph's Church got a new minister of music, a husband and a wife team, and they are truly musicians. Everybody that we've had has been really good because I've learned so much about music. Even though I sang in college it was on a different scale because you're in a class for an hour then you leave, and unless you do some homework.... But when I go to a rehearsal now I work on the parts I haven't picked up at home or that I didn't pick up at a rehearsal.

I would go out to PTA meetings, League of Women Voters, and Church Women United- those groups, and church, were my outlets. Church has a lot of activities. I could go to my church every day of the week, and every night too probably, but I choose not to simply because

I've been there, done that, and now I want to do something for the community as a whole.

MB: What's the name of your church?

VJ: The First Church of God on 33rd and 78th.

MB: You sing at church?

MB: No, I don't. I have sung in the choir only on special occasions, like on Mother's Day they might have a mother's choir, but it's another night away from home and if I can have a night at home I need it.

MB: Is family important?

VJ: I would not have had six children had it not been. I am supportive of my children. I said, "You can step on my blue suede shoes but please don't step on my kids'."

MB: As a teacher and a mother, how did school relate to your children?

VJ: They were very supportive simply because I always got up in time to make their breakfasts, did the wash and ironing and whatever was necessary to get them ready for school, and I always cooked dinner. I'm kind of a morning person. I usually was the first person in my building, and when the bell rang at 3:15 or 3:30 I was ready to get out of there simply because I wanted to come home to my family.

MB: What differences do you see in Vancouver between then and now?

VJ: When we first came to Vancouver [in 1942] it was a small town. I liked it when it was small. I know that every city, town, hamlet, and what not in the United States its growing by leaps and bounds. There was something in the paper one day this week about the growth in Vancouver; we're supposed to be the fastest-growing county in the whole state. You can see it every day. When I first came here they had big buses, what they called cattle cars. It was during the war years and they transported people to the shipyards in the cattle car, and you could ride downtown. I can get lost in Vancouver now. Growth is one of the big changes I've noticed, and with growth comes land being swallowed up for development.

MB: How did the war effect you and your family?

MB: The big thing that affected me was not being with my ultimate family, I was a long ways from my mother and father. I had sisters in Michigan and brothers in California. [During the war] families were divided. Of course, we kept in contact. I went back to Texas every year to visit when the parents were living. Being divided was really hard on my mother. Once I went down to visit and the last thing I saw was my dad standing and waving, and to this day I can have a vision of him and how much his kids meant to him.

MB: How did you see the war effect the community?

VJ: People came from all over the United States to work. They had three shifts- morning, swing, and graveyard. People came for upward mobility and that meant you didn't spend every penny just because you made a good salary. People saved their money to buy a home, go back to where they came from, or whatever their choices were.

MB: Did you work in the shipyards?

VJ: No.

MB: Is there anything else you'd like to say.

VJ: I went to Lewis and Clark College in Portland, got my masters degree and my kids tried to encourage me to get a doctorate and I said, "Not in my lifetime."

MW: We'd like to know some years for a frame of reference.

VJ: We moved here in 1942, my husband and I. His parents were already here and I've been here ever since. The group that I sing with travels an awful lot and every time they go out I say, "Yeah, put my name in the pot," because I have always wanted to travel.

MB: Why did you stay in Vancouver?

VJ: Because I like it. I liked the smallness of it, it was such a homey, friendly community. I could go anywhere I wanted to go in a day's time and be back home in time to get dinner.

The one thing I'm hoping is that we get a center where we can have some fine arts things here and won't have to go to Portland. When you go to the auditorium at Portland if the thing starts at 8 o'clock you have to leave an hour or an hour and a half early because of traffic. By the time you get out of the event you have to wait until the traffic dies down to get home and it's almost midnight before you settle down to bed. If we had a performing arts center here then I would go to it instead.

MB: Did any of your children move to Texas?

VJ: No, my kids have been there but they know very little, other than what they've read, about Texas. Once we took the older kids, the three that we had, [to Texas]. My parents had some acreage and they thought, "Oh my goodness, what a waste. This should be done, it should have this on it, it should have that on it," well, they didn't get their wish because it's still there.

MB: What types of things do you do now?

VJ: Sundays I go to church but I don't go back in the evening unless there's something musical or something that I really want to hear. Monday night I go to the U.S.A. Singers rehearsal for two and a half to three hours. On Tuesday I go to the county jail and that takes sometimes five hours because I go by the YWCA where we keep our supplies- I take care of the cards, envelopes, and paper. We allow the girls to write two letters and we take them back and mail them. When I get home from that I try to have something left over so I can have something to eat. Then at 6:30 I'm picked up and I go to St. Joe's for a rehearsal for two and a half to three hours.

When I get home from that I come upstairs undressing and ready to go to bed, but I do want to see if the news is still on, I'm a news fan. I'm addicted to working crossword puzzles so I take the puzzles to bed with me and I work on them a while. When I get tired I just turn off everything and go to sleep, but I'm up the next morning.

Wednesdays I have a sewing group I go to. We meet at 10 o'clock in different homes and that's three to four hours, and coming home I might stop at the store. I advocate for people, so my answering machine

is crying away back there. When anybody calls I try my best to help them as much as I can, try to steer them to the agency that will be most helpful to them. I have gone to court with people. I've gone to juvenile hall with children and families. When I was a kid I thought that I wanted to be a social worker, but after I stayed in the classroom with three grade levels I said, "No, I gotta be a teacher."

MB: You mentioned night clubs before. What were some of the nightclubs you went to?

VJ: Well, they had Black ones. There was a group of men that had a club and my husband was not a member of it but he liked to go when they had a dance. We used to go over there to dances- somewhere off of Martin Luther King Boulevard I think it was, probably torn down by now.

There was a hotel on Main Street and I think the city voted to tear it down, it used to have dances upstairs. We went there a few times.

MB: Were a lot of the activities segregated?

VJ: I remember way out somewhere, I don't know whether it was Mill Plain Boulevard or Fourth Plain Boulevard, there was a Black man who had a night club. I was not a nightclub-goer but I remember hearing people talk about it.

MB: I understand there was an amusement park in Jantzen Beach.

VJ: Yes, we took our kids there. It was fun because I rode the rollercoaster and I said, "This is my last time. I will never ride another rollercoaster." It was fun to go to the different things they had to offer.

MB: Is there anything you want to let us know or tell us?

VJ: When my husband and I bought the house here there was a lady who lived directly across the street from us. Josh went out to cut the lawn while I was at work and while he was out there it was kind of raining a little bit, so the girl across the street came over and invited him over for coffee for the very first time. From that day to this day she and I have been friends. She lives in condos in Salmon Creek but she'll call me up and say, "I'm having a Chinese fit, let's go out to lunch," and we go to lunch. Her husband and my husband became good friends. We'd go out to dinner together and that type of thing.

I used to know all the neighbors here. Some of the people in the houses that I knew have since moved away, but most of the houses I still know. I can't go out in the yard without somebody stopping me, and I've gotta get my work done out there! I always have time for neighbors, for anybody who needs it, the kids that come by from school or whoever.

MB: When you first moved to Washington where did you and your husband settle?

VJ: It was a place called Bagely Downs. They had apartments down there and we lived in an apartment there.

MB: Was the area mostly Black?

VJ: In our apartment building, yes it was, and probably close around. But here again, I always try to relate to people because my philosophy is this- I'm so proud of my culture I hope it shows. By the same token, I cannot live by myself alone. When people [suggest a separatist stance], I say "Well, where do you get your daily bread? Who sells it to you? When

you go to the bank how many people who wait on you in the bank are African American?" We just can't live by ourselves alone.

MB: Are you going to continue to educate in the classroom?

VJ: I do tutoring. I had a little blind boy from my church that went to the school for the blind and his parents wanted him to have a church education too. Once a week I would go out to my church and sit in his classroom and mentor him. They then started going to church up at Kalama and he plays the piano just beautifully. He had a concert and, of course, I was invited and I took a friend. Now they've started going to a Lutheran church out in the neighborhood and I was invited to a concert out there. I really like the little boy. It's a nice family. They always send me Christmas gifts and cards and I do the same for him- I send him a little toy or something.

MB: You were singing when you were in college. Were you a member of any singing groups between then and now?

VJ: I sang in my church choir as a kid in Texas.

MB: Are your kids as musically talented as you?

VJ: The oldest boy played the violin, I don't know whether he keeps it up or not. The second boy sang in Hudson's Bay High School's choir, and Ron played the clarinet, and the others sang in the choir. They've all been musical up to a point but when you go to college and do something else then you don't always go back to the horn or whatever.

MB: Are any of your children educators or involved in community activities?

VJ: They have done some. My daughter is a lieutenant for Clark County Sheriff. One son worked as a security officer for a Safeway store in Colorado. My son way up north works for Arco Oil Company and has an office. I also have a son who's an attorney.

MB: Thank you very much.

VJ: You're very welcome.

[End of first interview]

Narrator: Val Joshua

Interviewer: Mary Byrd and Melissa Williams

Location: Vancouver, Washington

Second interview [tape 2]: April 19, 2001

Transcriptionist: Melissa Williams

Edited by Melissa Williams

[Second interview, begin side A, tape 2 of 2]

MB: In your last interview you mentioned your family owned a farm. How long has that farm been in your family?

VJ: I don't have any specific date, but I grew up on it. I didn't work in the field until I got old enough, so it's been a long time.

MB: Is it still there?

VJ: Yes, but the farm I grew up on has been developed into a housing development because land is precious and, just like here in Clark County, everywhere is growing. The home that my family still owns is there now.

MB: Who lives there?

VJ: We have it rented out to a woman on Section 8. She has subsidized rental fees; the government pays for it and she pays for it.

MB: Kids in your class were bused in?

MB: Most of them were, but there were some that lived here in Clark County and some of them were brought by their parents. When I first started teaching for the School for the Deaf here in Clark County they didn't have a school for the deaf in Alaska. Since then they have built a school and the kids from Alaska don't come. They came to Vancouver from Alaska and all over the state. We even had some other states, but [it] was [the] responsibility from the state in which they came to pay for their care and tuition.

MB: Where did those kids come from?

VJ: All over- Spokane and other Washington residents, but we had some from Idaho and places like that.

MB: Your husband's family lived here in Vancouver [before you came in 1942]. Why were they here?

VJ: I'm sure for upward mobility like a lot of people who came before the war years because there were better opportunities. Just like the great migration of people from the South that went back East for a better life, I'm sure that was the reason most of the African Americans, as well as other people, came.

MB: Were there any other reasons your husband wanted to raise his family here?

VJ: We just decided we wanted to move on and establish our lives, so we did.

MB: Once you got here how was the work climate?

VJ: There was plenty of work for people because of the shipyard days. Anybody that wanted to work could have a job- they had either skills to move up or to train to do a certain job.

MB: Were there any race issues?

VJ: Oh yes. In some of the restaurants in the area, as well as in the Portland metropolitan area, some said, "We reserve the right to [refuse service]." We were not socializers very much and, of course, there were places in Portland that were owned by African Americans along the Williams Avenue area [*Northeast Portland*]. People went to nightclubs or what have you.

MB: Do you recall any of the businesses that had the signs up?

VJ: Yeah, I do. I don't know if I want to mention because it's under different ownership and management now. I know the gentleman who currently owns it and he's a very nice gentleman who had nothing to do whatsoever with what happened back then.

MB: What did your husband's family do in Vancouver when they moved here?

VJ: His father and mother worked in the shipyards and after they downsized they went back to Texas, and we chose to stay because at that time we were raising our family and we wanted to establish a home and make a home for them.

MW: Did they ever tell you about their experiences working in the shipyards?

VJ: No, I don't remember anything because they seemed to have prospered. I'm sure they might have had some encounters but we never especially talked about them because working long hours and sleeping during your off time, you know what I mean?

MB: How long had they been here before they moved back to Texas?

VJ: They must have stayed several years, the number I don't remember.

MB: Your children grew up mostly in the '50s and '60s.

VJ: Yes.

MW: Can you tell us some birth date years?

VJ: I'd have to go back through my files. I don't try to keep numbers or dates in my head.

MB: What year did you start teaching at the deaf school?

VJ: Well, I taught there twenty-two years and I don't remember the year I started. It was at a time that teachers were needed and there were six of us that went in at the same time. We were all hired the very first day we went.

MB: What years were you a member of the PTA?

VJ: As soon as my kids got in preschool I started as a PTA person.

MB: The NAACP was established in Vancouver in 1945. Do you recall any specific ways the NAACP helped the Black community?

VJ: With the housing authority, NAACP, and concerned citizens integrated housing became an issue. Before it became integrated it was an issue because the projects were up and people came to Vancouver and that was the available low rental housing. There was White on one side, African American on the other and this is what they worked to integrate- not only in the projects because they closed after a while and then the people who decided to stay needed a home of their own. That was a blessing because I'm a firm believer that people should live wherever their resources will take them.

MW: You're saying there were Black people on one side of the street and White people on the other, how did that happen?

VJ: I'm not sure it was mandated because I was not a part of that group that did that, but I was aware it was going on and I was sure integration was something that needed to be done. [It] was done because the kids went to school together, they played together, and mothers and fathers went to PTA together, some of us went to church together, so why have this division?

MW: How did the NAACP and the housing authority get together?

VJ: We had a man who was instrumental in organizing a local chapter of NAACP who worked for housing and through that process other people were brought in. There were people in the broader community who thought that it was time to do something and worked with the program.

MB: Do you know anything about the Vanport Interracial Council?

VJ: No, sure don't, but I knew people in Vanport and knew when the flood came.

MB: I understand the Urban League was in Portland in the 1940s, can you tell us anything about the Urban League?

VJ: We never had an Urban League of our own. Vancouver was part of the Portland Urban League and any time they had a function people went. I can remember several CEOs- Edwin Berry who went on to Chicago I believe, he passed on, but he was an excellent person. The lady who is CEO of the Urban League now, Margaret Carter, I met her and she's an outstanding person and has done wonders to bring the Urban League back to its position.

MB: Bagley Downs was opened to tenants in August of 1943, do you remember if you came in 1942 or 1943?

VJ: I'm just surmising it opened in '42 because if people were here they needed a place to stay. I'm assuming that maybe it opened then but I don't know the dates. You could always stay out a hotel or motel.

MB: More Black Vancouver tenants came from Texas than any other state...

VJ: They came from all over. They came from the East, and California, South.

MB: Did you meet anyone who came from Texas?

VJ: Oh, I met lots of people that came from Texas. I became acquainted with lots of people and have friends that I'm still acquainted with.

MB: Did you know any women who worked in the shipyards?

VJ: Yeah, I had a good friend; she and I called each other every morning, and she and her husband worked in the shipyards. Her name is Willimae Jonigan.

MB: You mentioned you would take the cattle car downtown. Did the cattle car just go to the shipyard or did it go to other places too?

VJ: It picked up the workers and people that were going to the city. You could ride the cattle car wherever it went, you paid a fee of course. As

far as the transportation for the outlying established communities, I'm not sure it did that. I don't know because I didn't ride it any further than downtown.

MB: What was Vancouver like in the 1940s?

VJ: Beautiful. I tell you, there were nuts, apple orchards, farmland, beautiful trees. It was just a small community that was very very enjoyable, a nice place to live.

MB: Can you tell us more about Black social life in Vancouver?

VJ: There was a nightclub I guess out on Mill Plain and it was owned by Black men, but my husband and I were not socialites. I think I went there once to something that they had, but it's been so long ago I just can't relate to it.

MB: Do you remember the name?

VJ: No. I could ask somebody and maybe find that out.

MB: You mentioned a nightclub on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard that your husband was not a member of but he went sometimes. What else can you tell us about that?

VJ: Well, once a year they probably had a formal dance but people could go any time they chose to sit around and talk with people, meet people and that type of thing. I'm sure it was probably open every night that's just my estimation.

MB: Do you recall a certain club called the Cotton Club on Main Street?

VJ: I think so.

MB: Were there a large number of Blacks that went there?

VJ: I'm sure there was. I wish I knew more. I was interested in community activities and that took me to PTA and Church Women United, church, and the YWCA. I've been a member of the YWCA since my college days.

MB: When your family moved here from Texas, what church did you and your family go to?

VJ: First I went to a church down at Bagley Center, I think that's where it was, but I didn't especially care for that. I met some friends who went to Hughes Memorial Methodist Church in Portland and we got along quiet a while, but there was toll on the Interstate 5 bridge. I thought, "The money I pay for toll to go to church I could give in the collection plate here," so I started going to church here in Vancouver.

MB: What church?

VJ: First Church of God. At that time it was located on 37th and F Street, and then moved to 78th Street and it's been there ever since.

MB: Did you have other friends who went to churches in Vancouver?

VJ: There was an African American church that moved to Portland- New Hope Baptist Church- I don't know a lot about it but I have friends that

still go there. I've gone to weddings and special occasions there but not enough to know a lot about it, I don't even know who the minister is. They started here as far as I can remember.

MW: Do you have any idea how long they were in Vancouver?

VJ: I really don't. I remember going once and nothing happened personally with me but I just didn't like the attitude I got there. It was probably me rather than anything else, but I think I was looking for something different. Let me say this, I did go to an interracial community church that met up where Community African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church meets. I went up there from when it became a recreation center, this was before it Community A. M. E. Zion bought the building. We had church there and met some very interesting ministers. They never had a Black minister but I remember it going under three ministers, at least.

MB: Did the Black community in Vancouver have unity?

VJ: Well, we had NAACP and to me that is a focal point of Black interaction. When there were educational meetings the rooms would overflow simply because of issues that people perceived that were real to them. The meetings focused on things of interest like education and political awareness.

MB: Were there discussions of problems with the living conditions and jobs?

VJ: Yes. Always one of the issues was people seeking jobs and issues of children in school, name-calling, and the type of thing that still goes on today.

MB: Did your children experience any of that?

VJ: Yes. My kids have always been encouraged to be a part of whatever-whether it's the school, the community, Little League. I didn't know [about this story] until after the lady had died and I probably would have said something to her- one of my kids was going to be a crossing guard and somebody told me the librarian said, "Well, there are no Black [crossing guards]." Boy, I'm angry to this day, and I hope her soul rests in peace but by the same token it hurts to know this went on. She didn't say it to me or my son, but she said it where someone heard. I would have gone up one side and down the other on her case if I had known.

MW: Do you recall any public school problems?

VJ: Yeah, I have heard. You know old Fort Vancouver used to be downtown? The kids were told they could not dance with the White girls, this is what I was told by students at that particular time. That has passed but there are things that are probably still being said.

MB: When you moved here and joined the YWCA and the NAACP do you recall any incidents where you personally went out to help certain cases where there were problems in the Black community?

VJ: In the YWCA, the friend that was CEO at that time is still living, and she and I became very good friends. She started her life membership with the local chapter and anytime there was anything going on we could

always gather people. One time we went down to a forest area somewhere down the Columbia River Gorge to a Black girl who was teaching there. Her husband was a forester and they had three children and I can't remember exactly what the issues were, but we went and they were having a board meeting that night and would not let us stay at the board meeting.

Of course, after that they wanted their children to grow up in an integrated area so she moved to Vancouver and she's still teaching in Portland, but the husband and father lives back East. We've always taken an interest. Anybody that calls me and wants to me to go with them to court, to a school, I will go if I'm not already doing something.

MB: What schools did your kids attend?

VJ: All of them graduated from Hudson's Bay High School. They also attended John Rogers and Bagley Downs.

MW: Do you know anything about the one Black man who lived in Vancouver before World War II?

VJ: You know, I'm not sure because we didn't get a name. There was an African American man, very very light-skinned who could have passed if he wanted to. He had a shoe shine parlor in the bus depot. He was always busy, the man is dead I understand. That's all I know about him! It's unfortunate that at that time we didn't collect a lot of things on him and any others that might have been here.

MB: Are there any experiences you'd like to tell us about?

VJ: I have thoroughly enjoyed... not that everything's been roses, but I can cope and I have learned that you listen and then you say what you have to say. I've enjoyed Vancouver and I consider Vancouver home even though I was born in the State of Texas. I have wonderful friends and people that would go to bat for me if I knew them, but I try to go to bat for myself and advocate for others.

MW: Do you recall when the housing projects were being put up for public sale that there was a mayor's commission to go door-to-door and speak to people who lived in neighborhoods about the possibility of Blacks buying homes...

[Interview two, end side A, tape 2 of 2]

[Interview two, begin side B, tape 2 of 2]

VJ: ... [when my husband and I wanted to move] down in The Village and a minister that we knew owned this house, the minister went to the neighbors to ask [the neighbors about Blacks moving in]. I didn't find that out until after we moved into the house. One day, I was out in the yard and a man passed by who lived in the neighborhood and he said, "You're as welcome as the flowers in May," I never will forget that one. When we decided that Vancouver would be our home and we wanted to buy I understand the realtor who sold us this house went and asked [neighbors] to get their opinions. This realtor happened to have been on the human rights commission.

MB: When did you move to the house you're in now?

VJ: That I don't know. My husband could tell you to the day when we moved here. I'm surmising maybe it was the '70s but I'd have to go back and look at our deeds.

MB: When you lived in Bagley Downs, did you remember having house gatherings or going to somebody's house?

VJ: Yeah, walking to the store together because they had a Bagley store up there. There were people we went out with once in a while to have dinner or something like that.

MB: Was there a favorite restaurant in Vancouver that Blacks liked to go to?

VJ: Well, there was a hotel on Main Street and I think it's torn down and become something else. The last time I was in this hotel I went there on behalf of a Black lady that lived there because it was low rental, I don't know whether the housing authority bought it or what. It was right on the corner down from Evergreen Boulevard. We went dancing there once in a while. We went to Portland a lot because we did a lot of shopping in Portland and you could have your dinner or lunch over there. Meier and Frank's always been a favorite, "Friday Surprises"¹ and that kind of stuff. We used to like to drive and sit and just watch people parade.

MW: How do you feel about the success of the human rights commission?

VJ: You know, the state human rights commission had an office here at one time but it closed for lack of funds, or whatever reason. The local

¹ "Friday Surprise" was the name for a weekly sale held on Fridays at Meier and Frank department store.

human rights commission passed ordinances about housing and things like that. Any time there was an issue brought up we talked about it, but we had no clout to subpoena people or to do anything other than use good will and hope attitudes would change. I'm sure we did some good for people, but the diehards we probably didn't.

MW: The human rights commission was separate from the mayor's commission?

VJ: I'm not sure because I'm confused on the human rights commission and mayor's commission. The mayor's commission might have evolved into a human rights commission, that's what probably happened. I think for lack of being able to do a lot of things, like have some clout, maybe that's why it didn't last. The church was a focal point to talk about... seeing as how Sunday at eleven o'clock in the morning was the most segregated hour, that was probably one of the big issues. If you live in Vancouver find a church and be a part of that church.

MW: I heard the mayor's commission met at Clark College.

VJ: Seems like we met at City Hall. Well, we could have met at Clark College too. That's been a long time ago and we probably met at Clark College. I understand from a girl that I go to Sunday school with that NAACP had a college chapter at Clark College and she was a part of it. Now, it probably wasn't at the location it is now, but when it was down at Ogden Meadows and Main Street or somewhere. She remembers they had a college chapter and I didn't know that until she told me.

MW: What do you recall about rationing during the war?

VJ: People stood in line to get sugar stamps, nylons, anything that said you had to have a coupon for people stood in line, that's what I remember most. Then, if somebody didn't need theirs they would exchange coupons to get things. It was definitely part of history.

MB: Those are all the questions I have.

VJ: Well, I answered as thoroughly as I could remember and as forthright as I could, but there were a lot of things that happened.

MB: Thank you very much.

VJ: You're very welcome, and I hope that your project is really a huge success.

[End of second interview]