

SUA, LOU SAUNDERS, Ph.D. *But Your Mother Was An Activist: Black Women's Activism in North Carolina.* (2012)  
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Black women have had a long history of unrecognized community activism. This includes involvement in the freedom struggle as recorded by Naples (1998), Rodriguez (1998), Knupfer (2006) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and others. I review research on Black women's activism in the Civil Rights Movement, and such roles as Black librarians. Black women serve as "bridge leaders" with a strong orientation toward social justice and social activism. Robnett (1997) theorized that *bridge leaders* were those who "utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community: between prefigurative strategies and political strategies."

The focus of my research is Black women's grassroots activism in the Triad area of North Carolina. In defining grassroots, Naples (1998) states that "being from the grassroots generally means being free from any constraining political affiliations and being responsible to no authority except their own group." The research of these seven women redefines an understanding and knowledge of why Black women fight for their communities and increases the knowledge of the political, cultural, social, and historical context of grassroots activism.

This study utilizes narrative research methodology (Casey, 1993, 1995-6). I asked seven women to "tell me the story of your life." I taped each interview and transcribed and analyzed each life story, taking note of selectivity, slippage, silence, and intertextuality (Popular Memory Group, 1982). I discuss the collective stories of these

women in terms of the influence of their families, especially their fathers, the role of the church in their lived experience and the key impetus of education. Their life stories provide insights into their reasons for their activism which includes community issues that involved their own children and their communities. Some of the women were instrumental in developing an academic computer science, implementing a preschool and after school educational programs, and advocating for local public library services and building. Some served on the city council while others worked to save a historical Black high school, fight for welfare rights, and train community residents on community empowerment. Their other work would include undoing racism and addressing the deterioration of their housing, neighborhoods, and communities.

Through their love of others and the need to make their neighborhoods and communities a better place for their families, these women represent the voices for social justice, social change, and community change that have not been heard.

BUT YOUR MOTHER WAS AN ACTIVIST: BLACK WOMEN'S  
ACTIVISM IN NORTH CAROLINA

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

#### **Invisibility of Black Women in Grassroots Activism**

The title of this dissertation comes from a conversation I was having one day with my doctoral committee chairperson. We were talking about the things I remembered about some of the women I grew up with and who had influenced me as an adult with my work in communities. As we discussed what these women have done and were doing, she said to me, “But your mother was an activist.” I remember looking at her and stating emphatically that my mother *was not* an activist. She proceeded to remind me of stories I shared in some of my classes about my mother and her community activities. I thought about it for a long time because I never saw my mother being anything other than my mom and a woman who helped her neighbors. Yet her community involvement *did* qualify her as an activist by definition.

This dissertation is inspired by my mother’s community work and my frustration; frustration from not finding evidence of Black women’s activism in the freedom struggle. As a child who grew up during the freedom struggle, I remember observing and listening to men involved in the struggle; men like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and other Black male leaders in the South. I would sometimes see Black women in the background when these leaders were speaking without hearing the women speak. During that time men were expected to lead movements; I never questioned the roles of women

in the struggle. The country was moving from segregation to integration and I was a part of the change. So I never questioned who was helping to make the change. I accepted what was happening and watched my parents and other adults making decisions for us. I remembered watching events unfolding on television with my parents, great-grandfather, my older brother, and my younger sister. Although things were happening in this country, in some ways, it seemed so distant because places like Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia seemed far, far away.

There were civil rights activities happening in my own community but not at the level that I saw on television (or so I thought). My brother was allowed to march for civil rights but my sister and I were not. During the 50's and 60's, my mother and father were involved in the Struggle but their involvements were more subtle. They did not demonstrate or march but they both were very active in the NAACP. My mother's covert involvement in the struggle was as a nurse in the local hospital. My mother, who worked the third shift, would use ether to remove the "White" and "Colored" words from the bathrooms and water fountains in the hospital. For many people this may seem like a little thing but for the hospital it was a big deal. Not only was my mother costing the hospital money replacing and re-painting the signs but what she was doing was illegal. This went on for about three years before they found out who was doing it. They finally set a trap to discover the "culprit" and that "culprit" was my mother. They threatened to fire her if she did not stop and she agreed--for a while; but within six months she was back at her old tricks. By the time they decided to deal with her again, the hospital had decided to integrate. As a child growing up, I did not see this as significant but when I

was much older I realized that it took courage to continue to do this even after she was told to stop. Not only did she jeopardize her job but she jeopardized her family and her life.

I grew up during segregation in this country. I lived in a segregated community, went to segregated schools, and experienced the segregation of restaurants, transportation, shopping, and other parts of life in the segregated South. I was very fortunate to grow up with my parents, my brother and sister, grandparents (my father's mother, my father's grandmother, and my mother's grandfather) and lots of aunts and uncles (*kin and fictive kin*), cousins, and other relatives who could ease the sting of segregation and the Jim Crow laws. There were people, events, situations, and impressions in your life that leave a profound impact on you. They leave an imprint that stays with you forever and can either destroy you or make you stronger. How you deal with these situations or "things" can make you or break you. What you walk away with leaves an indelible mark on your mind and psyche. Most of the negative effects of segregation were kept from us by our parents because they wanted to insulate us from the horrors and troubles of segregation. I was not exposed to most of the negative elements. I only experienced the negative elements when we had to go downtown to shop and mostly, when I was with my grandmother.

When I went off to college in the 70's, I began to read about some of the events that happened when I was growing up. I read about women such as Rosa Parks, Mary McCleod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, and others but their contributions were minimized in the literature. I think it was during this time that the seed of questioning about Black

women's contribution to the freedom struggle was planted. Gradually, I began to read more and more about the history of Blacks in this country minus the addition of activist Black women. There was much publicity about the four young men from North Carolina A&T College (NCA&T) protesting at the Woolworth's lunch counter. There is a passing footnote about a group of young women from Bennett College who preceded those NCA&T students in the struggle for freedom.

This need to understand the place of women in the freedom struggle was paramount. As I pursued to further my education and my career, I was always on the "watch" for the information, papers, studies, or books about the involvement of Black women in various struggles. I don't think it was until the late 1980's that I began to see a little information about their involvement. In 1987, I saw the first installment of "Eyes on the Prize," which was a public television's documentary on the civil-rights struggle. This television showed men and *women* being interviewed about their experiences in the 1950's and 1960's. Although this program did show representation of women in the struggle, it still concentrated on the men's involvement. I wanted and needed more information about the role of Black women because I knew there had to be more. To understand this thirst for information and why it was and has been so important to me, I had to examine my role as a researcher to understand this need.

### **Myself as a Researcher**

Subjectivity as lived experience legitimates individual's consciousness that social reality is constructed within a historical and political context. As an individual I can't deny my history and the influence it has on every aspect of my life. It is the lens through which I view my world. My personal history is a construction of my

lived experiences, fragments of my life contrasting, contradicting and rubbing against each other. (Malone, 1994, pp. 20-21)

In reading Alan Peshkin's (1988) article "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own" and in Karen Malone's paper entitled "Celebrating Our Subjectivity: Research as a Lived Experience," I thought about writing about myself as a researcher. Malone (1994) states that "when we celebrate our subjectivity, we are learning new ways of telling our research tales" (p. 1). This was true as I struggle to actually write about myself as a researcher and who I am as it is associated to the research I conducted for my dissertation.

In my paper, *Finding Joy: Refugee Women in the United States* for the course "Narrative Research," I had to write about myself and found it very difficult to write about me and to put it on paper. In the paper I wrote:

I am an African American woman who is proud to say that. I am proud of who I am and how I identify myself. I know that my "Blackness" is what helps to define me and I have no shame for that. The music I like to listen to, the people that I identify myself with, even those things that sometimes embarrass me by being "Black" have helped to shape me. I like to tell people that I am a true Southerner in the things that I like, the things about the South, and the things that I like about being an African American Southern woman. I think that those of us who are from the South do see and think differently than those in other parts of the country. I think what I have gone through as a Southern Black has helped me to look at life differently; through different lens.

As part of a larger community, I think that it is important for me to identify myself to know how I fit in. I have a great concern for the survival of the African American community in the United States. I am proud of what we have accomplished and I know that we have survived worst times through slavery, reconstruction, "Jim Crow," the civil rights and more. I see a group of strong people and see how my optimism is important for my continuous work in the community. I have worked in African American communities since the early 1990's working with women, mostly African American. I have been able to

identify with the communities that I have worked in because my history is their history. The story may be told differently but the messages have been the same.

The work that I have done in the community has been with women who have been part of “the system,” (welfare, public housing, substance abuse, domestic violence, etc.) They have had to struggle for survival for themselves, their children, and their family. Sometimes I have had to be the “voice” for them in their communities because their “voices” were silenced and could not be “heard.” There are assumptions about women in these situations and even the women themselves are sometimes convinced that what is assumed or said about them is true. Because I have been where they are or and in some cases are still in the “fire” with them, I was able to “aid” them in finding their “voice” and understand that only you can speak your future. Women sometimes feel powerless in their situation and feel that they have to settle for less but empowering people and helping them take leadership in their lives can help them change the future.

In this research I know that there will be times when my subjectivity may overshadow what is being said by the narrator but it will important to recognize the subjectivity. I know as I have in the past heard stories from other women that I have wanted to go out and “slay the world” for them. But I have tried to step back and let them take the lead through guidance and support.

I have been in their homes and became part of their community and families. I was seen as “one of them” because I shared my history with them and I succeeded and got “out of the system.” Their children became my children and their families became my families and in a number of cases our families became friends and socialized. Today, I am still friends with a number of the women that I have worked with in various projects. Although we don’t see each other often, it is almost as if time has not passed when we do get together. (Sua, 2006)

Since I wrote this statement for the narrative research class, I have learned how to share more about myself. I have learned how important it is to think more about me as a researcher and how subjectivity in my research will help me to refine and define my topic for research.

I was born in 1953 so I am a “baby boomer.” I think it is very interesting that I categorize myself in this way because I always think of this as a term used by White people. As I look at my research and the era in which some of my research will focus, I

realize that it is important for me to clarify where I situate myself in the topics of the freedom struggle, women's rights and community activism. I grew up during segregation in this country. I lived in a segregated community, went to segregated schools, and experienced the segregation of restaurants, transportation, shopping and other parts of life in the segregated South. I was very fortunate to grow up with my parents, a brother and sister, grandparents (my father's mother, my father's grandmother, and my mother's grandfather) and lots of aunts and uncles (*kin and fictive kin*), cousins, and other relatives.

My mother was a very proud woman who was a nurse and met my father when his aunt was in the hospital because of an illness. They were married in 1948 and by 1956 they had three children which included my sister who was adopted. *Before they had children, my parents would take in babies of single mothers or women who had too many children.* They would keep the children until the women came and got their babies or the babies were put up for adoption. That's how my sister came to be part of our family. Her biological mother (*Aunt Martha*) and my mother were best friends. When her mother decided that three children were too many for her and my mother took my sister in thinking that her mother would change her mind; *Aunt Martha* never did. So my sister came to live with us when she was five days old.

My grandparents were very important in our lives. Today not many children are fortunate to live with elderly grandparents. My great grandmother (Mama Simp) was my daddy's grandmother and my great grandfather (Uncle Tom) was my mom's grandfather. He moved into to our house when my sister was five months old; he died when she was 13 years old. He never learned to read and write but was a fantastic storyteller. He told

stories to his grandchildren, great grandchildren, and all the neighborhood children. It is through him that I got my love and passion for storytelling.

Mama Simp was an amazing woman to me just because she was always “proper.” I always remember her everyday looking like she was going to church. Her face was always made up and she plucked her eyebrows and drew them in with an eyebrow pencil. She was always dressed in pumps. She never wore those “old lady” shoes, the kind that had thick soles and clunky heels. When anyone saw her they could not believe that she was the mother to her daughters which include my grandmother (Grandma Dick) because she looked so young. I asked my mother once why did my great grandmother always dress the way she did. My mother told me that Mama Simp had been a domestic; she worked for White people in their house. When she worked for them she had to always wear a White uniform, White stockings, White shoes, and White apron. She lived on “the lot” which meant that she stayed on their property, Sunday afternoon until Friday nights. She only saw her children on the weekend. Whatever happened while working for this family made her vow to always dress the way she did.

She was a very patient woman who never raised her voice at her grandchildren. I remember she always had three bath cloths; one for her face, one for her body and one for her “private place” as she would say. Her skin was very soft like a baby’s. She was a light skinned woman and never put the blue rinse in her hair that you saw in the hair of a lot of the older Black women in our community. She “dipped” snuff, loved fish heads and always had to have her “medicine” each year from September to April. Her “medicine” was White lightning (moonshine) poured over rock candy. She was my daddy’s “rock,”

he would do anything for her. She was 88 years old when she died. I think that was the first time I ever saw my daddy cry. She, my father, and my great grandfather all died the same year when I was fifteen. That was a hard year for me.

When I think about growing up in my neighborhood, many names bring back memories that are good and some bad. These people helped to shape and create the person that I am today. They were the foundation of my life every day until 1965 when we moved to another neighborhood. I experienced situations that exposed me to instances and events that were positive but I also saw things that to this day affect me. As I work with women in the community today and see and experience so many things, I discovered that some things never change.

Mama Daisy was an influence on my life until 2003 when she died. She lived on the corner from us with her husband, father-in-law and brother-in-law, even after we moved to the new neighborhood. She was a wonderful and excellent cook and was called Mama because she was a mother to everyone in the community. She never had children of her own but she helped to raise a number of nephews, nieces, and other children who were neglected. This woman was like my grandmother. I remember stories told about her keeping my brother, my sister and myself and at some point as children sleeping in the bed with her. She was a tiny woman who made the best cakes, chicken and dumpling, and biscuits in the world. She worked her whole life for the same family in High Point. She worked for the parents of the family, then their children and then the grandchildren. Mama Daisy was in her 90's when she died.

But Mama Daisy was frequently abused by her husband. Daddy Red was a tall very light skinned man. He was over 6 feet tall. He, his father, and brother were house painters and Mama Daisy took care of them all. When she was cooking and cleaning on her job, she was cooking and cleaning at home. Dad Hill, her father-in-law, lost both of his legs to diabetes, and was a very angry and bitter old man. He would hit her with stick if she didn't move fast enough for him. I remember my mother telling him that if he hit Mama Daisy one more time with that stick, then she, my mother, was going to take it from him and beat him. That stopped him from hitting her but then he would curse at her all the time. My dad had a "talk" with him about his treatment of Mama and after a while, he stopped cursing and at least tried to treat her better when other people were around.

I just remember always seeing bruises on her and she would say something about bumping into a door, or burning her hand on the stove, or some excuse. It wasn't until I was older and learned about abused women that I realize that this wonderful woman that I loved so much had been a victim of abuse. As an adult, I always made sure that she knew how much I appreciated her being in my life. It was this woman and others who taught me to be a great cook.

I lived in a community where everyone looked out for their children and where children were taught to respect adults (although we didn't like all of them). We were taught by Black teachers, went to Black churches, went to Black doctors and dentists, and got most of our needs met in our Black community. Teachers were an important part of our community. Teachers like Mrs. Phifer and Mrs. Marshall made sure that we not only did our homework but we were encouraged to talk about our plans for the future. Mrs.

Marshall was the school librarian and Mrs. Phifer was my fourth-grade teacher when I was in elementary school. Both of these ladies lived in my neighborhood and attended my church. My friends and I would go to their houses after school or on Saturdays.

They would always make sure that we had lunch and we would be glad to get the attention from them. Walker (2000) talks about the connection of teachers and students during segregation; “the teachers assumed responsibility of interacting with students beyond the confined class periods and interceding when external difficulties could prohibit the objectives they held for a particular child” (p. 265). I always had a problem with math and afterschool I would go to Mrs. Phifer house and she would help me with my math. It was not unusual to see a child at her house getting help. In return we would help her to clean her house or watch her son while she was cooking supper.

When we went off to junior high school and high school, it was with these women that we kept in touch. They were the ones who helped our parents when the schools integrated and they were the ones who made sure that we were safe when we started the White schools. “Usually products of Southern segregated schools themselves, these teachers both implicitly identified with student needs and aspirations and, simultaneously, understood how to negotiate the world beyond the local community” (Walker, 2000, p. 265).

What I saw in my community as I grew up is what has shaped me to be the kind of person who tries very hard to give back to the community. As a child, I observed a community that always looked after one another. I saw families taking care of not only their family members but other people in the community who were not related to them. I

was fortunate to be a recipient of that community care a number of times as my family lived and participated as citizens of that community. We had many “community mothers” when I was growing up. There were many women who took care of other families when something happened to the mother of the family. Although I lived not far from my grandmother and my father’s sisters, it was Mrs. Eloise who helped my father to care of us when my mother would get sick. My mother used to have severe headaches that would cause her to take to her bed. A few times she had to be hospitalized because of the headaches. It took years before they found the source of the headaches so whenever she got sick, Mrs. Eloise would always make sure that we were feed before school and made sure we had something to eat when we came home after school. My grandmother was not a very good cook so my dad would be responsible for supper.

Mrs. Eloise was married with six children. Mr. Sam, her husband, Mrs. Eloise and my parents were good friends. She was an excellent cook and she seemed to always be the one who would cook for other families. Other women would also cook but it was the food of Mrs. Eloise that everyone would always talk about. Mrs. Eloise was a domestic worker; she worked in White people’s houses. This may explain why she was such a good cook and why her house was always spotless even though she had six children. She had other children older than the ones who lived with her but for some reason they lived and were raised by other family members. Years after we moved from that neighborhood, our families stayed connected.

There are people, events, situations, just things in your life that leave a profound impact on your life. They leave an imprint that stays with you forever and can either

destroy you or make you stronger. The work that I see myself doing with women today is the results of the teaching, observations, and witnessing of the women who taught me lessons that they may not have been aware they were teaching. What I have learned from the many experiences in my life has made me stronger in what I have chosen to do with my life. These impressions have left me with a need to understand more about myself but also about the lives of those whom I have come in contact with over the years. My work with women probably started as a child and with my observations of women's status in society. I know at that age I was not thinking about what kind of work I would do as an adult but I was always an observer of my surrounding. I was *that* child that was invisible to a lot of people because I was quiet and shy, and always had my head stuck in a book.

As a girl child, I think that I was more aware of what was going on in my community than most children. I know I knew more about what was going on in my immediate and extended family because adults would always "talk" around me like I was not there. As I think back to my childhood, I witnessed the strengths and weaknesses of both the men and women in my community. I saw women who were powerful and powerless but who never thought they were either. I guess back then women did not think in those terms. I think they did what needed to be done to help their families to survive. This consciousness of power did not occur to me until I was an adult and began to work with women in helping them to define for themselves the concept of power. Power was not a word in my vocabulary and I am quite sure it was not in the vocabulary of the women who had powerful influence in my life.

Most of the negative effects of segregation were kept from us by our parents because they tried to insulate us from the horrors and troubles of segregation. I never was exposed to most of the negative elements. I only experienced the negative elements when we had to go downtown to shop; but even then most of those elements were more exposed to me when I was with my grandmother. Although my mother and I did not have the best relationship, I learned a lot more from her than I have ever thought I did. I don't ever remember seeing my mother being weak except in illness. During the time I was growing up, I can't remember a time that my mother did not teach us to be proud of who we were. She was hard on me as her daughter and sometimes I didn't think that she liked me; but she was a strong woman who stood up for her principles.

I just remember when we would go downtown to the stores my mother would not shop in stores that did not respect Blacks. She only shopped in certain stores and if she had to go to a store that did not respect her she treated them the same way they treated her. One of my favorite stores to go to was Sample's Shoe store. It was owned by two Jewish brothers, Ervin and Hal and there was a little Jewish woman named Ruth who worked for them. I shopped at that store all my life until they closed when my children were little. They always treated us with lots of respect and would always give us candy or a small toy or something when we leaving the store after our purchases.

My dad had an aunt who lived with my grandmother whenever she came home on the weekend. She worked for a White family and would come home maybe one or two weekend every month. Like her mother before her, she lived on "the lot" Aunt Ella was a very thin woman and even when she was home she would wear the uniform she wore at

work, a gray dress with a White apron. The clothes were very starched and ironed. My grandmother had 11 grandchildren by her three children, my dad and his two sisters. We also had cousins who lived up the street from my grandmother; so we were always running in and out of each other homes all the time. We could go and come as we pleased in my grandmother's house and nothing was said. We would get food from each other's houses and my grandmother's also and would have picnics or cookouts in "the woods." When my grandmother got tired of our foolishness, she would send us home or beat our butts until we settled down.

When Aunt Ella came home, it would be different. We had to be on our best behavior. We could not run in and out the house; but most of all we could not go through the front door of the house. We had to always go to through back door. As little kids, we didn't know and didn't care because we learned the rules about Aunt Ella. This was all fine until the day my mother found out about the door rule. My mother saw it as an affront to us as "Negroes" that one of our relatives would force any of us to go to the back door, that's what White people did to us every day. So we (my brother, my sister, and I) could not go to my grandmother's house anymore. My grandmother tried to talk to my mother, my father tried to talk to my mother, my aunts tried to talk to my mother but my mother would not budge. It was my mother's sister, Aunt Mae, who convinced my mother to let us go back. Aunt Ella apologized to my mother and we could go back to my grandmother's house. Do you know how hard it was not to go to her house? To get to the store, to catch the bus to go downtown, to go to the beauty shop, to go to school, to do practically anything, we had to pass my grandmother's house.

All was well for a while until about four months later, we (brother, sister, mother, me) were on the way to catch the bus. My mother stopped to talk to a neighbor and we, the kids, proceeded to go to the bus stop. We stopped at my grandmother's house and started up the steps and we heard a voice coming from the house, "Get your Black asses around to the back." We stopped in our tracks and then proceeded to go around to the back. The next voice we heard was our mother saying, "Get you Black asses here and don't go back to that house." Aunt Ella came running out of the house apologizing to my mother telling her that she didn't realize it was us, Toot's (my dad's nickname) children. My mother said that she didn't care whose children we were, none of us should have to go to the back door and who did she (Aunt Ella) think she was; some White person. We would not be coming back to my grandmother's house. Grandma Dick came out and apologized to my mom to no avail. It was Mama Simp who convinced my mother to change her mind. From that day until the day that my grandmother died, we (all of us, brother, sister, cousins, any child) could go through any door we wanted.

*The thing that was so interesting about this whole situation was the fact that my grandmother and aunt could not understand why my mother was so upset. They thought that my mother had made a big deal out of nothing. They always told people that my mother thought she was better than other people; she was too proud and "stuck up." They didn't see the importance of my mother's stand against them and with others who tried to oppress us. By her standing up to them for us, she taught us how to stand up for ourselves.*

There were other women in my life who gave me a sense of who I was as a girl child. My mother's sister, other women who were friends of hers, various women in the communities in which I have lived, and other women who I have come in contact with have had profound impressions of my life. So when I think of myself as a researcher and how my life experiences have helped me and continue to help me, I have to go back to the women who have touched my lives.

My mother's only sister, Aunt Mae, was one of the women in my life that I can truly say I loved with all my heart. She was the middle child like me and I think she understood me more than anyone else except for my dad. My aunt had one son, and when I was born he was a teenager. She and my mother were together a lot because my mother did not drive. She was my father's "sister" also and they would do anything for each other. We would go to her house and she would always have something special for us to talk about or do; the moon, the weather, her car, something that seem so boring and unappealing to children, she could make it interesting. She was a great storyteller, not like my great grandfather, but she could tell stories about ordinary things.

My aunt couldn't really cook but she was an amazing seamstress. She could look at a garment, go home, create a pattern and make the outfit. She made clothes for us for special days; Easter, Christmas, special church events. We always like her to make our clothes because they were made pretty for fat little girls. Whenever my mom made our special clothes we always looked like little fat old women. My aunt lived in the same city with us but she didn't live in our neighborhood. It was always great to go to her house because we would have to either catch the bus or get my dad to take us there, or go to her

house from school and she would have to take us home. We always got to drink sodas and tea at her house, things that we didn't get on a regular basis.

Through her, I learned how important was to be a good sister. When my mother would have her bad headaches, it would be my aunt who would come and sit with her or take her to the hospital. It was my aunt who was with her when my dad was suffering with cancer; and it was my aunt who was there for all of us when my dad died. When I was in the Cotillion, it was my aunt who made my dress and made me as pretty as the other girls. It was my aunt who helped me to be a good single mom by setting a good example.

From her I learned patience; she hardly ever got angry. She could turn any bad situation into a funny or less serious one. The only thing that I could not save her from was an abusive husband. My aunt had been without a husband for years. She was married to her son's father for over 30 years but had not lived together but about 3 of those years. When he finally found someone he wanted to marry, they divorced. I guess my aunt decided that she needed to be married to somebody so she got married. At first, her husband seemed to be a great guy as long as they were living together. But once they got married, she started have these "accidents." She never admitted to anyone that he was abusing her but we knew. The abuse stopped for a while but then she became a little withdrawn and not her usual happy self. We never had any further physical evidence that he was abusing her but she changed whenever he was around. She died almost 22 years ago and my mother always felt that she gave up on living.

I also have to give much credit to my father who had a very powerful influence in my life. My father taught me that men can respect women at so many levels. My father taught me how to respect myself as a young woman. He was not what I observed sometimes in my community when I witnessed the relationship of men and women. I never heard or saw my father be disrespectful to any woman and would defend a woman when men were violent or disrespectful. Through my father, I learned patience with my own children. He was a very patient and passionate man. I always knew my father loved us because he always told us and demonstrated his love for us and my mother. One of the greatest tragic in my life was the day my father died in 1969. To this day, I miss him as much now as I did then. My reason for pursuing this PhD is because of my father. My father valued education because he only had a sixth grade education. I know that my father is in heaven beaming because of what I am doing now. My father taught all of us to respect ourselves and to be respectful. These lessons were taught by both of my parents and we saw this modeled in so many ways. They taught us to give back and to take care of others. So I think that what I find myself doing now is what I was taught in my home, through word and deed.

In 1965, my parents bought a house in an integrated neighborhood. When we first moved into the neighborhood, there were a number of White families but within three years, the neighborhood went from a predominately White neighborhood to a predominately Black neighborhood. During the transition of the neighborhood, there were a number of events that exposed me to the fight for desegregation that I had never experienced before. There was a cross burning in a neighbor's front yard. I was called a

“nigger” by a young White girl and I punched her in the face when later I found out what the word meant. My brother and some of his friends were chased by a group of young White men in a car as they were traveling home from a party. These events left an impression upon me.

In my work in the community, I bring with me the messages and lessons that I learned from my home and my community. How to live the way I was taught growing up and how to deal with the mixed messages that I get from society is what I have had to navigate. I won't say that I have always followed all the lessons from my past; but I can say that I have learned how to negotiate. I think my whole life was preparing me for my future work. The in-school protests that were stage during my high school years helped to bring me to a different level of consciousness. I was still shy and observant but I was moved to get more involved in events that were influencing my life. In college, I was becoming more aware of myself as a woman in society.

Before college, I think I was more aware of my *Blackness* than my *femaleness*. In college, I think I became more aware of the *femaleness*. After college, I became more aware of both as I tried to negotiate in a society who saw both; I don't know which, the Blackness before the femaleness was first, probably,. As I make my way in this world, I don't think that I am more concern about either. I know I more concern about what is right; what is right for all people whether they are man or woman; whether they are rich or poor; whether they are of color or not; just what is right. My work in communities is more concentrated on Black women; but my main concern is what is right; fairness, justice.

I have been able to be successful in my work because I do learn from my lessons and what I learn I share with other. When I had my first child, I was a single mother. I had to deal first with my mother, next with a society that does not respect single mother, then with a system that is designed to keep people poor. When you fight to break out of that mold, the system tries very hard to discourage you by making it harder for you to achieve. Some people break out and some people become victims. This was a lesson that I was able to experience and to carry with me as I moved through life. Dealing with the school system was another lesson that I had to learn. I was fortunate to have wonderful women who taught me a lot about dealing with schools. Without their help, I would have not been able to fight for the rights of my children and other people children, too. Dealing with the work force has been constant lessons that I am still learning with each new job. How to work in systems and in various organizational cultures has helped me to help people when they run into some of the same problems I have experienced in the past. Power relationships are lessons that I continue to learn about and try to help others to deal and understand power and the games that are played with power. Having my own group of friends (women and men) who I can depend on for strength, love, support, and encouragement has made me stronger in my confidence.

My first experience in working with my life lessons came when I worked for the public library. I think that I have always worked with poor families in some form or another. But it was my work in the library that helped to formalize the work that I categorize as my *life* work. I began working with a family literacy program entitled “Catch ‘em in the Cradle” which taught parents how to develop language skills in their

children. In presenting this program and working with parents, other issues and concerns would arise and parents wanted those issues to be addressed. From the parents' needs, a program was developed that dealt with adult literacy and I worked with parents who needed to learn how to read or who wanted to improve their reading skills. This program led to working with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and their *WorkFirst* program. The *WorkFirst* program was designed to work with parents on their educational and employment needs. Parents were to be involved in 20 hours of work and/or education related activities. It was through this partnership with DSS that I experienced my first real work as a community activist. When women came to my program, I taught them how to take more charge of the lives of their families. This proved not to be what DSS wanted them to know. There was always a clash with what DSS said they wanted for their clients from my program and what they actually wanted for them. After putting up with their "mess" for a year, I decided that I needed to go back to doing what I did best and that was recruiting people who were not DSS clients. The work with this agency was my first lesson about defining your own philosophy.

This experience helped me to understand that this work I was choosing to do was valuable and controversial. Changing the dynamics in communities could be very disputatious and antagonistic. During this time, I began to develop other family literacy programs for the library in different venues, such as the health department, doctors' offices, public housing, and Saturday programs. Although the family literacy programs were fulfilling, the work with Black women was what I missed the most. A number of times I was asked to hold workshops for women about topics such as self-esteem or how

to be your child's advocate with their school. I would also train teachers and childcare providers in various literacy programs. It was during one of these training other librarians about working with families that I realized that not everyone had my compassion for working with communities. I began to find myself sitting on committees with various agencies and organizations who worked with literacy and family issues. My work with literacy put me in the position to meet a woman who ended up being not only my friend but my mentor in social justice and community activism work.

It was through my work with Ann Lennon that I have come to love and understand the work that I love the most. It was working with Ann that I understood that the kind of work I was doing had a name. The work is called *Liberation Literacy*. This is literacy that facilitates a spiritual feeling of the mind in order to feel, think, or act in order to bring about a conscious betterment of the mind as opposed to a literacy that is oppressive or that keeps people down. I was at a conference in 1992 in Ohio when I heard a woman named Liz Peavy. She was doing a workshop and talking about the work she was doing. This workshop clarified so much for me and I knew that this was the type of work I was doing and that I would probably always do. In this workshop, Ms. Peavy detailed how in the United States, the system was designed to oppress women, and even more so, women of color. This workshop was liberating for me and helped me to define the work that I was doing but never knew that it had a name. After that conference, more of my work was concentrated on working with Black women and community empowerment, which was the phrase that was used during that time. Since leaving the public library and the work with Black women in poor communities, I have had time to

think about what other women were doing in poor communities. My past work has led me to my current research to hear the voices of other Black women and their connection to their community.

In my research and readings about social justice, and community activism (Crawford, Rouse, & Woods, 1993; Robnett, 1997; Springer 1999; Collins 2000), I found a lack of information about Black women in North Carolina and their involvement in these areas. My own work in the past with Black women in poor communities in Greensboro, North Carolina led me to wonder about women who were very active in their community. They did what needed to be done for others and continued with their everyday life making life better for themselves, their family, and their community. When I started looking at the work of other women in the community where I was working, I started to think about the things my mother had done. The rest of this study will go into more detail about my research and what I discovered as I took this journey to understanding.

### **Summary of Chapters**

Chapter II explores the origins of Black women activism and describes the role of Black women before, during, and after the *Civil Rights* movement. Social responsibility and activism have been very important aspects of Black women's involvement in their communities. I explore their activism from various aspects as mother, community members, and in some cases, librarians, and how these roles have influenced their activism. This chapter distinguishes between the women's self-definition as activists or organizers and as a framework for activism.

Chapter III describes the methodological research approach of narrative research I used to study the life stories of Black women. I define key terms in narrative research and discuss how the women were selected for this research. Rodriguez (1998) states that narratives can “reveal an understanding of Black women’s roles in institutional change as well as their analyses of oppression based on race, gender, class, and/or sexuality” (p. 95). With this in mind, I explore how the women describe and define their grassroots community activism and organizing work. I also introduce the seven women who are a very important part to this study

Chapter IV is dedicated to the analysis of the life stories of the seven women from High Point, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I use narrative research as the interpretative and cultural framework. In this chapter the women tell their stories and explain their involvement their communities

Chapter V is dedicated to conclusions and potential possibilities for future work for documenting the work of Black women in the Triad area and other parts of North Carolina. Stories of the women in this research leave the question about the involvement of other Black women who stories have not been told. This research leaves implication of collecting the stories of the children of the women who were active in their community and how their mother’s work has impacted their lives.

### **Terminology**

**Community Activist**—“Community activists are women whose personal identity overlaps with the collective identity of their community.” (Boehmer, 2000, p. 73)

**Community Organizing:** collective action by community members drawing on the strength of numbers, participatory processes, and indigenous leadership to decrease power disparities and achieve shared goals for social change. (Staples, 2004, p. 1)

**Grassroots**—“To women claiming provenance, being from the grassroots generally means being free from any constraining political affiliations and being responsible to no authority except their own group” (Naples, 1998, p. 223).

**Political Machine**—Federal state and local government offices including public housing authorities and public welfare agencies.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Black women have had a long tradition of civil and human rights activism. Historically, they have had to fight the challenge of gender and race. They have used the negativity in their lives to emerge as activists for their race and gender, and as advocates for abolitionist movements, civil rights, feminist movements, public housing, and welfare reform movements. The need to fight for justice, equal rights, and human rights for themselves and others have been, and are, always present.

#### **Black Women as Early Activists**

For generations, Black women have had to confront slavery, poverty, racial social policies, sexual discrimination and being relegated to the status of being a “second class citizen.” Karin S. Coddon (2004) and Kimberly Springer (1999) analyzed the involvement of Black women in activism and social change. They saw that the women were able to use a myriad of tactics to bring about change. From the first enslaved Africans who were brought over from Africa to Black women of today, they found that their concerns and issues are not central to mainstream America. The beginning of Black women’s involvement in freedom struggles can be traced back to slavery and the pre-Civil War era. During slavery, Black women were exploited, raped, and subjected to the absolute authority of slave-owners. They fought against bondage and slavery and often defied “the customs and laws of the land” in order to nurture and care for other Black

people. Delores Y. Williams (1993) states the “Hagar-in-the wilderness symbolism directs attention to African-American women’s history of resistance” (p. 136). She discusses how slave women belligerent attitudes help to lead a number of slave insurrections. These women were led by their religious obligations to lead them to rebellious action. They rebelled against their dilemma as slaves, petitioned for their freedom, attempted to poison their masters, and ran away from slavery (Davis, 1981; Williams, 1993). There are a number of stories in slave narratives (Harper, 1999; Jacobs, 2009; May, 1999) of slave mothers who killed their children to keep them from a life of slavery.

During the pre-civil war period, the main efforts of Black women were associated with the anti-slavery cause according to Angela Y. Davis (1981). She adds that Black women were less motivated by charity or by moral principles than by the demands for the survival of their race. Women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune and others should be considered the pre-cursors to contemporary women activism. Tubman and Truth spoke against the racial and sexuality inequality. During the 1800’s the issue was the right to vote for women. In her speech to White women in 1853, Truth implored them to consider their privileges as Whites to develop a movement that would be inclusive of all women. She used the story of Esther to argue for full citizenship of all women (Ross, 2003). Through her activism, Truth fought to show how “gender oppression affected not only race and class, but also social conditions” (Springer, 1999, p. 26). The “double-sword” of gender and race forced Black women to

face the dilemma of conflicting political identities: fighting for equality as Blacks versus fighting for equality as women.

Ida B. Wells was a guiding spirit in the Black women's suffrage movement and fought against lynching and "Jim Crow" laws that kept Blacks segregated (Davis, 1981). She was a bold anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, and women's rights advocate. Wells fought with early suffragettes about the lack of concern for lynching in the South. She also felt that White suffragettes failed to connect lynching to feminism. Her activism caused her to address issues dealing with race and to equally deal with the issues of gender because these issues were intrinsically linked. Through the use of her own newspaper, Wells was able to pursue a path of anti-racism. She was able to go all over the United States to fight a war against lynching. She traveled abroad and was able to organize in Europe solidarity campaigns against the lynching of Blacks in the United States. Until her death, Wells fought for justice for Blacks and against segregationist policies in the United States.

### **Black Women's Clubs**

According to Gerda Lerner (1974), in the 1890's, the long tradition of women's organized effort in support of some local charitable or educational institution was transformed into something new and different by the emergence of multipurpose women's clubs, embracing a broad range of activities and interests. Black women began collectively to join the fight for racial justice. Black women's activism and leadership were often asserted through participation in Black women's clubs (Robnett, 1997). Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin called for a national meeting of Colored Women to take place

in Boston, Massachusetts in 1895 to address some of the negative attacks on Black women and other disfranchisement areas in the Black community. The formation of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was a merger of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, the Women's Era Clubs of Boston, and the Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C. as well as smaller organizations that had arisen from the Black women's club struggle. Many joined the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) which laid the groundwork for activism for Black women (Jersey, Pollard, & Wormser, 2002). Black women educators, community leaders, and civil-rights activists in America, including Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Margaret Murray Washington, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell were the founders of this struggle. Their motto "Lifting as We Climb" was adopted because Mrs. St. Pierre Ruffin felt that Black women had to present a positive image of the race to the world (Jersey et al., 2002). The women in "the NACW were primarily committed to racial equality, service to the Black community, and the promotion of the positive image of Black women" (Coddon, 2004, p. 18). Mary Church Terrell became the organization's first president. The organization helped women and children suffering from poor health, lack of education, decent clothing, and housing. It raised funds for kindergartens, vocational schools, summer camps, and homes for the elderly. The Black women's clubs were also viewed as laboratories for training women for leadership roles in a society traditionally dominated by males (Jersey et al., 2002).

According to Springer (1999), the Black women's club movement started to promote the dual needs of Black women, under the rubric of racial uplift, tackled gender

and class concerns. The Black women's club movement was aimed at middle-class Black women's organizations. These clubs were elitist on their attitudes toward the majority of their people. The working class and poor Black women found their activism in church groups, benevolent societies, female auxiliaries, and fraternal orders. These organizations, according to Collins (2000), required less affluent lifestyles and less active public roles and had more practical benefits for their members than did predominantly middle-class reform organizations. These women became politically aware through specific struggles that emanated to identify them as part of the communities that helped shape their lives, thereby forming a commitment to fight for injustice and inequality. (Collins, 2000) They were involved in "Negro labor organizations" that admitted men and women. These organizations proved by practice to be more committed to working on women's rights than the White counterparts and predecessors (Davis, 1981). These women were part of the early freedom struggle in the early late 1800s and early 1900s.

### **Black Women and Suffrage**

During the early 1900's, according to Coddon (2004), a freedom struggle in America was being shaped and organized. Although Black people were emancipated and seeking the right to vote, Black women found themselves in an indefinite state of peonage. They suffered from the perversion of the criminal justice system that was not only racist but sexist as well (Davis, 1981). The cause of the emancipation of Black women did not exist. The anti-slavery societies and the cause of woman suffrage were not for Black women.

In fact, the White women who were involved in the suffrage movement were more concerned with White women's rights over the rights of Black people especially Black men. What Black women discovered was that the rights of Black women were not on the agendas of the White women suffragists or Black men. Some of the White women spoke against racial issues and did not include Black women in the women's suffrage laws. They ignored the conditions of Black women and at times manifested blatant racist prejudices. It was during this time that Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" address spoke to attitudes of White women (Davis, 1981). During the women's suffrage movement, Black women joined interracial and predominantly Black women's organizations in support of women's suffrage.

### **Black Women and the Freedom Struggle**

Black women have been at the forefront of all freedom struggles in the United States. Prior to the 1950's, Black women clearly acted as leaders and addressed issues of gender and race simultaneously (Robnett, 1997). Black women participated in three types of social protest organizations: those which Black women were members only; Black community organizations comprising men and women; and interracial organizations (Knupfer, 2006). It was in those organizations, comprised of men and women, and interracial organizations, that Black women were excluded, though they were involved in a number of anti-racial and resistance activities prior of the 1950's.

Septima Clark, Daisy Bates, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker were activists who played major roles in the modern freedom struggle. These women were involved in their communities and risked jail, beatings, intimidation, and death threats. In the civil

rights movement, the male leadership in Black organizations found it hard to see Black women as leaders. What the women found time and time again is what Patricia Collins (1999) calls a “matrix of domination” (p. 227), which is the intertwining of sexism, racism and classism. Black women found the need to transcend societal constraints imposed by racial institutions and gender norms. Their involvement in the freedom struggles led to their leadership being suppressed. Nevertheless, Black women found ways to lead. Black women participated in the freedom struggles through their work in the women’s club movement, the NAACP, and other activist groups prior to the 1950’s (Robnett, 1997).

After World War II, Black women continued their grassroots activism. The daily fight for justice was a reality and is one of the reasons that spurred Black women in Alabama to fight the bus company and its treatment of them. The change in rulings by the United States Supreme Court, and the long history of women’s resistance to inequality on public transportation helped to move their civil rights activism to the forefront. Poor Black women and Black working class women were more involved in the grassroots civil rights crusade because middle-class Blacks were afraid of economic reprisals. The middle class had no influence over the new power base among the low income Blacks (Greene, 2005). The collective activities of the working class helped to shape their consciousness and did not fall within the rigid distinctions among the middle class. Drink houses (junk joints) and beauty shops were some of the free spaces, outside of the church, where Blacks could gather and where Black women were recognized and respected as unofficial community leaders (Greene, 2005).

In Durham, North Carolina in the 1940's, according to Christine Greene (2005), Black women were very active in dealing with the racial injustices in the city. Their creations of and work in the Black neighborhood councils gave women valuable experience that transformed later into civil rights activity. The Black male leadership's inability to deal with implications for the city of Durham offered unexpected opportunities for grassroots organizing among the Black women. R. Arline Young and Ella Baker took advantage of this indecisiveness and timidity of the Black elite and revitalized the local NAACP to help address the racial problems (Greene, 2005). Ella Baker and other women also played an important part in the development of policy and execution of the program of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As hard as the women tried to find their place in the freedom struggle, they found themselves constantly having to deal with sexism. A number of the women served as *bridge leaders*. In the mid- to late freedom rights struggle, more Black women began to look at the women's movement as a place to be able to exercise their leadership and activism skills.

### **Bridge Leaders and Local People**

#### **Bridge Leaders**

Belinda Robnett (1997) theorized that the term *bridge leaders* were those “who utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community; and between prefigurative strategies and political strategies” (p. 19). She described four different types of *bridge leaders* that were distinguishable from one another. There were *professional bridge leaders*, *community bridge leaders*, *indigenous bridge leaders*, and *mainstream bridge leaders*.

The four types of bridge leaders were not always mutually exclusive because some of the women could be described by a number of the different types. In other words, some of the women wore several “hats” in the work in the community. The bridge workers were involved in the one-to-one connection to the community and had control over their day-to-day activities. The women’s work was to help provide bridges that facilitated mobilization and recruitment. The *bridge leaders* kept their hands on the pulse of community and their goal was to gain the trust of the community. They were also to *bridge the masses* to the struggle and to act in accord with their constituent’s desires; to work day-to-day with the people. Their struggle and involvement in the community was less restricted than that of *formal leaders* (male leaders) and thereby they were able to vary the methods of protests. While formal leaders were concerned with what was going on with the State and the government, *bridge leaders* were able to mobilize and sustain the struggle

The position of the bridge leader was socially constructed and was *defined by race, class, gender and culture*. Marshall and Oliva (2006) suggest that *bridge leaders* had a strong orientation toward social justice and they were committed to *creating a bridge between themselves and others* for the purposes of improving the lives of the people they worked with. *Bridge leaders* were not always women but it was a position held primarily by women. Because of the lack of access to the formal leaders, this was the most accessible and acceptable form of leadership for women because of their gender (Robnett, 1997). Their involvement in civil rights was the stepping stone for Black

women to use to cross the barriers between their personal lives and the political life of the freedom struggle organizations.

Most Black women who joined freedom struggles did so primarily because of religious beliefs or preexisting social networks of kinship and friendship (Payne, 1993). Many became involved because of their children or a sibling. Other reasons for their involvement were based on humiliating experience or treatment at the hands of Whites. The bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama was started because of the daily mistreatment of Blacks on the buses. The Women's Political Council of Montgomery was started by Mary Fair Burks to educate the community about their constitutional rights and to encourage them to register to vote (Robnett, 1997). Women such as Fannie Lou Hamer got involved in the freedom struggle because of an invitation to a SNCC meeting from an indigenous bridge leader. Through her involvement with SNCC, her potential for leadership was recognized and she was sent to the Septima Clark's SCLC-sponsored Citizenship Education Program workshops in Dorchester, Georgia. (Robnett, 1997) She became a bridge between the various organizations such as SNCC, CORE, and SCLC and the communities she served.

The work of Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Mary Fair Burks as "*bridge leaders*" helped to energize the movement and get people involved. However, most of the Black groups were organized hierarchically with men comprising most, if not all, of the offices and advisory committee. The roles by the women were not associated with power. On the local level their leadership was valuable but nationally they were given less power and excluded from primary and even secondary levels of power. As *bridge*

*leaders*, the women had control over the daily activities and were able to keep in touch with the needs and desires of the community and other people involved in the struggle even on this level there was contention and conflict between women as *professional bridge leaders* and the *community bridge leaders*. Even with the conflict between the bridge leaders, the greatest conflict was between women and men.

Robnett adds that although the women were involved in the movement as *formal bridge leaders* and could move people to act, they did not have the community connections or the local know-how to motivate the rural masses to act. Their greatest strength in the struggle was their ability to respond to community needs and to tailoring the organizations' effort to deal with the various requirements of the community needs (Robnett, 1997). Black religious institutions proved to be the source of their strength and comfort (Ross, 2003). This is where they were able to practice racial uplifting and social responsibility for fulfilling what they understood as their duty to God (Ross, 2003). Formulating a plan of action to help sustain their work soon followed

### **Local People**

The grassroots struggle for racial justice for *local people* was different than that of the *bridge leaders*. Their work was *based on the successes and failures of previous actions of formal Black leadership*. The grassroots activists theorized, acted upon and tailored global ideas to suit their local circumstances (Dittmer, 1994). *Bridge leaders* were very *dependent on the local people* because the locals were the “*foot soldiers*.” They were the people who opened their homes for meetings and provided places for people to sleep, food, and transportation. In addition, they passed the word about

meetings and raised money to support the struggle. *Local people* were involved in daily work that made the struggle for the movement possible. According to Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (2005), the *local people* drove the Black freedom struggle. Because of the lack of government assistance and the ineffective interference of local national Black organizations, local people were able to build momentum in their community.

Women like Ella Baker and Septima Clark confronted and challenged the local male leaders. They encountered difficulties with ministers who supported the freedom struggle. This included male clergy and other male antagonists toward women's leadership, who trivialized women's contributions and opposed developing and enabling local leaders (Ross, 2003). Clark is quoted as saying:

It was just the way things were. I see this as one of the weakness of the civil rights movement, the way the men looked at women. I used to feel that women couldn't speak up . . . Of course, my father always said that a woman needs to be quiet and just be in the home . . . I changed my mind about women being quiet when they had something to say. (Ross, 2003, p. 84)

### **Grassroots Activism**

Grassroots activism has been a big part of the changes that have taken place in Black communities. Black women were involved in determining and fulfilling the local need to work and create better places for their families and their communities at large. In Nancy Naples's book (1998b), Temma Kaplan defines grassroots as "being outside the control of any state, church, union, or political party":

To the women claiming its provenance, being from the grassroots generally means being free from any constraining political affiliations and being responsible to no authority except their own group. (Naples, 1998b, p. 223)

The attitude of those who are grassroots activists is an attitude of freedom and the willingness to band together for a common purpose. Kimberly Springer (1999) defines activism “to encompass the myriad tactics Black women employ to confront sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism. Their activism takes the form of ‘direct action’ or activism involving face-to-face interaction with members of the community” (p. 2).

Several readings (Barnett, 1993; Coddon, 2004; Greene, 2005) pressed me to search for answers to what happened to women who were involved in the freedom struggle. Understanding the involvement of Black women in civil rights and activism must be approached through the multiple forms of oppression: gender, class and race. Black women’s activism in their community challenges the political and traditional ways of thinking of power and ways to exercise new power. In my work with the women in Greensboro, I found that most of the women I came in contact with had grown weary of the invisibility and marginalization they faced as low income Black women. The stories of fights with the “political machine” (the welfare office, public housing authorities, and other government offices) has been a necessary aspect of survival not only for Black women but for the entire Black community.

The political positions of these women could be viewed as the result of the successes and failures of previous actions, issues and problems that faced their communities and their own political activity (Collins, 2000). What I saw in these communities were women who were committed to making a change in their communities

at the grassroots level. It was a change in them that helped to change the landscape of the community through the use of signifying as a rhetorical strategy. Black women used a signifying discourse to allow them to define themselves in apposition and/or opposition to the mainstream (Campbell, 2006). In Casey's (1993) study of the Black women who were teachers, she found that the use of signifying discourse reflected their awareness of double consciousness. Campbell (2006) sees "signifying as not a mere playground activity or as a coping mechanism but sees it as an attitude or stance toward humanity." According to Mitchell-Kernan (1999), "signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages" (p. 311). The messages the women were giving were not the messages that the outsider were receiving. Black women were moved to challenge and change social rules as well as politically and racially motivated policies (Lapping, 2008). Their actions were both overt and covert. Overt in following the "mainstream" subscribed notions of them but covert in making subtle but major changes in their communities.

One of the examples of signifying was with a group that I worked with in 1993 in a low-income government-assisted public housing unit. This group consisted of women who were welfare recipients who had been told by other agencies and organizations that they could not and should not try to make a difference in their community. They met weekly to learn about organizing and community leadership and began to make changes in their community. From the very beginning of the program, there was opposition to the group from both within and outside the group. One of the ways of making sure that what was discussed in the group was kept within the group was to always maintain

confidentiality of topics, issues, and identities. This action was viewed by outsiders as unprofessional and oppressive to others if they could not come to a session without permission from the group. Because of this very important component to the meeting, the group was viewed as conducting subversive activities. When those outside the group tried to force their way into sessions, the sessions closed down. The women continued to meet in other places that were not controlled by the mainstream organization. Although nothing was secretive about the session, the women felt that they were treated with disrespect and their meetings were not viewed as important:

Grassroots people cannot decide for themselves. We need prestigious people. *This is a myth*. We can speak for ourselves. The problem is that we woke up the community. Power = loss of power and people don't like that. (H.O.P.E. meeting, 1994)

In my interviews with participants for this research, a number of them described incidents involving their mothers that demonstrated the signifying discourse:

I was in the era of the White and Black water fountain, in the era of Belk's Department Store, where Blacks didn't shop. Well, my mom made friends in every place. We could go in the basement of Belk's. My mom could call the store and talk with a representative or a salesperson that she knew, get things for her children. She had means, but she didn't have access. (Mrs. Nettie, 2011)

You might have to be that person, because we have a lot of information that has been written incorrectly, a lot of information. And I would guess if you just start it with the now, because I remember the fountains downtown, but I pretended not to read. I remember the colored fountains, but I just—if I was thirsty, I just drank out of each one. (Mrs. Cuthrell, 2011)

To make a point or to get others to understand their meaning of a situation, Black women have had to use signifying as an indirect intent or metaphorical reference. Dr.

Virginia Newell had to fight to get others to see that there were few Blacks in prominent government positions. Her response to a challenge of her allegation signifies its actual meaning of the message that was given:

We are fighting for the Blacks to move up in government. Maryanne Sheboy said, “Alderman V,” she said, “How do you know that the Blacks are not going to go up in government?”

And my answer was, “*There are no Blacks warming up in the bullpen.*” And that was a headline. *No Blacks warming up in the bullpen.* I knew that when they got ready to send in a pitcher or whatever in the bullpen, you start warming up to go. *They were not training any Blacks to go down there, and I could see it.*

And when we would go down there, all the Blacks were in the service jobs. They were in sanitation, and every time I’d come out, I’d say *Black people know how to do things just like me*, we finished their colleges, we’ve done this, and we’ve one the other thing, and why don’t we. We’re going to see that they’re back.

The women who were struggling to make these changes were supported by local people who helped them to mold their way of thinking about their work in *their* community. For example, groups such as the public library, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and Literacy South of Durham, North Carolina were committed to social and political change and were willing to aid the women in the community to organize community survival. My work in poor communities made me aware that a number of the women in the communities were very active in their communities. They were changing the politics in their communities and creating positive effects for their children, their families, and other families in the community. They were *agitating the system.*

### **Agitating the System**

The complexity of how singular and multiple forms of oppression are organized must also be understood. Black women were faced with the problem of more than just gender but with problems that are also associated with race. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) stated that Black women had to address more than one form of oppression. They had to face a “structural domain of power” that had control over social institutions that denied Black women jobs, education, and income “without attending to how ideas about Black womanhood advance within the hegemonic domain of power justify this treatment” (p. 203). Black women did not see feminist movements or the progress of feminism as an overarching matrix in their lives. Collins (2000) states that “research on African-American women stresses the way in which Black women experience the injustices associated with intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation” (p. 202). Black women had to create spaces in which they could participate in Black women’s activism. “They were *agitators* who would not be restricted to the narrow boundaries that male society and White society had set for them because of gender and race” (Smith, 1998, p. 122).

As I looked at the activism of Black women in their community and the research that has been done, the triple threat of race, class and gender were always prominent. . Although the women from the H.O.P.E. group continued to meet, there was always the threat from those outside the group. The women continued to carry on with their projects and to make life better for everyone in the community. Many changes happened because of their involvement. The members of the group talked a lot about “taking the community

back.” These dimensions of oppression could not be ignored. All the work I had done in the past did not directly address these dimensions, but I know that these were prominent reasons a number of the women did not succeed in their lives.

### **Dimensions of Oppression**

There are those who knew that change could affect them and would cause them to have to change their ways. The H.O.P.E. group was viewed as threatening their way of survival although their ways were creating the very problems that the women were addressing. There were those outside the community who also thought that the women would affect the status quo of the “authorities” and affect their ability to control and direct the power they felt they had over the residents of this community.

The oppression of Black women has many dimensions according to Collins. She sees these dimensions as interdependent. These dimensions are: (a) the exploitation of Black women’s labor essential to United States capitalism which represents the economic dimension of oppression; (b) the denial to Black women of the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens which represents the political dimensions; and (c) controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era which is the ideological dimension. Denying literacy and relegating Black women to underfunded and inferior schooling has worked to ensure that a quality of education is denied to Black women. Negative stereotypes applied to Black Americans are a form of Black oppression (Collins, 2000). The dimensions of oppression can be seen in the fight of Black women as they struggled to make differences in the lives of other Blacks in the United States. In Black communities, Black women have to fight a number of ideologies

to succeed. They have to fight stereotypical images that are prevalent in society about Black women as mammies, welfare queens, “loose” or sexually aggressive, and other controlling and demeaning images. According to Collins (2000), they had to fight the hegemonic ideology that is prevalent in society today:

Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people. Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. (p. 5)

As Black women struggled and fought the aggregated inequities related to the “tridimensional phenomenon of race/class/gender oppression” (Canon, 1995, p. 56), a consciousness of Black feminist thought emerged. Black women began to learn how to refute the stereotypes of Blacks, especially women. According to Canon (1995), by “understanding the prophetic tradition of the Bible” (p. 56), Black women were able to alter on their own terms a set of values that shattered the images and “pervasive negative orientations” (p. 56) that were imposed by society.

### **The Social Activism of Black Female Librarians**

Black women from all the spectrum of society were faced with aggregated inequities. Teachers, librarians, domestics, factory workers and other professional and non-professional women had to fight the racist, sexist, and cultural ideologies of society. The social activism of Black women took many forms of resistance in the struggle for freedom and equality. Theaters, restaurants, and other public services and accommodations were restricted or non-existent for Blacks, even public libraries. Library services to Blacks were a struggle for these communities. Public library services to

Blacks were not introduced until the early part of the twentieth century. Segregation and Jim Crow laws functioned in all educational, religious, and public institutions including libraries. Services to Black communities were sporadic and sparse.

In some communities before the early twentieth century in the United States, Blacks were not allowed to own books or to be taught to read. The American Library Association (ALA) instituted a committee to provide services to immigrants but did not see the need to address the needs or services to Black communities seeing the problem as “a regional one, and therefore, not worthy of the attention of the national organization of librarians” (Musmann, 1998, p. 81). Some communities even turned down money for library construction from Andrew Carnegie to keep Blacks from gaining access to libraries. Grants from the Carnegie philanthropy stimulated the construction of libraries and had a big influence on the creation of public libraries for Blacks. The access to libraries was seen as a way to social improvement. Middle-class activism and Carnegie grants were also influential in the creation of public libraries for Blacks, but, at least directed by titular civic leaders (Fultz, 2006).

Without the coercion and persuasion of prominent members of the Black community and the loss of the money dedicated to a library building, many libraries for Blacks may not have been built. (Hersberger, Sua, & Murray, 2007) The work of the Black female librarians was for the good of all Black people. These women knew that they could not separate their gender from their race because society would not allow them. They were mothers, teachers, wives, civil rights activists, children’s rights activists but most of all they were visionaries. They addressed and fought issues that help to

remove stereotypical images, to eradicate racist attitudes, and to create opportunities for librarians. Women like Martha Josephine Oxford Sebastian, Regina Anderson Andrews, Charlemae Hill Rollins, and Mollie Huston Lee knew that they had to fight for their communities if the community was to receive fair and equal services. This was a necessary step towards changing society's images of Blacks.

Black female librarians fought for and received permission for a countywide service to Negro communities. They knew the community needs for the library and knew that the library could not grow without their share fair of support from the city and the county. Their fights were not easy and not without a fight. Their fights over fair wages and promotion opportunities and the conflict between civic activities and work help to make opportunities easier for Black librarians who followed. They fought for the right to be compensated for their experience and the right to be treated fairly. They did not allow their race, class, ethnic background or gender to impede their progress but used it to give them the strength to ultimately succeed.

*Charlemae Hill Rollins* was influenced by her grandmother who was an ex-slave. The stories that her grandmother told of being a slave had a great influence on Rollins life. Rollins became prominently known nationally because of her opposition to racial stereotypes in children's books and used the library and her writings to promote the contributions of Black people. She made it her mission to improve the image of Blacks in children's books and to teach her young patrons about their heritage. Her work changed the ways Blacks are portrayed in children's literature by raising the level of consciousness.

*Mollie Huston Lee* was the first Black librarian in Wake County. She is known as a trailblazer for advocating service to Blacks in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was instrumental in developing, maintaining, and increasing public library service to Blacks (Valentine, 1998). Before 1935, there was no public library facility for Blacks. Under her administration, Lee directed many innovative programs aimed at the community and developed a collection of books about and by Blacks. She committed her life to serving the Black community that had little power and fewer resources. She insisted that it was her duty to help others and to make other help themselves.

### **Conscious Awareness**

The social activism of Black women in this country could be categorized as “womanist.” Alice Walker was the first person that I remember using this term. It appeared in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She states that a womanist is “usually referring to outrageous audacious, courageous, or willful behavior . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (p. xi). Walker notes that a womanist is a Black feminist or feminist of color who brings new demands and different perspectives to feminism, and coerces the growth of the feminist scope in theory and practice. Collins (2000) comments that “womanism seemingly supplies a way for Black women to address gender-oppression without attacking Black men” (p. 41). Black women also knew that their concerns and struggles were not on the agenda of White women feminists. Historically, Black women have felt that White women were culpable in Black women’s subordination. Collins (2000) observed that “White women’s inability to acknowledge how racism privileges them

reflects the relationship that they have to White male power” (p. 164). Black women understood that their suffering was congruent with those of Black men; their collective identity of race was a greater than their identity as woman. Canon (1995) believed that Black feminist consciousness could be “more accurately identified as Black womanist consciousness”:

As an interpretive principle, the Black womanist tradition provides the incentive to chip away at the oppressive structures, bit by bit. It identifies those texts that help Black womanists to celebrate and rename the innumerable incidents of unpredictability in empowering ways. (p. 56)

What was happening in their community to cause them to question why things were not working in their community? What moves Black women in a community to initiate their involvement in creating a better future for themselves, their families, and their neighborhood? There comes a time when Black women feel isolated and powerless to change the system. They lack self-confidence and specific skills that would enable them to make changes in their community and become leaders in their community. They want to be a positive force for change in their community. The women want the opportunity to share common concerns and to fight the stigma of apathy, poverty, class and racism.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states that behind a mask of behavioral conformity that has been imposed on Black women there have been acts of resistance. Black women have had to create and craft identities and images to empower them. They have had to make things safe for themselves and their families; they have had to fight the image of a defenseless victim but had to show an image of one as a strong resister. The women had

to deal with the triple threat of sexism, racism, and class. Mezirow (1991) points out that when something different happens in a person's world, they began to question their way of viewing and seeing the world. They know they have to define their expectations of what they wanted society to provide for them or what they saw that society was not providing for them. Concern for children and their families has served as the foundation for struggles among Black women. The experience of *community mothering* has led many Black women to become community activists in order to make a better life for all theirs and the community's children (Collins, 1987). "Community mothering" combines Collins's idea of "othermothering" and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's description of mothering as a form of community-based political activism (Collins, 2000; Gilkes, 1980). Collins explains that othermothering "consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African American women experience with one another, with black children, with the larger African American community, and with self" (p. 176).

Canon (1995) and Delores S. Williams (1993) feel that the change in Black women consciousness can be attributed to their *involvement in the Black church*. The Black church has been the key to the activism of Black women in their communities. It is in the Black church where Black women have taken serious risks in the liberation of the Black community's struggle. I discovered that *poor* Black women have always been active in their communities through their involvement with their church. They have fought against oppression and refused to be marginalized in their perspectives on life. They have supported each other and worked to improve the environment in which they have to call home. The women expressed the need to develop leadership skills in order to

fight the forces that were tearing their neighborhood apart. Only through education could this happen and not education in a traditional sense. Collins (2000) stated that “education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in Black communities” (p. 210).

### **Awareness of Consciousness**

Septima Clark used education as an empowering tool to develop community leaders. Collins explained that women like Clark carried distinctive notion of leadership and empowerment into the Black freedom struggle. Ideas, according to Nikki Giovanni, served “the purpose of any leadership is to build more leadership. The purpose of being a spokesperson is to speak until the people gain a voice” (Collins, 2000, p. 118).

We knew that only through the integration of leadership, literacy, and community building skills would the women be able to achieve the changes in their community. An awareness of consciousness was what we saw happening with these women. Women can be positive forces for change in their communities. But to do this, they must have the opportunity to share concerns and to mobilize support for these shared concerns as a means to work together to overcome feelings of powerlessness, according to Cheryl Rodriguez (1998). Awareness by the mainstream has often failed to recognize or document the nature of Black women’s work in communities.

The use of Paulo Freire and his theories as a way to understand the changes in community is very valuable. Freire’s concept as *Conscientizacao* or the concept of critical awareness refers to the process in which people achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to

transform that reality. This is what seemed to be what was happening to the women (Freire, 1970). According to Freire (1970), “the culture of silence” is when people are unable to discover and articulate their view of the world and unable to act to change. This was where we found the women when they first approached us with their concerns about their community. The “naive transitivity” stage is when the capacity of the popular consciousness expands so that people begin to visualize and distinguish what before was not clearly outlined. This concept is an effective way to shift women’s ways of thinking as they begin to doubt their ability to make change. Finding appropriate curriculum materials to address their needs and concerns is extremely necessary. The “critical transitivity” is where participatory learning or liberal education becomes the key to making lifelong changes for the women.

The participatory learning model can sometimes be the only model that will work with women who begin to have doubts about their abilities. In order for the women to make decisions about their lives they have to have power over their lives and they can only do this through knowledge. Conscious awareness and liberation are associated with transformative learning. Transformative learning is the process for adults to learn to think for themselves, through true emancipation from sometimes mindless or unquestioning acceptance of what we have to come to know through our life experience, according Jack Mezirow (1991).

Myles Horton’s work at the Highlander Center and Liz Peavey’s (1998) “Liberation Literacy” are pieces of research that should be examined to help define what was needed in consciousness transformation. “Liberation Literacy” is a literacy that

facilitates a spiritual freeing of the mind in order to feel, think, or act in order to bring about a conscious betterment of the mind, as opposed to a literacy that is oppressive, smothering, or that keeps people down (socially, politically, culturally, etc.). Peavy (1998) proposed that women in literacy programs must be made to understand that being literate means more than reading and writing; it is the act of thinking critically and creatively about the realities of the world; to develop a critical consciousness.

Horton believed that people gained knowledge through their experiences. He strongly believed that people learn to make decisions by doing it, that people have the capacity to govern themselves but they need to exercise that capacity. He believed the teacher's role was one of helping empower students to think and act for themselves. By using group singing and classes that dealt with specific problems, education developed from the people themselves naturally and the curriculum was developed within the experiences of the students. Highlander Folk School was originally established in Tennessee in 1932. Myles Horton, Don West and James A. Dombrowski, started Highlander to address the problems workers were meeting from employers when they were trying to organize the labor unions. Horton, who was an activist, along with West, an educator and Dombrowski, a minister and others created the Highlander School to "serve as the de-facto CIO education center for the region, training union organizers and leaders in eleven southern states" (Highlander, 2010, n.d.-b ) In the 1950's and 1960's, Highlander became an important training site for the Civil Right Movement. Highlander was able to "concentrate on helping people look to themselves to find their own potential and their own solutions" (Horton, 1990, p. 57).

In working with women from various poor communities, I discovered there were a number of women who needed a different environment to learn and develop their literacy skills using community-based participatory practice. They joined groups who could help them to find ways to make positive changes in their neighborhood, while working on their academic, social, and leadership skills. In this process they begin to understand the ownership of power at a deeper level. They begin to identify the need to gather personal experiences and use their own words as to help to develop the curriculum, and to use their own words to develop analytical skills as tools to use to illuminate the process of change. Both Horton and Peavy used this method to empower their participants. Through critical reflection, women begin to explore connections between personal transformation and a commitment to social change and social transformation. This new learning was supported by reinforcement of structures of meaning. Their experiences and everyday involvement within these situations helped to redefine and strengthen expectations and begin to raise their awareness and consciousness.

### **Summary of Chapter II**

Historically, Black women have been at the forefront of activism for their race. They have fought for justice, equal rights, and human rights. Black women can trace their activism back to slavery. They worked collectively to “lift up” their race as they have fought to raise their own image and fight negative attacks against the Black community. Women such as Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and others have been the leaders in the fight for social justice. Women like Septima Clark, Ella Baker have served as bridge

leaders. It has only been with the help of local people who have served as foot soldiers in the struggle for freedom and equal rights have the rights of Black people advanced.

Through an awareness of consciousness and education, Black women have been empowered to refuse to be marginalized in their lives and have used their knowledge to empower their communities.

### CHAPTER III

#### NARRATIVE RESEARCH AS METHODOLOGY

It is not the intelligent woman v. the ignorant woman; nor the White woman v. the Black, the brown, and the red, it is not even the cause of woman v. man. Nay, tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice.

—Anna Julia Cooper

Narrative research is collecting and analyzing life history stories of people.

How individuals recount their histories--what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience--all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the mean by which identities may be fashioned. (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992b, p. 1)

Catherine Riessman (1993) observed that storytelling is what we do with our research materials and what the informants do with us. When this research is conducted, the researcher is not looking for anything in particular but is looking for patterns in the stories that are collected. The patterns could have themes, emotions, ruptures, chronology, or repetition in the stories that the people tell. Patterns are recurring forms of “*patter*” which are discerned in narrative transcripts. Polkinghorne (1988) notes that during interviews “people strive to organize their temporal experience into meaningful wholes and to use the narrative form as a pattern for uniting the events of their lives.”

The stories may reveal *silences* or *slippage* in the stories. People think and speak in certain ways and the interpretation of the life stories are important to those who will later read what has been said and recorded. Since we are aware of the *silences* and *slippage* in the stories, the researcher should not take everything people say as truth because their story is told from their perspective (Casey, 1995). The storytellers may choose to include some things (*selectivity*) and omit other (*silences*) as they tell their stories. *Slippage* can be found when contradictions occur within or among the texts.

According to Zeller Mayer (1997) and Moen (2006), we create narrative descriptions about our experiences for ourselves and others, and we also develop narratives to make sense of the behavior of others. Narrative is a way humans make a connection to the meaning of their life; it is how people assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. Polkinghorne (1988) stated that “to ask about the meaning or significance of an event is to ask how it contributed to the conclusion of the episode.” It is the connections or relationships among events that is their meaning. Meanings are not produced only by individuals who register certain experiences as connected to others.

Narrative is one type of meaning produced. Through telling and retelling their stories, people create order out of the experiences of their lives. They create, speak, and think in patterns that continue all through their lives. Meaning perspectives involve criteria for making value judgments and for belief systems. This could be done through remembering meaning, developing activities of perceiving, and comprehending what was

happening in their lives and was affecting them. They now have the ability to move to a more intense context of learning than they had never had before.

Narrative research then becomes the study of how human beings experience the world and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Moen, 2006). Michael Apples states:

Life history is important here, since in many ways its task is to give history back to people of their own words. In the process, by giving the past back, it helps us in making our own futures. Of course, oral history and life history, by enabling people to tell their own lives with all the selectivities and silences it entails, does not necessarily guarantee that people will “make their own futures” in transformative ways. Nor does it guarantee that relations of power will be reconstituted in the ways “researchers” and “tellers” interact. (as cited in Casey, 1993, p. xv)

The use of narrative research as the methodology I used to collect and analyze the stories of women is an active form of inquiry. This methodology brings the repressed and “invisible” social aspects of the female experience into the “full daylight” of analysis.

Audre Lord (1987) stated that “each of us has some power. You can use your power in the service of what you say you believe. If you do not use your power, someone will use it for you, and in your name.” This statement applied to what I saw in the communities that I have worked in and what I see happening among grassroots community activists.

The plight of women and the prevalence of racism have come into play in the political policymaking arena. The work of Black women organizing at the local level, the acknowledgement of the active work being done in communities by various women, and the need to create a safe space for a critical consciousness were necessary to create an awareness of those outside these communities.

Black women activist involvement in their community challenges the mainstream ways of thinking of power in the mainstream. The stories of these Black community activist women in the Triad of North Carolina bring new perspectives to oral histories and personal narratives. The history of social, political, and cultural change in this area of North Carolina and the larger United States is incomplete without the words of Black women and especially those who have been actively involved in resistance against oppression. Thompson (1978) stated that “oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making” (p. 308). Narrative research can help Black women to not only recover their voices but to create a safe place for their voices to be heard and documented.

### **Assembling the Participants**

My initial plan was to interview three women from each of the three major cities in the Piedmont area of North Carolina: Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem. I was able to interview seven women; three from Greensboro, three from Winston-Salem, and one from High Point for a total of seven. My interest in these women was related to the work that I had done in Black communities with poor women. I wanted to hear the voices of Black women who were involved in the same types of communities where I had worked.

The first three women I interviewed were women I knew from working at the public library in Greensboro. I worked directly with one of the women through my employment at the public library. I knew about the others from their involvement in the community and the public library. One of them, with the help of a small group of people,

was directly responsible for the beginning of an off-site public library branch. This small library would eventually become a full service library branch. The other women sat on a number of committees that addressed the needs of the public library services to poor communities. Whenever I asked about women in the community who were involved in community organizing and activism, the names of these women were always recommended.

The names of the three women that I interviewed from Winston-Salem were recommended through an acquaintance of a former classmate. When I contacted the acquaintance and asked her to suggest names of women in Winston-Salem who were community *activists*. I was told that she did not know any activists but she knew some women who were community *organizers*. This left me with another question that had to be answered. *How would these women define themselves?* Were they community grassroots activists or grassroots organizers? My interview in High Point was through a woman I met in a water exercise class. We were talking about my work on my PhD and she was interested in my research. Her mother was a community activist in High Point but was now deceased. She talked in detail about the work her mother had done to save a building which represents a piece of history for the Black community. Her mother and others fought to save, renovate, and restore the auditorium of the only Black high school that had existed in the community. She was able to provide the name of another woman who worked and fought along with her mother.

I contacted each one of the seven women. I explained who I was, what I was doing, and why I was contacting them. The women from Greensboro and Winston-Salem

were willing to be interviewed about their roles. The woman from High Point was very reluctant and wanted to consult with her children and other family members before agreeing to the interview. I found out later that it was my water aerobics friend who convinced her to meet with me. I felt very comfortable with contacting the Greensboro participants because I had a past history with them through my work at the public library. The women from Winston-Salem and High Point did not know me nor did I know them, so I was a little anxious about meeting and interviewing them. My greatest fear was that I would not be able to give their stories justice. Would I be able to get everyone who read their stories to hear and understand their stories? Will I be able to allow the storytellers to tell *their* stories?

### **Subjectivity and Reflection**

I put aside these fears and moved forward with what I needed and wanted to do. I thought about reading Casey's book (1993) in my narrative coursework and her work with teachers as I was moving forward with the research. This research was a very important part of who I am, what I had done in the past, and what I wanted to do in the future. Casey stated:

Indeed, my own experiences may have provided impetus for this project, but, in more than reciprocal return, my study of the life histories of other teachers has given me opportunity to reflect upon my own teaching, and to explore the social grounding of my own ideas. (Casey, 1993, p. 9)

My experiences and my own life history would be interwoven in the stories that I hoped to hear. The work that these women had and were doing in their community would be connected to me because of my own work in various communities. My fear in listening to

their stories, and analyzing and telling their stories was that my own story would override their stories. I had to be very careful to step aside and to let their words guide and lead this research.

My own subjectivity would have to help me to understand their stories but it must not become my story. Peshkin (1998) states:

One's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our lives. It can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers' making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data that they have collected. (p. 17)

Peshkin (1998) noted that "our subjectivity lies inert and beyond our control while actively engaged in the research process" (p. 17). The researcher may have the tendency "to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement" (p. 17). In my research, I felt that it was very important to revisit Peshkin and his "Subjective I's."

Peshkin (1998) noted that during his research subjectivity emerged in the process. He noted that his subjectivities were engaged when he became aware of "the warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs" (p. 17). I felt that this awareness of my subjectivity was extremely important as I listened to the stories of the women and at times wanted to inject my opinions and feelings in the narratives.

As Peshkin addressed each of his “subjective I’s,” he referred to the phenomenon as “situational subjectivity.” This phenomenon is explained by him as he discussed that his subjective I’s “may change for place to place.” His subjectivity were listed as the Ethnic-Maintenance I; the Community-Maintenance I; the E-Pluribus-Unum I; the Justice-Seeking I; the Pedagogical-Meliorist I; and the Nonresearch Human I. Not all of the subjectivity “I’s” were apparent in my research.

Peshkin’s research stayed with me as I continued to listen to the women I was interviewing but even more so as I read their transcripts. I continued to ask myself how not to inject my opinion, my values, and my own experiences into their stories. How do I make sure that those you read their words will hear their voices not my voice overriding theirs? Peshkin (1998) describes the *Ethnic- Maintenance I* of the subjectivity as that part that gives you “a warm feeling from it. It’s the part that when he “saw people doing something that I realized that I do myself, and I valued it” (p. 18). As I listened to the stories of the participants, I could understand and relate to how they felt when they told a particular event or incident. My work with Black women in low-income communities and my own community activism were very close to the stories that I heard. This was especially evident from the women I interviewed in Winston-Salem. At times, all I could do was to hold my breath and maintain my composure. I wanted to stand up and shout “Amen!” As I began to read and analyze the narratives, I began to wonder if I was too caught up in paying too much attention to my own emotions and those “warm and cool spots” about which Peshkin spoke.

In analyzing the interviews, I could relate to Peshkin's *Community-Maintenance I*. A number of the women talked about their connection to the community and how they fought for their families and other families in the community. The women were tied to the community either as residents or working in different programs brought into the community. Those who were community workers, there because of their job-related work were loyal to the residents and fought along with the residents to create a better place. My work in poor communities brought me there because of my job but it was my familiarity to their situations that kept me there fighting with them.

As a representative of a community agency, the library, I was not viewed as an outsider. I lived in public housing in the early 1980s in another community. I could also relate to and understand the concerns of the women who were fighting tirelessly to improve their conditions. I fought outside organizations and agencies that the women of the H.O.P.E. group (community empowerment group) felt were threatening their growth and progress. These agencies and organizations complained about my involvement with the community group. What they never recognized about the group and my relationship with it was that I was inherently a group member. I was not from an outside organization working in the community. Peshkin (1998) stated that "the subjectivity of the *Community-Maintenance I* engaged each morning at Mario's" (p. 19). My "*Community-Maintenance I*" was engaged everyday with the women and their community. I tied myself to this community to the point that I was willing to put my job on the line for them.

I continued to question myself about my subjectivity in analyzing the interviews. Am I hearing their voices or am I imparting my thoughts too much in the research? As I continued with the research and the analysis of the narratives; I got a card from one of the participants that read “I believe in you and thank you for your research.” I knew that I had to put aside all fear and thoughts of failure and do what I started out to do when I began this research to give voice to women whose voices had not been heard before. Was I worrying too much about not representing their voices and sabotaging my research and blocking good research out of an unfounded fear? I decided to be aware of my subjectivity and to move forward. My research was in jeopardy of not being completed because of fear.

### **Meeting the Interviewees**

I met with each woman in her home (except one who I met in her mother’s home). When I first contacted the women, I asked for their permission to audio and videotape our interview. Some were reluctant about the videotaping and it was agreed that if they did not feel comfortable, I would not videotape. Before I left my home to interview each woman, I called to let them know that I was on my way. I did this for two reasons: one, to let them know that I was coming, and two, just in case there had been changes in their schedule and we would have to reschedule. Fortunately, I only had to reschedule one appointment.

### **Greensboro, North Carolina**

**Mrs. Nettie.** Armed with a small digital recorder, video recorder, extension cord, and tripod, I visited my first interviewee who was a well-known community activist in

Greensboro. As I was coming in, the telephone began to ring and as she took the call, I noted how beautiful her home was and very befitted for this old beautiful neighborhood which was now being revived. After her call, we settled on the good place for her to be interviewed. As I was setting up my equipment, we talked about my history a little bit and why I wanted to do this research. She informed me that she had been interviewed a number of times by other students from local colleges and universities. Basically, she had a rehearsed story. But I think that my research question took her by surprise. My research question was a simple open-ended one which seemed to stump all seven of the women that I interviewed. I simply asked each woman to “tell me your life story.” Each woman wanted to know where to start and my response was wherever they wanted to start and they all started with either where they were born or to whom they were born.

Although, my first interviewee had told her story “a hundred times” as she said, it took her a while to gather where her story should start. Mrs. Nettie’s story began with her family and “you reach back and you see how your family sort of maneuvered you through a way to keep you safe, and also to give you an opportunity to push you toward learning.” She grew up during the time of segregation. “I was in the era of the White and Black water fountain, in the era of Belk’s Department Store, where Blacks didn’t shop.” But as she talked about her growing up in Greensboro, her family had a great influence on her life. “One of the things that didn’t really happen in our family, we didn’t talk about race and racism.” Although they did not talk about race and racism, she stated that her mother taught her that she had rights.

I listened to her talk and I realized that the reason she was so involved in her community was because of the foundation that was built by her family. Her mother found ways to make things happen for her family and her father was active in the neighborhood. “So I guess the backbone of my life is, coming from exceptional parents.” It was through her parents that she learned about society and her place in the segregated society. Like all parents, her parents tried to shield her from the harshness of society.

Instead of listening to them, she had to learn the hard way about the ways of society. It wasn't until she became a parent and dealing with the school system that she was able to understand what her parents wanted for her and that understanding started her on the road to activism. “And that's what spurred me to be an activist, and I think that goes back to how my parents tried to shield me and keep us safe.”

**Mrs. Mary Oliver.** My second interview was with an eighty-one-year-old woman who felt that “God gave me the power to be a leader.” I knew Mrs. Mary Oliver from my work in the public library. When I first started working for the public library, there were two women I met who were doing some interesting work in their public housing community. Mrs. Mary Oliver was one of the two women. She was very active and influential in organizing the residents of the community and getting a branch of the public library in the community. With another woman, Mrs. Mary Oliver started an education program for children in the public housing community.

One of the most interesting aspects of her life was the beginning of the interview. “I got started off from a baby. They tell me I was a crying child. I didn't like darkness. I always wanted light.” As I listened to her talking about her life, I could see that she felt

that her life and her work in the neighborhood were directed by God. “The Lord has always been with me all the time. I always have been kind of spiritual-like because every time I asked him for something, he could do it, give it to me.”

Throughout her interview, Mrs. Mary Oliver talked about God, His direction for her life and her reason for helping people. The *God Talk* permeated her interview which I think was important to help understand her work in the community. She was born and raised in Greensboro and has been very active in each of the communities where she was a resident. She is the mother of eight children and the grandmother to many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The day I interviewed her, she was taking care of two of grandchildren and a great-grandchild. She stated that she was raising these grandchildren.

She talked about her life and constantly stated that her life was simple. But this was far from the truth. As I was conducting the interview, three of her children came in to visit. They questioned who I was and why I was there. I introduced myself and told them that I was interviewing women in Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem who were identified as community activists. They all agreed that I had selected one of the best people in Greensboro to interview.

**Mrs. Mary Jeffries.** My third interview was with a woman that I sometimes called “Mama” because of my relationship with her daughter. I knew Mrs. Jeffries before I knew her daughter but through my work with the public library, I became close to both of them. Mrs. Jeffries was born in Greensboro and grew up in a family of ten. She had eight siblings-sisters and brothers. She began her interview talking about her parents and

their influence on her, especially her mother and other women in her life. She was the mother of six children. She talked a lot about her children and was very proud of their accomplishments. She had eight grandchildren and three great-grandsons. When she talked about her children and grandchildren, there was sadness in her voice because her oldest grandson was murdered.

Mrs. Jeffries was the lead teacher of a daycare and the woman who would make my entrance into this community the beginning of my community work in other communities in Greensboro. It was through her that I was able to work with this community and provide a different kind of public library service that had not been provided before. The public library had a room at the recreation center as an off-site library. This library utilized staff members from other branches to run the library and on Tuesday and Thursday I worked at this site. It was my responsibility to provide traditional library services like reference, circulation, and programming. Mrs. Jeffries and I planned programs for the pre-school program that was housed and conducted there.

Mrs. Jeffries was very active in her public housing community, elementary schools and the foster grandmother program. She stated that “I guess one of the biggest achievements was working with the Educational Program, Incorporated.” My relationship with her was different from any of the other women who I interviewed because our professional relationship changed into a very personal one. Although, I have known Mrs. Jeffries a long time, there was so much to learn about her and all of her accomplishments. She writes poetry, is a professional actress who has appeared in two movies, *Special Day* and *Above Suspicion*, and a collector of autographs. She has been a Foster Grandmother,

and belongs to a senior group that shares their testimonies about God and discusses the Bible. She began to write poetry after the death of her grandson:

I write poetry. I love to write poetry, and one of the things about writing poetry is it expresses how you feel. I have to say that when my grandson was murdered, I started writing poetry, and I wrote a poem every morning for a few months.

One of the criteria for women who were community activists was that they had not worked in other places outside of their native city. When I started looking for women in Winston-Salem, my fourth and fifth interviewees were women who had left their native city, came back, and made a major impact on their city. So my criteria had to change because of the work these women have done. My fourth, fifth and sixth interviews were women from Winston-Salem. All three of the women have served on the city council in Winston-Salem.

### **Winston-Salem, North Carolina**

**Dr. Virginia Newell.** My fourth interview was with a wonderful and engaging woman from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. When I called her about being interviewed for this study, she told me that she had been talking to a friend earlier about writing a book about her life. She told me that my call was an opportunity for her to make sure “the story was told right.” When Dr. Virginia Newell opened the door to her home, I was taken aback because she looked and sounded like my mother’s sister. Her voice and mannerisms were so much like my Aunt Mae. I thought she was going to talk about the moon (a joke between me and my aunt).

She started her interview by saying that she didn't know if her life story was important or interesting. After listening to her, I knew her life was a story that others would want to hear. She grew up in Davie County and at that time they were the only Black family with children in the area. Her father moved the family from Winston-Salem to Davie County before she was born. He moved because of the low wages that the large tobacco manufacturing company were paying Blacks. She was the eighth of nine children and was a sickly child which meant she was home-schooled for a while.

Dr. Virginia Newell's parents were very interested in education. The one thing that her father taught her was the love of math. He was a builder of houses for people around Davie County. She would sit with him as he drew houses and taught her to "board feet." The lessons she learned from her father while being home-schooled would lead her to better schools and to a lifetime career in and love for mathematics. She graduated in the eleventh grade "because that was the highest grade."

It was her husband, now deceased, who got her involved in politics. He encouraged her to run for the Board of Education when they were living in Raleigh, North Carolina. When they moved back to Winston-Salem, it was his idea that she run for the Board of Alderman. She was successful in both Raleigh and Winston-Salem. In Winston-Salem, she served for sixteen years on the board. She was one of the first Black women to be elected to the city council in Winston-Salem. I felt very relaxed and totally engaged as I interviewed her. Her humor, laughter, and warmth were infectious. I found myself being totally enthralled with this woman and knew that I needed for others to hear her story.

**Mrs. Evelyn Terry.** My fifth interview took place on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Evelyn Terry was a former alderman and is the friend to Dr. Virginia Newell and Ms. Johnson another woman from Winston-Salem that I interviewed. Mrs. Evelyn Terry is the wife of a minister. We discovered that our husbands knew each other and worked at the local state university. Although our contact was not through them, I feel that it did help to ease some of the tension and anxiety that comes with conducting an interview with someone you don't know. We met on the third Sunday of the month. This was the only day that she had opened that month because not only was she a minister's wife but she also had a full-time job.

As I sat to listen to her story, I really felt a kindred spirit with Mrs. Evelyn Terry because of the work that she has done in her community. She is "a native of Winston-Salem by the way of a number of places throughout the past years since my birth." She was the only daughter to her mother and one of two others of her father's children. Although Mrs. Evelyn Terry has a younger sister and a younger brother, she was reared mainly by her mother and her mother's father, her grandfather. Education was very important to her family. She was educated in parochial schools. She went from kindergarten through high school being taught by the Franciscan nun in Forsyth County. After graduating from high school, she went to a private Black college in Charlotte, North Carolina. "When I graduated from there, I did not want any part of Winston-Salem, so I just packed my bags, spread my wings after I finished and took off to the north."

While in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she worked as a schoolteacher, a social worker, and a community organizer. Mrs. Evelyn Terry moved back to Winston-Salem in

the 1970's mainly because "my mother was anxious for me to come back to the South, because she knew the stuff I had gotten into, and she wasn't very pleased about it." She came back and got involved with the Great Society programs which were a result of the North Carolina Fund's work during the civil rights era. The North Carolina Fund was a series of experimental programs conceived at the request of Governor Terry Sanford. When Governor Terry Sanford established the North Carolina Fund in 1963, he saw it as a way to provide a better life for the "tens of thousands whose family income was so low that daily subsistence was always in doubt" (Korstad & Leloudis, 2010). For years, she worked as a caseworker but always worked in the community to address problems that she saw in the community. She met her husband when he was an intern in college and looking for an opportunity to do community work. She and her husband have worked in the community for over thirty years; making changes and "wanting to see justice roll down." They have both served as an alderman in their ward and continue to do justice work.

**Ms. Johnson.** My next interview took place in the home of Ms. Johnson's mother. Ms. Johnson also served as an alderman for a number of years. She was friends to both Dr. Virginia Newell and Mrs. Evelyn Terry. She and Dr. Virginia Newell had represented the same ward but did not serve during the same time period. She and Mrs. Evelyn Terry served on the council at the same time. She was in the East Ward and Mrs. Evelyn Terry was in the Southeast Ward. Of all the women I had interviewed, Ms. Johnson was the one person I had to nudge for more information. She said that she was "not used to nor was comfortable talking about herself." She would stop talking and then

ask if that was enough. Whenever I would ask if there was anything else she wanted to say, she would give more information about herself.

She was a very straightforward, to-the-point woman. As I interviewed her, she reminded me of a friend of mine who is involved in local politics in Greensboro. My friend was born and raised in Winston-Salem and while I was interviewed Ms. Johnson, I wondered to myself if I were to interview my friend would their interviews be similar. Their mannerisms, their commitment to the community, and their candor was so much alike. When I asked her to tell me her life story, she began talking about community sense. She talked about involvement in the community which, for her, was Biblical. Ms. Johnson pointed out where she was a single parent and lived in the same neighborhood that she had grown up, the family's home place. I wondered to myself why we were meeting at her mother's home and not her own, but did not ask. Ms. Johnson returned to her old neighborhood in Winston-Salem after graduating from a local college for Black women in Greensboro, North Carolina. I felt that her moving back into her old neighborhood was important to her story because it explained so much about her organizing and involvement in the community. Although all of the women I had interviewed talked about or mentioned God, only Mrs. Mary Oliver and Ms. Johnson talked about God or the church as being a vast part of who they are and why they do the things they do.

### **High Point, North Carolina**

**Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell.** My last interview was in High Point. When I originally called to ask for an interview, Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell proceeded to tell me that she had not

done anything that should warrant an interview. She told me that the person I should have interviewed was now dead. As we talked on the phone, she began to tell me some of the things that she had done in her life. She was the first Black person to work in the Superior Court office. She was the first Black person to work in the district attorney's office in Greensboro, NC. She was one of the first Black women to work as Eligibility Specialist for the Department of Social Services. I knew that she had a story to tell and that her voice had to be heard. Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell is a very quiet, soft spoken woman in her sixties.

Our first interview was cancelled because she had another commitment. I made a second appointment to interview her later. When I called about two days later to confirm the interview, she said that she could not meet me then because she was going to be out of town. She did reschedule another time and we finally sat down for the interview. What was so ironic about this interview was the location of the interview. When she gave me her address, I realized that Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell lived around the corner from me. I had passed her house a number of times as I took my daily walk around my neighborhood. As I was setting up to begin our interview, we talked about why I was doing this research. As usual with Southerners, she wanted to know who my people were. Although she did not know my mother, we talked about her friend whom she had been involved with in community work. Our conversation led to a discovery of past connections I had to her friend's family. This helped to ease some of the tension.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell was born in High Point and grew up in DB Homes which today is defined as public housing. She defined the DB Homes as a place "where families

were families during that time. Even the single parents instilled in us that we can rise above being poor.” She is one of seven children. Her mother was instrumental in starting a church. It was under her mother’s guidance and growing up in this community that “we, as children, understood that my mother had a mission and that was to rise above poverty.” Her father was a deacon in the Baptist church and it is through her parents that she learned that “you have to give back to the community.” Her mother founded a church with the help of her father. “And there again, as children, they taught us the discipline for giving back to the community, getting along, and being a silent person making contributions, so I place myself into that category.” To this day, she and her sister are working diligently to keep the church that her mother started open. When we sat down for the interview, she had a piece of paper. I later found out that she had a resume and wanted to make sure that she didn’t leave anything out of the interview. During our interview, she never raised her voice but this quiet, unassuming woman did a number of times let me know that under this quietness was a very strong and influential woman who could make things happen.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell has two children who “I’ve encouraged to do the best.” They both have college degrees and she is very proud that they are giving back to their community. She currently works at a state university which is her retirement job. I also discovered in our conversation that she knew my husband because of the work he has done on the campus. Once again a connection through my husband eased the interview for the both of us.

## CHAPTER IV

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE NARRATIVES

You reach back, and you see how your family sort of maneuvered you through a way to keep you safe, and also to give you opportunity to push you toward learning. (Mrs. Nettie, 2011)

Seven women are represented in this study, each giving her version of her life and how each was affected by life itself. I have attempted to capture the essence of their individual experiences without losing the women's place in the research. They had so much to tell and I felt that they needed to tell their story from their own point of view. Each interview addresses the various themes that emerged in the analysis of their interviews. The interviews are arranged chronologically from the oldest participant to the youngest.

#### **Mrs. Mary Oliver**

##### **“I Just Made It Because I Love People.”**

Mrs. Mary Oliver was the oldest of the women who were interviewed. At the time of the interview, she was eighty-one-years old. She was the mother of eight children and the grandmother of “many grandchildren and great grandchildren.” She raised her children, grandchildren, her brother's children, and was currently raising three of her great- grandchildren. She has been very active in her community since the 1970's. She had a heart attack and was told that she has glaucoma in one of her eyes. But, as I listened to this woman tell her story; it was hard to believe that she was eighty-one years old. Her

voice was very strong and determined and her mind was sharp. She had a fire in her and was ready to fight a current issue with the public library.

*“They tell me I was a crying child.”*

Mrs. Mary Oliver began her story talking about her family like many of the women who were interviewed. Throughout her interview she would remember something about her mother or father and would bring that information to the forefront. She spoke extensively about what her father’s influence on her life but not as much about her mother’s influence:

I had one of the best raising mothers and father anybody maybe ever had. I used to say, “If I had to go through this again, I would pick those two to be my mother and father.” I got started off from a baby. *They tell me I was a crying child. I didn’t like darkness. I always wanted light.* And I grew up with two brothers. One was Willy and one was Ya. *And them brothers was good to me.* I grew up having everything that I wanted in the world because my daddy was a plaster contractor. He was taught from a little boy by White people and they gave him a trade and he was the best in North Carolina. He was always giving and learning other people how to do. *And I grew up in a nice home, nice family and here I am today. I grew up in Happy Hill.*

Her father was a skilled laborer and he taught her how to use her hands and to make a living. She spoke of his work and how working next to him gave her the ability to make a living later in life after the deaths of her parents and husband:

I’ll tell you something else, *I started when I was a child on down*, because my daddy. He could do things like that because I don’t know what him and my momma agreed, *but my daddy didn’t run up and down the street*, you know all the time. He was able to fix cars. When he didn’t fix cars, he was making furniture out of this wood, making tables and all that kind of stuff.

Selectivity is the storyteller's decision to tell certain stories and what they chose to reveal from her history. Her story can be revealed through glimpses or through details. Mrs. Mary Oliver's family history was told in bits and pieces. When she first started her interview, she talked about her beginning life but it was well into the interview that I found out more about her family history and how this influenced her. Her grandfather was Mexican which created a connection to Mexicans in this area. She could understand their plight and was willing to fight for their rights as she fought for the rights of Black-Americans. Her mother left home at the age of thirteen years old after the death of her mother. At a very young age her mother got married and was brought to Greensboro. Later, she would discover that the man was already married with children. Her mother was left with a small child but would eventually meet and marry Mrs. Mary Oliver's father. Her father was given away to a White couple and raised by them. I felt that was important for her to tell that part of her family history so that others could understand her a little bit better. This family history would help me to understand why her children and grandchildren were so important to her:

*My granddaddy was a Mexican. So you know I don't like United States pushing them around either. My forefathers down there were Mexicans. But my daddy was a plain old Black man. I mean Black, almost Black like those bushes there. My momma didn't teach me how to cook. I taught myself. She left home when she was 13 years old because her mother died. Her daddy brought in them others; other Mexican children so. So she left. She met a man that brought her all the way up here. He married her but he was already married. And his wife, I don't know how many kids he had, but his wife was hunting for him, and the police got him here. But she was lucky to have that baby by him, my brother.*

Silence is what the storyteller chooses to leave out of the story. This silence can be a very important tool to help better understand the storyteller. Even talking about her husband was a bit confusing. When she first talked about her husband, I was under the impression that he walked away, deserted, and left the family:

*. . . and I got married to Walter Jr. And we lived together to have seven or eight children. And he left home, he left here with all the burdens on me and but I took them because I know I had God with me all the time. But I have had hard times like everybody else, raising my kids. I know my mother and father; they helped me to get them up. My mother died in '67.*

When she started talking about her involvement and work in a public housing community, I realized that her husband had not deserted the family but had died. “*My husband had just died and I had just got raised up to get Claremont* (public housing community). And, we buried my husband in ‘69 and I moved really in ‘69 over to Claremont.” Nothing more is mentioned about her husband in the interview. Perhaps the pain of losing her husband keeps her silent even today about their life and relationship.

*The Lord always been with me all the time. I always have been kind of spiritual like because every time I asked him for something, he could do it, give it to me.* (Mrs. Mary Oliver, 2011)

Mrs. Mary Oliver has a connection with her community through her church and her faith with God. All of her belief and trust is in God begun when she was a little child:

*I forgot to tell you, my momma said I preached when I was 5 years old. And it started from a child, because I was very smart. I started reading when I was 3 years old, you know, reading the Bible and stuff and it is just in me. I remember as a child, too, that I had been playing ball one evening up on Bear Street and somebody said something about the Lord and I just went off, and I’ve been*

working for him ever since. *And it's a good feeling to know that you're going to be saved, you know.*

She credits God for everything that happens in her life. She credits him for her ability to lead people, her success with developing and caring out various programs, for the success of her family, and for having such a long life:

*And when I moved to Claremont, God gave me the power to be a leader and it just like—I took on Claremont strong. I did everything I could for the people. I'm giving everything to the Lord I say, that's the way to do, give everything to the Lord, because he's our safe, he's our salvation. He's everything.*

She belongs to a local church that has been known for its social justice and community involvement. She is one of the Mothers of the church. A mother of the church is usually give to older women in the congregation, who have been saved for many years and are able to convey wisdom and prayers to the younger generation. The status of being a “mother of the church” is a very important and distinguished role in the Black church. This role in the church carries out into her home and her neighborhood. She has “*raised up*” her children and grandchildren but she has “*raised*” her brother’s children and is now helping to raise her great-grandchildren. At the time of her interview, she was babysitting two of her great-grandchildren and “*raising*” a great-grandchild.

*But I actually raised up my brother's children. He and his wife were working out of town so I had to keep their children. Both of the brothers' children I had to keep and I practically raised all of them until they got big enough to do on their own. I've got so many grandchildren because I don't even count them. There are so many.*

God gives her visions and the visions are the reason she is able to help so many people. This concept of seeing spirits seemed to a foretelling of things that were going to happen in the future.

*But with the help of the Lord, He was there all the time. The busiest times that come from me was getting them around the table. Before I go to work, before they go to school, we'll sit there and hold hands and pray to God every morning and ask Him for the blessing we always had. I have had visions of things, to sit and have vision of food on the table and God put it there too, you know. You've got to have a vision. You've got to talk to him at this vision, and it all comes to.*

She never brings this ability up again in the interview but she seem to see this “seeing” as a gift from God that was part of her since she was a child but also an ability that was passed down to her through her mother. This connection between her belief and dependence upon God and the ability “to see” other entities bring a different aspect to her character.

*I can tell you some things and I can see some things; But I see things. They just say ghosts. I see—I mean I can tell you some things too, that's going to happen. They can hear me keep talking about different things. And my boy that I have now, he'll tell you when I tell you something you can believe it because I see it before it happened.*

Black women have often used their religion to cope with and transform the negative aspects of their lives. Mrs. Mary Oliver always gives credit to God for everything that is good in her life. She believes that her well-being and protection is due to her faith in a God that guides and directs her life. It is only through God that she has the strength and resilience to endure all the hardships that she has faced. From the time she was born until today, Mrs. Mary Oliver believes that her life is only hers because of

God. In her research on Liberian refugee women, Maura Busch Nsonwu (2008) defines God-talk “as the language that manifests the incorporation of spirituality and religion in everyday lives” (p. 69). She found that the women she interviewed “utilize a cultural framework of meaning that incorporates their collective understanding of African God-Talk that encompasses communication and reliance on God to protect and guide them and to ensure their families’ survival” (Nsonwu, 2008, p. 70).

A number of times, she stated that her life was “simple.” Simple to me means something that is easy to understand or not elaborate. So, trying to understand her definition is still difficult for me. When you hear her story, her life is anything but simple:

I don’t want to take no credit for myself. I want it all to give the glory to God about it because if it wasn’t for Him we wouldn’t have had nothing to get it started. *But my life is simple.* But, that’s my life. It’s simple ever but I know God gives me strength to be a leader and I try to do the best I can. I love people. I always have. But going through life at 81 years old, I think I’m doing good.

*“But I used to be all out woman could just about do anything, you know, that a man could do.”*

Mrs. Mary Oliver’s education came in many stages. She completed high school, got married and had children. After the death of her husband and parents, she moved into public housing and became active in her community. Along the way, she took a number of community college classes that helped her to provide for her family. She was proud to show me her degrees in upholstery and cabinetry.

And then, when I was little, *I'd just do hair. I used to do hair.* I don't do none of that no more but I still can do it, you know. But *I used to be all out woman could just about do anything, you know, that a man could do.* I took brick masonry down at Dudley. I laid bricks, too. I could lay bricks. I could build a foundation. I guess my father learned me how to build a foundation showed me how to do, and *I went on and took the training down at Dudley High, you know.*

Although she never attended college, she was very proud in the achievements of her children. She has worked hard to provide for her children and for their success:

*But I worked hard to get each one through college, each one, all nine. And they speak up for themselves too, and they have. I have teachers. I have bankers. The baby got his highest degree you can get. But every one of them has got good jobs and they'd support me in a minute. They're all grown and done got educated themselves and go on, you know And when '70 come, I got real active, you know. You know, I've been real active ever since then when we integrated.*

Women who struggle to make changes in their community are supported by local people who helped them to tailor and shape their ways of thinking and understanding of their work in their community. Research shows that residents of public housing have historically fought and continue to fight the stereotype of poor people, especially poor Black women. Mrs. Mary Oliver's involvement in her community began after the death of her husband and when she moved into public housing.

*And when '70 come, I got real active, you know. You know, I've been real active ever since then when we integrated.* I marched downtown there, down at Woolworth, I marched downtown. Then I was in the Greensboro Association for Poor People. We marched and go all over Washington, anywhere. I went to Philadelphia to march with the women for the, you know, for different things.

*I got along with everybody and I always try to help everybody and I always have been in politics, you know.* So to tell the truth about it, when I lived at McAdoo Avenue, I was the president of the Gorrell Street. It's just that I've been out there

trying to help all along. *Claremont was really my home and I raised my children there.*

*“God gave me the power to be a leader and it just like I took on Claremont strong. I did everything I could for the people.”*

One thing that I wanted to know was how the women in this research would define their work and community involvement. I wanted to know if they would define themselves as an activist or an organizer based on Blanchard’s (2011) definition. Mrs. Mary Oliver did not define herself as an activist nor an organizer. She just stated that what she did was because she loved people and because she was doing what God wanted her to do. Her work and all the things she is able to do for other people are because of God.

*God gave me the power to be a leader and it just like I took on Claremont strong. I did everything I could for the people. I even had organized the people too. That was something from the Lord right there, that was Him doing that, not me. I don’t want to take no credit for myself. I want it all to give the glory to God about it because if it wasn’t for Him we wouldn’t have had nothing to get it started.*

*“I formed an education program, the Claremont Education Program, which I got Miss J for the director.”*

She started an education program that was initially started for preschool children and later added an after-school program for school-aged children. Her work went beyond the education program. She was responsible for transportation for the residents in the community, establishing the Police Neighborhood Resource Centers (PNRCs), and a neighborhood public library. The PNRC was a joint effort between the housing authority,

community residents and the police department to decrease the crime rate in the public housing communities in Greensboro. The library branch started in a room in the community center at Claremont. She was very influential in the community getting a full-service library branch:

*I did everything I could for the people. I even had organized the people to because when you didn't have your rent money, that they could get out of the treasury to pay the rent and when they pay them, when they get the money put it back in there. I had everything going on good up until we had the PNR, the police department. I provided for them, too, with food coming in and take a snack and, you know, rest, and go on where they going.*

When Mrs. Mary Oliver talks about her work, she always goes back to the work of her father. Although he was a master plasterer around Greensboro, no one knows about him or his work. She feels that same way when she talks about all the people who were responsible for the formation of the current branch library in her community:

But I had all kinds of things for senior citizens. I got 501(c) (3) [*IRS non-profit organization tax exempt*] to provide, get food from every minister to serve the people so who wasn't getting food stamps could get food from the office, you know. Then that's when the library came in. That one room end up, I got everybody that was on the board of that school, too. I pulled that out yesterday but it wasn't necessary for me to use it but—I did all my work at Claremont. I did my own education program then I made furniture for urban ministries and stuff. I didn't charge them nothing.

Mrs. Mary Oliver was a very interesting to interview and to listen to. She has achieved so much for her family, children, and community:

*I just made it because I love people, and I love to see—I don't like to see people mistreated, you know. It's not in my book to see mistreated. I walk away from it if I find out you're mistreating because I call myself retiring. I went out there two*

weeks ago, I was out there and boy, them people just, I don't know, just have a fit. That's it, I haven't changed or nothing, you know. And HE was good to me, you know, real good to me.

But I have a pretty good life. *I've had a hard life and then soft life.* But you know you can't—everything can't be good—all at once. You're going to have some hard times but he's going to fix it where you don't have some hard times so you can call on him.

### **Dr. Virginia Newell**

#### **“I Don't Know that My Life Story is that Important and Exciting. I Guess it is Exciting To Me.”**

Dr. Virginia Newell was one of five women whose name was given to me as I searched for Black women activists. She was recommended through an acquaintance of a former classmate. I was pleasantly surprised when I called to ask her to be interviewed. She mentioned a conversation she had with a friend about her writing a book about her life. Although I don't see this research as a book about her life, I do see it as a beginning for her to tell her life story. My time with Dr. Virginia Newell was like spending time with a favorite aunt.

*“My mother tells me that I guess I was a miracle child.”*

Dr. Virginia Newell was a very sickly baby because she was born premature. It's through her mother love and determination that Dr. Virginia Newell feels she is alive today.

I was born in Davie County, and *I was the eighth child of a family of nine*, and I guess sort of a kid that was a little because I was born sort of premature, and *I was very sickly*, or so I was told. I had, I think it was diphtheria, whooping cough, and the smallpox all at once, and I think I was about, I don't know, four or five months old. So, *my mother tells me that I guess I was a miracle child, because I'm supposed to be dead, and she had to sit up all night for six weeks.* She said her

eyes didn't close, and when they did close, it looked like straws were opening them up.

Family life was an important part of Dr. Virginia Newell. She had amazing parents who felt that it was important to protect their children and to provide the best for them. Before her birth, her father moved the family from a large city back to where he came from because of racist unfair practice of wages toward Blacks. He moved the family back to Davie County and into a schoolhouse owned by his brother.

*We lived in a schoolhouse.* In fact, my older siblings were born in Winston, and my daddy said that the tobacco company—the Blacks were paid 10 cents an hour to work, *and he didn't want to do that because he couldn't take care of his family,* so there were three of them. *So he went back to Davie County, where he came from, and my mom, they went to school together.* And he bought the schoolhouse where his uncle taught school, Uncle Ed.

She was very influenced by her parents. When she talked about her parents you could hear the pride she had in the lessons they had instilled upon her. There were many lessons that they taught her and helped to make her the person she is today. Her father was a builder and her mother was a stay at home mother. It was this combination that help to create a strong family unit.

*My daddy was a builder; he built houses,* and people would come to our house to have him build a rock house, a brick house, and some in this city and in Davie County that he built, and *I would sit with him to have him draw the houses* and do the lumber. *I learned board feet from my dad.* I didn't know what that was, and he told me how. But he would finish up all the—in other words, he would not only draw the house, but he would figure out all the lumber that was needed, or the rocks or the brick in the house, so that they could build.

*Mama believed in a lot of land. We had about 75 acres out there. Mama didn't work. She, of course, worked for nine kids, and she was sort of the ruler of the house. She kept things going, you know, from morning until night.*

Eventually, he had to go back and take the job he had left in the past in order to take care of his family. This was a lesson that the family learned about segregation and discrimination.

*And so my daddy, going back to him, was hired to show you what segregation and discrimination does to a family. He was a great guy. He was hired back on the job and was paid some of the lowest wages—not the lowest, because he was the skilled laborer, but his boss was White, and so he did get enough money, though, to take care of our family.*

Dr. Virginia Newell was very proud of her family history. She and her younger brother were the last two children at home after their older brothers and sister had left to go off to high school or college. Her older sisters were a lot older and were almost like another parent to her. She would follow in their footsteps leaving home to get a better education.

*I had an older brother that left, and he left home before I was born. I had three brothers older, one brother under me, so my older sisters I didn't get to know them too much because they were like my mom. I didn't play with them. My brothers were just so brilliant and smart. They could do everything.*

There were many times that she spoke of lessons that her parents taught them. Her mother was strict and expected her children to obey her. There was little time to play and chores and schoolwork were extremely important. Children were expected to do their

best and to be honest. The lessons she learned as a child would stay with her forever and help her to succeed in everything that she had done.

*We lived in Davie County and at that time [we were] the only Black family with children. There was a Black family down below us, but they didn't have children, they were much older, and we had playmates, but you didn't play that much. My mother was very strict on us. We didn't visit—there was very little visitation. Parents would visit a little, but we wouldn't, and we were told not to ever eat at any of those homes. I played with these little White kids (neighborhood kids).*

One story she tells was a key component to her character. She tells of how her mother taught her not to lie. As she is telling the story, she is laughing and you can see that she is reliving this moment in her life. She talked in her interview a lot about her father but her mother had the most effect on her. This is a very poignant story but it also says a lot about her mother and her effect on Dr. Virginia Newell.

*She taught me not to lie. I was doing the dishes, and I'd break a dish, and we had a wood box—It was when we had a wood stove before we got electric. And I would put the little dish in, I would hide it. And when we would get through with all the wood, she would see the dish. She said, "Who did the dishes?" and I said, "I don't know, Mama, I just don't know." And I did that three times, and she said, "Now, you were the only one." I mean, she tried to reason with me. But somehow or another, I knew that she was going to spank me. I knew if I told her the truth, it would be worse; she spanked me anyway. And I knew it would be worse if I told her the truth.*

So one day I decided, I'm going to do it. I'm going to try her and see if it's true that she won't spank me if I do that. So I was washing the dishes, and I have to go back to Davie County. I'm in and out. I ran to the front porch. She was reading the newspaper. And I said, "Mama, Mama, I broke the dish." *And I'll never forget, she looked around like this, and she says, "Now I'm not going to spank you, but I just want you to know that those dishes cost money, and be careful." And I stood up there and cried like a baby. I cried as if I had been beaten, because I felt that now I know what it is to tell the truth, and she was telling me the truth. I did not get any more spankings about that. Right today, I cannot tell a*

*lie easily. Now I will, I'll tell a lie for peace, but a lie that is no good, I can't tell it. And I think my mother gave me that.*

*"I would just say that they were parents who were very, very interested in education."*

Dr. Virginia Newell grew up during a time that segregation and education was very important. She grew up during a time when parents wanting a better education for their children would send them to other family members who could meet the child's educational needs. Her parents expected their children to excel in school and life.

Learning started at home. She learned that her father knew all about math and would work out problems for her Uncle Ed who was a teacher.

*One of the things I did, again, I got from my mother. Mom was—my dad was in mathematics. He was a mathematics guru, though he did not finish school. He and my mama were given scholarships to go to Shaw University, and they got married. But he was still good in math. They took -- they got the blue back speller, and they tell me that was the same as high school. Both of them got that, they finished a little common schools out there.*

*They went to school. We had school every night at my dad's house. We lived in a schoolhouse. And he bought the schoolhouse where his uncle taught school, Uncle Ed, and I understand that my dad was so smart that he knew all the math, and he would work the problems out for Uncle Ed. But when we came along, every night we had school, and my dad and mom were very much interested, and I would just say that they were parents who were very, very interested in education.*

Because she was sickly, Dr. Virginia Newell's mother didn't want her to ride the bus to school. So, she learned what her brothers and sister had learned while they were in school. The lessons she learned from her father while being home-schooled would lead her to better schools and to a lifetime career and love for mathematics.

*I was a little thing there with him, knowing my math, knowing how to do all of that because I stayed home a lot because I was a little sickly, and Mama didn't want me to walk that far to school with just my baby brother and me, so I was sort of home schooled a little bit.*

Her parents were concerned about the quality of education that their children received. Education represented a better life for their children. They made sacrifices to make sure the children got what they needed. Her older brothers and sisters were sent to boarding school and/or sent off to other relatives in other cities to get a better education. Her parents created safe and disciplined environments that provided a wealth of learning opportunities in an atmosphere of high expectations. They expected the best for their children and made sure that they took advantage of those opportunities:

*So early on my parents would send my older sisters and brothers away to boarding school. I had at least three or four brothers and sisters at boarding school at one time. Now it was not necessarily a grade A school, but it was a school where they could get a little more than the little public school that they had. And of course I had an older sister that went to Laurinburg Institute, and she finally finished in Price High School in Salisbury. I had an older brother that left, and he left home before I was born. He went out to the University of Washington, and he finished up in music, and joined the band, and went all around the world.*

According to Slevin and Wingrove (1998), there was a time that Black parents and their children had to make the sacrifice to leave home and continue their education. Children were sent off to other relatives and these relatives served as surrogate parents.

Occasionally, public schools were abandoned for the promise of better opportunities in the Catholic parochial schools, and children had to leave neighborhood friends and cope with strange and different settings. This happened most frequently when the rural area or small town in which a child lived had no school for Blacks beyond the elementary level, so the child had to

move to another town and live with relatives during the school week. (Slevin & Wingrove, 1998, p. 68)

Dr. Virginia Newell and her younger brother attended the local public school but were eventually sent to live with relatives as her other siblings had to get a better education. Children sent to live with relatives were expected to do their best and were reminded of the sacrifices of the surrogate relative also. The relative was sometimes more demanding and a strict disciplinarian than the biological parents.

*So then it came time for me to go on to high school. My daddy knew that the high school was not right; so we had a great aunt in Winston, and three of my sisters and brothers stayed with her to go to school, and I was one of the last ones. So anyway, my great aunt said do not continue that way because I was not allowed to play with some of the neighborhood kids. She said they are not going anywhere; they are not going to go to college. I didn't learn to skate until I got to college because I couldn't go out with the kids. She said, "You've got to study."*

And I would sit on the porch; *my great uncle is a case*, and I couldn't even look up. She said, when we would go downtown, she would say, "now if those boys do not tip their hats to you, you don't speak to them." I said, "Well what if they don't have hats on?" She said, "Well, don't look at them." So she was a case. But she was right on the money. What she wanted to do, she wanted to be sure that I kept focused, and that I kept going to school. She said that if you continue to be smart, and she said, "You will teach math."

The lessons she learned from her father while being home-schooled would lead her to better schools and to a lifetime career and love for mathematics. Her education was one of the best that a student could have. Her education exposed her to a variety of experiences that would lead to her many achievements in life.

*Out in Davie County I was pretty smart, because they had regional contests, and I was the highest in the math in the regional contests, and that was held in Davie County at Knoxville, which was the county seat. But then when I came to Adkins*

I was an honor graduate. I loved math. *Togo West taught me.* He was one of the nicest guys that you've ever seen, but I was so afraid of him. And I was also afraid of Beatrice Armstead. Both of those were my math teachers. *I made straight A's in math, and I sort of taught the classes of my high school teachers, and graded papers, and all of that sort of stuff.*

She was taught by exceptional teachers in high school and went on to college in Florida and was taught by retired professors from Harvard, Princeton, and other places which required teachers to retire when they were sixty-five years of age.

*I got scholarships to all the colleges. Howard, Fisk, Talladega, Virginia Union, and all of that. So I went to Talladega. And my physics teacher, by the way, worked on the atomic bomb, so I was really thrilled. But, I went to Talladega and you finished in 11 grades. So I went there and finished. It was very difficult. I think at Talladega was when I really learned to study. They had the University of Chicago plan, and you had to really study hard in order to make it. If you failed your comprehensives, you could take them I think twice, maybe three times, but after that they would send you home, and you just wouldn't graduate.*

*We had most of our professors were from the east and north. They were professors from Harvard, Princeton, and places like that because they had to leave when they were 65. They had a retirement system. And they would come south to the schools that had gone up after slavery. And so as a result, we had excellent teachers. There were mixed Black and White teachers, but they were so great, and I will never forget.*

Dr. Virginia Newell would go on to get a master's degree and return to Winston-Salem and teach in her high school alma mater. It was while she was a teacher there that she would learn one of her greatest lesson as a teacher. This lesson changed how she taught students forever:

*So, graduating from there I went to Adkins and taught my first year, and my principal then was my boss. I think that I learned a lot from John Carter. He gave me all the smart kids. I thought it was good and it was bad. I was ready for the task because I had excellent training at Talladega. And by the way, I went on to*

graduate school as a fellow at University of Chicago. I went there for a year. And that reinforced me. I think that if I would say anything about myself, *I think I'm a master teacher in mathematics.*

As she is telling the story about the lesson she learns from a student, she is laughing and enjoying telling a lesson that proves even the smartest can learn something. I wanted to include this story because it says a lot about Dr. Virginia Newell and how this lesson will help her in the future when she becomes a department head and serve on the Board of Alderman later.

*And my first EF course I bombed out because I thought everybody could learn math, and I just ripped through the book, you know, and I was given A students, and it was just something. So when I would get students who didn't understand math, I was very impatient, and I didn't understand what they were doing, until one little girl said to me one day, "You know what math looks like to me?" I was talking about pure math, and applied math, and how pure math was a symphony, and it was an art, and a poet, and you know the poet uses words, and the mathematician uses symbols, and the musician uses notes.*

Oh, I was orating to no end. And she raised her little hand, and I just knew she had captured all that I had said. And she said, "*You know what math looks like to me?*" And I said no. She said, "*A mass accident.*" Well, let me tell you that knocked me for a loop. *I then created a talk, A Mass Accident, and I talked all over the states, north, south, east, west, Mathematics: A Mass Accident. And I think then, for the first time, I was shown that all kids do not learn the same way. They are all not endowed, but all of them can learn. I found out that they can learn a lot of math, and you just have to ask the right questions, and let them tell you. For the first time, I let kids talk back to me, and by kids talking to you, you learn a lot from them. And I think then this is when I did that.*

She would eventually meet her husband on the job. Her husband was her biology teacher when she was in high school.

So anyway, fast forwarding, so when I got through with that, I started working at Adkins, and *I met my husband. And he was my biology teacher.* So we started

dating I guess the first week I was there. Isn't that awful? Well anyway, from that day we started dating, and we dated about two to two and one-half years. Then *we got married, and I left and went to Atlanta*, came back to Raleigh, and there's where I spent a lot of my years. That's where both of our kids were born. And it was during that time that I did get a chance to, you know, teach again, master teacher.

She taught at a number of places including Yale University for three summers as the chairman of the Math Department at the Governor's School and with Upward Bound at a local state university.

*So then I went to the University of Chicago. I got a fellowship. Modern math was in vogue*, and I went up there and spent a year with modern math. *Then, I started my own little basement school with my own kids*. After I went to University of Chicago, I came back to Shaw University, taught there for five years, and then was pulled into Winston-Salem State. I stayed there until I retired.

In my research with the women that I interviewed, I was looking for information about their involvement in the civil rights or freedom movements. In analyzing Dr. Virginia Newell's interview, there was never any direct mention of marching for civil rights or anything like that. But, because of the part of the country in which she lived, there was a lot of discrimination and prejudice.

*We had separate schools*, and the little kids that I played with, they wanted to know why we couldn't ride the bus, and my daddy told us that they would give him money to take a car and take us to school just to keep segregation alive. Our schools were very close together, but ours was sort of up on the hill, and theirs was down sort of on the highway.

From the jobs that her father held to schooling available for her in the county, to her work later as an alderman, Dr. Virginia Newell experienced many instances of

discrimination as a Black person but also as a woman. She tells the story of getting needed computer equipment for her department and the questioning of her motives. As she tells her stories, she is laughing but there is a cynical tone to each of the stories.

Slippage appears a number of times in her interview:

*I started the Computer Science Department. My predecessor should have started it about four or five years before I did, but you know, women just take something and they make it. I went to IBM. I called the man that day and I had written up the proposal, gone to Chapel Hill and I had defended it. Well I blew them out of the water there, because when I got my proposal and defended it, they wanted to know wherever that woman comes from. I told them, I said, "I'm the only woman of color who has a computer science and math together. I don't intend to hover over a second fiddle. And I just talked to them like I was the boss. And it scared them, because they were my boss, and I was just a teacher.*

Her desire for wanting the best for her students gave her the reputation of one with high standards. She was able to attract some of the best students to the university, to bring in money to support her programs and provide scholarships, and to build a quality program. Once she was given the recommendation from a key person with IBM, the computer science department continued to grow and become a success. Although she was complimented on her high standards, it bothered her that it had to be the recommendation of a White man to validate her work:

Ron Thurston made a statement, and this is why we know that there is a difference between White and Black. *He made the statement* and it got in the paper that "*V. N's standards are higher than mine.*" Well that was it, because kids from other places left their computer science department and came to Winston, because *they knew that this White man said that this Black woman is a top woman, so she must be good.*

And my mother again said that, she said "*If you can get a recommendation from a White man*" she said this as we were growing up—she said, "*It will go 25 miles*

*down the road further than it will from a Black.”* Now isn't that sad? So we're still fighting that. We're still fighting.

Dr. Virginia Newell's work at the university and her past involvement as a leader with other groups would eventually lead to her role as an alderman. As a child growing up she had been president of a number of clubs and organizations in school: the French Club, the Y teams, and others. While living in Raleigh, Dr. Virginia Newell became involved in a number of organizations and became the president of a number of them.

So it was during that time, I guess, that *I had a chance to sort of spread my wings in organizing.* I was president of just about everything that I was ever in, even in elementary school, I was president. In high school I was president of my French club. I was president of the Y teams; I was president of this and the other. *I didn't know that I had, I guess, the qualities of a leader.*

It was with her husband's encouragement that she ran for the Board of Education. She was elected on the board and but the experience was not pleasant. When they moved back to Winston-Salem, her husband wanted her to run again for a political seat. She ran for Board of Alderman and was elected and remained there for 16 years.

So it was during that time that my husband, well it was in Raleigh *that my husband wanted me to run for the Board of Education.* And I did, I stepped out to run, and *I topped the incumbents.* That was something, and then *they cut my head off.* So then when we came to Winston, *he still wanted me to run again, and I ran for the Board of Aldermen, and I got on, and I stayed 16 years, and it was during that time that I guess I had it.*

As I was researching more information about Black women involvement in politics, I became aware of the term *Afritics.* The more I researched the term; I realized that this concept of Black women's political leadership would be critical to understand

how Dr. Virginia Newell and a number of the women became involved in the local political arena. I needed to make a connection with their personal and professional life to their awakening political life.

According to DeLany and Rogers (2004), Rogers (2000) characterized the political forces driving the leadership of Black women in the United States as *Afritics*. Rogers defined it as an African-American centered perspective. This perspective was one “in which people are viewed in an existential context as being participatory, collective, subjective agents in history in spite of the fact that they have been and continue to be manipulated by the Western concepts of the political process” (Rogers, 2000, pp. 19-20). DeLany and Rogers discussed how the messages women receive early in their lives causes them to take on “personal responsibility for addressing political and social advocacy issues. Spurred on by these messages, the women began articulating concepts of social justice early in their lives that reflected their sensitivity to individual and community rights.” *Afritics* comes about because of the multiple lenses, consciousness, and vision that Black women use in facing their daily life.

Dr. Virginia Newell had been involved with the Links, the AKAs, the Teacher’s Association, the NAACP, and other groups so her move to get into politics on the local level was a natural and logical move into another arena:

*I then was elected to be the alderman, and that was when I really got a chance to show the community that I was a real leader, other than to be in math. Now they knew that I was good in math, because I was either excellent, hated, brilliant, or I was the toughest thing there. They would run from me. So I had a lot—and I’ve still got that name. And a lot of people will say, “God, don’t go to that woman because she will give you a nervous breakdown.” Well, I’d say I’ve never molested a woman, and I haven’t molested a man.*

She continued to work for the University and building the Computer Science Department but was beginning to have an opportunity for people in the community to see her as a community leader and not just a woman known for math.

When I got to be alderman, I was teaching and I was chair of the department, and I was doing my work. *I had an opportunity to work for the people in this ward,* and I want to tell you, it had been neglected.

Rogers states that Black women use “multiple lenses, consciousness, and vision” as they face duality in daily life. Dr. Virginia Newell had dealt with the duality of race and sexism as she worked in the academia world. Now she would face it as she fought to serve her ward as best she could. Her predecessor was guilty of “appeasing and neglecting” the Blacks in the ward and she say it as her mission to correct the neglect and to organize the community. Her serving on the board was another form of organizing and activism.

By organizing the residents of her ward, they could go to the city after evaluating their needs and concerns, and demand change. Through her work as an alderman, Dr. Virginia Newell had a mission and that was to unify her ward; to serve them at the best of her ability. She had Blacks, Whites, poor, middle class, Democrats, Republicans, young, old and others living in her ward. But who they were affiliated with was not her main concern; her concern was to serve all the people. She wanted the best for her ward because they had been neglected for such a long time. Because she did not play politics the way the Whites expected her to do, she was not a favorite with them:

*So when I found out that this man was my predecessor, had appeased the Whites, and had kept things from the Black people, I just had a mission. And I was determined that I would leave this particular area, called the East Ward, better than what it was. And I want to tell you, I worked very, very hard, day and night, and I tore up a lot of things, upset the apple cart and I was not one of the little favorite persons on the board, particularly with the Whites. With the poorer Whites, I was, because I had some poor Whites in my neighborhood.*

I told them that I'm a Democrat, and I felt that when you got to be elected, that you ought to forget Democrat/Republican, and then go on and serve the people. That's what I did. *I served the White, I served the Black, I served the older people, and I served the children. I was on with the senior citizens.* I got them things that they did not have. I supported all of their legislation.

Dr. Virginia Newell accomplished a lot during her tenure. She pushed for a new recreation center and got it. She was instrumental in getting it named after the Black director of the center. She "put at least three or four programs in place where I could help the kids, not only in math, but help them be disciplined, talked to the parents, and get them together so that they would go down." She was responsible for more Blacks being hired in government positions. Most of the Blacks before her time were working in service positions such as sanitation. So, with the help of the other Blacks on the board, she was able to make these changes.

*I wanted them to take Blacks and push them up into the government. There were three of us on the board. We had a press conference, and I guess I was one of the persons. So I called a press conference and presided at the press conference. I was on my way to see my daughter. When the press conference came on, we came on, they had no Blacks. We are fighting for the Blacks to move up in government.*

*And my answer was, "There are no Blacks warming up in the bullpen." And that was a headline. No Blacks warming up in the bullpen. I knew that when they got ready to send in a pitcher or whatever in the bullpen, you start warming up to go. They were not training any Blacks to go down there, and I could see it. And when we would go down there, all the Blacks were in the service jobs. They were in sanitation, and every time I'd come out, I'd say Black people know how to do*

*things just like me, we finished their colleges, we've done this, and we've done the other thing, and why don't we.*

Dr. Virginia Newell was able to divert the building of a new jail out of the middle of homes and residential areas in her ward. This was not a minor accomplishment, but Dr. Virginia Newell stood her ground and the jail is currently located in another part of the city:

*So anyway, one day they were getting closer and closer to getting that jail. And I'd fight them on every end. I'd fight them here, I'd fight them there. They'd say, "We're going to have it here." I said, "You're not going to have it there. That's still in my ward." I said, "Look, you know why I'm fighting that jail? I've got six grandchildren," and my grandchildren were smaller.*

*I said, "They come to visit me, and they will see that great big monstrosity up there where Black people are four times more likely to be in there than Whites. And how can I explain to my grandchildren that mostly Black children are in there. "Why, grandmother, did you let that go in there under your watch?" That's why it will never be in there. I said, "We will die, we will die in the trenches, we will die wherever it is. I said, "You try to do that."*

The irony about the jail's location is that it was still built in her ward but away from the ward's residents:

*I had that honky! I'm sorry, I have to say it. He said, "Oh yeah." and all of them. And when I said that, they succumbed. I said, "And by the way, gentlemen, it will still be in my ward. I am alderman of East Ward, and most of downtown is in my ward, but it will not be close to my people! It will not be close to my Black people who consume most of the time in the jail," and I said, "And in fact, we need to have a school that we can train our people."*

Some of her other accomplishments are a Best Choice Center that works with young people whose parents are incarcerated and the East Winston Shopping Center because there were no shopping centers or grocery stores in the community.

*I started the Best Choice Center. And I did that because we did not have any place. It started downtown, and the police were planning to have it. I asked the police "Well will you give me this group of students so I can control them by love?" Most of their parents were incarcerated because of drugs. And I said, "Give them to me so I can handle them by love, instead of a billy and a gun." And I did that, and he gave them to me, and that school is still going. It's not a school; it's a project, after school project.*

She brought a bank and businesses to the neighborhood.

*The bank here, you know, when I say I organized it, I brought it here, and the Black bank is still going, you know, because I support it, and all of that. The East Winston Shopping Center I started that because we didn't have one. We'd have to go some three or four miles for a loaf of bread. So, I organized that and then I started shopping there. We've got two shopping centers here, and I started them both.*

According to Rogers, "Africians (those who afritic) pay particular attention to the issues evolving from those on the bottom because they are concerned with lifting as they climb." Dr. Virginia Newell would be considered an Africian. She had to learn how to understand the workings of White America politics but she was able to deal with it in her own terms and in her own way. This battle was not easy but it was worthwhile for the benefit of her constituents.

Now, and they have it down there, right now. And somebody said, "V, if you don't tell nothing else, tell that." I said, "Well, I don't know what it is to tell, except Blacks have so much power. *Blacks cause the Whites to make so many separate things, and they call them unequal.* We could have gone 25 miles down

the road with the money that they have spent to keep us segregated, to keep us separated, and why, why?

Now they're talking about money spent. Well, you don't mind spending money to have separate things, and why can't you have one good thing, and let everybody have it? And so to me, that's the best economics lesson that I've ever seen. I said, "You are the dumbest economists that I've ever seen, because you're taking money from your people, taking money from our people, and you're having something up there that's not even good." I said, "Even the Supreme Court has said that. So why don't we just eliminate it." But at any rate, I think I got that over to them, and it was wonderful.

Dr. Virginia Newell's story was extremely interesting. This woman has accomplished so much and has done so many things for herself, family, and community. She started fighting from the time she was born and continued to fight. Her legacy of achievement and activism that started with her parents has been passed on to her daughters and grandchildren.

*I have two daughters. Both of those daughters are physicians at present, and I've got six grands. All of them are in school. I guess four of them are in school. Well, let me see. I guess five are in school now. One is a lawyer. One is getting her MBA at Harvard. One is getting a medical degree at the school where her mother was getting a medical degree. She will be a junior in March, hopefully, the Lord willing. And I guess the others are in college, so that's basically where they are. And I'm so glad. My daughters went straight through med. One finished University of Cincinnati Med School; the other one finished Case Western Reserve Med School. So I'm real proud of them.*

Although she is no longer in the forefront of the political scene, Dr. Virginia Newell continues to fight for her community and their causes. She is currently working with Title I schools in the school system and the low-performing students.

### Mrs. Nettie

**“So it was—that, for Me, was—Something I Took with Me was that I Had Rights.”**

My interview with Mrs. Nettie took place in her beautiful home in an old neighborhood that is being revived. This neighborhood has seen its share of urban problems such as drugs, prostitution, and simple neglect. She grew up during the time of Jim Crow laws and segregation, her experience with segregation, discrimination, and the lessons she learned from her parents helped to create an involved and active citizen even today. She began by telling me that she had had been interviewed a number of times by other students from local colleges and universities so she basically had a rehearsed story. She began her story talking about lessons that she had learned from her parents.

*I was in the era of the White and Black water fountain, in the era of Belk’s Department Store, where Blacks didn’t shop.*

Born in Greensboro, North Carolina, Mrs. Nettie grew up during the time of segregation. Her story began with her family and, through their influences; she became very active in the community. Listening to her description of how her mother was able to make things happen was similar to the stories of other women that I interviewed.

*I was in the era of the White and Black water fountain, in the era of Belk’s Department Store, where Blacks didn’t shop. Well, my mom made friends in every place. My mom could call the store and talk with a representative or a salesperson that she knew, get things for her children. She had means, but she didn’t have access. So I remember those things, and what made me so thankful for it was how my mom paved the way for herself and her family in this very inaccessible society for Blacks.*

Just like Mrs. Mary Oliver and Dr. Virginia Newell, her parents had a great influence over her life. Mrs. Nettie's regret is that she had to experience harsh lessons that could have been avoided.

So it was—that, for me, was—something I took with me was that I had rights. *My mom found a way to do it, and that inspired me to always look for a way, because you have rights, and look for a way to access opportunities.* My failure was not realizing this early on, so that I would pursue education rather than the wild roots, *I guess the period in my life that was dysfunctional, I did overcome, but I regret it.* And then when I reach back and see how my mom was guiding me in that direction.

Her father was a long distance truck driver on the East Coast in the 1940's and his experiences made her very aware of her place in society. But like other Black parents, her parents tried to shield her from the harshness of society. Her parents had to teach her the principles of resistance as she dealt with the inequalities of society.

*He drove a long-distance truck from Maine to Florida in the 40s.* I remember him coming home, and I remember stories. More importantly, as I grew older and realized the Jim Crow era, I could just see my father in that truck, carrying vegetables to businesses that prepared meals.

But if he got food, he had to go to the back door. And couldn't sleep in hotels—he had to sleep in the truck. And various places in the country, he was treated differently, but you always know where you can do certain things. You're well-schooled in that. So that—I think, *the beginning of my life is having those parents that understood society, understood their place in society, and carefully tried to shield their children from the harshness of it.*

When Mrs. Nettie talked about her father, it was a reminder of how Black parents and communities used to be. Her father was a surrogate father to other kids in the neighborhood, especially the boys. Her mother was active in the community and attended

political rallies. It's these lessons that she witnessed and experience that she began to get her first glimpse of activism.

*My dad had fourth grade education. He was sort of a surrogate father for kids in the neighborhood—boys. And they would come sit with my dad for questions, and my dad would sit there and talk with them like he was a professor or somebody, give them the answers. And I will never forget, one of the areas was in math—algebra. My dad didn't know nothing about algebra. Oh, yes, he did. He could tell you, to the inch, any dimensions that you needed to build or to erect something. And these boys knew that, so they would sit and listen to my dad help them figure out equations or dimensions of things or how to go about understanding how to get there.*

As I analyzed the interview of Mrs. Nettie, I realized that there was a lot of information about her life that was excluded. Her story would not fit into neat, little categories. She only gave a glimpse of her family, but talked a great about what spurred her on and maintained her work as an activist. She never talked about her involvement in her church nor did she talk much about her personal life. She was educated in the Greensboro public school system but did not complete high school. She would many years later get a diploma. She married in 1954 to a “wonderful South Carolina little boy who had his problems he brought within our family. One of them was substance abuse, which is a major problem, but we persevered.” Together they had two boys and they were very involved in the community with their sons. Her sons were involved in sports and other year round activities.

*So we would go to—they were involved, always, in sports, and we would go to the park, to the Windsor Center, Nocho Park. My husband and I were always somewhere at games, with basketball, football, and baseball. So you got these year-round activities. You go to work, you go to the park, you go home, and you cook and eat. Or you go to work, go home and cook, and then go to the park. The*

*one thing about our lifestyle—once our kids were involved in school and everything—was that you lived right down the street.*

It was after the boys started school that she was spurred to be an activist. Having to deal with the school system when her sons were in school and seeing all the problems that she tried so hard to shield from her sons, she was spurred on to be an activist.

*I have two sons, and they both came up through the school system. And that's what spurred me to be an activist, and I think that goes back to how my parents tried to shield me and keep us safe. Well, I wanted that for my boys.*

Her connection with the neighborhood was not only with being a resident but also she worked at a nursery school in the neighborhood. This position in the community gave her an opportunity to get to know her neighbors because she took care of their children. This connection with this community later proved to be to her advantage as she later began to organize the community.

I actually worked right down this street, Martin Luther King—at a daycare center. It had previously been housed on Bessemer Avenue—Kiddy Corner Nursery School—so the proprietor's mother owned the house down here, and we moved into that, since one of the partners got out of the business, so the partner moved it here.

*And I worked in that nursery school and lived two blocks away. And this was in 1955. I lived right—just two blocks, in this old, beautiful, primarily White neighborhood. And I got to know all the people in the neighborhood, everybody, and cared for their children.*

In 1955, she left Greensboro for a year to live in New York. When she returned the neighborhood had changed. The safety that she has aspired for her children was gone.

The problem she was trying to shield them from was now becoming prevalent.

*I went away to New York and stayed for about a year. And then, once I did that, I came back, and I resettled after a while back in this neighborhood. Anyway, this is the area the kids been in school, and me working at a textile mill and just having fun with the children, playing ball in the street and on the weekends, and going to all these coaches and having fun sitting at the benches at Nocho Park.*

*Then, the next thing you know—well, the one thing about coming home at night from being with the kids was that walking, just walking in the neighborhood, it was dark, and, also, the streets had potholes, the sidewalks had overgrowth all on them, and we had a park—Douglas Park—where our kids played, but the creek was always blocked up and smelly. So these things were just bothersome.*

These bothersome problems became a big concern for the neighborhood residents and the residents began to meet and discuss possible solutions. The residents began to get organized and things began to move and happen. Their complaints were being heard by the local Black politicians. According to Piven and Cloward (1979), “the emergence of a protest movement entails a transformation of consciousness and behavior” (p. 3). This is what began to happen in Mrs. Nettie’s neighborhood. People were tired of their conditions and were willing to march, protest, and fight; to do whatever needed to be done to create change.

*And so we kind of organized in the neighborhood, so we could discuss these things and try to decide, where do you go to get them corrected? At the same time, there began to be movements in the neighborhood, organized movements on a political front. One was the ward system. Politicians would come out—I’ll never forget Ms. Alfreda Webb and Mr. George Simkins. I’ll never forget those people that would come out with their bullhorns and ride through the streets. Had rallies in Douglas Park and bringing people out.*

It was during this time that Mrs. Nettie got to vote for the first time. What was significant about this is she did so with her mother. “You reach back, and you see how your family sort of maneuvered you through a way to keep you safe and also to give you

opportunity to push you toward learning” was one of the most telling quotes as she told this story about voting with her mother. Once again her mother makes a way for her family.

*And my mom would always be in these rallies, and I'll never forget that. My mom also went with me when I turned 21, the first time I went to vote. I went to vote with my mom at Windsor Center. So that was just that special stuff about my parents. But anyway, at this particular time, it was an era of movements and organizing and of change.*

As I began to analyze this interview, I became conscious of the fact that there was a large gap between the time Mrs. Nettie first voted and when the Association of Community Organizations (ACORN) got involved in the community. The For Reform Now (ACORN) was started in 1970 by Wade Rathke and Gary Delgado in Little Rock Arkansas. It started off as the Arkansas Community Organizations for Reform Now because that's where it started. At the beginning, its main interest was addressing such things as clothing, food, furniture and other needs of welfare individuals living in the area. It eventually began to tackle the needs of poor people and uniting welfare and poor people and addressing issues such education, free school lunches, emergency health care, decreasing unemployment rates, protection of workers' rights, guarantee women's rights, the protection of families, voter registration, and housing.

Although there was the gap, her mother's involvement demonstrates the example they set for Mrs. Nettie. She began to work hard in her community to get people involved. Black women have always been “warriors” in their communities (Naples, 1998b). They have had to fight for their communities, families, and for themselves. From

the time they were brought to America as enslaved Africans until today, they have had to fight social and economic injustice, and gender, class, and racist inequalities.

Mrs. Nettie would eventually get involved with an organized group. This was when ACORN began to emerge in neighborhoods and communities. She began to canvas the community, and with her neighbors began to start petition drives to bring forth the **deficits** that were happening in our neighborhood. Through ACORN, she and her neighbors began to learn organizing skills and began to get organized politically. With these new skills, the residents of this community were able to bring more attention to their needs and concerns.

*So while I was busy working in my neighborhood with my neighbors to get a petition brought to the deficits that were happening in our neighborhood, on another front, this organizing taking place was with ACORN, and I got involved—my neighbors got involved with ACORN, and we started learning organizing techniques. And in doing so, we did some incredible things. We actually organized politically—that would be the ward system—then like the school board, it's just seven neighborhoods that were organized, made all these things happen.*

With new skills and techniques, Mrs. Nettie and her neighbors started to make many changes in their community. She was a delegate to the 1980 Democratic National Convention and that helped to bring attention to the plight of their community and for them to gain momentum in their organizational awareness. They began to take assertive ways to get the attention of the city. They refused to continue to sit back and way for others to make changes in their community.

*We continued to organize and gain momentum and strength and attention to the problems in our community. I actually was a delegate in 1980 to the Democratic*

*National Convention.* That came out of the organizing effort and concessions that had to be made. *Our neighborhood organization just continued to try to do things to bring attention.*

I'll never forget, one meeting I didn't attend, but the members went down to city hall. But anyway, they took debris and stuff from vacant lots that were just springing up all over the place, took it downtown—and even a snake—to show the city what we were having to contend with. So, we really opened awareness and started getting some things done – a whole lots of things done.

As usual when one area of a community begins to clean up and push problems out their neighborhood, those problems just show up in another community.

*But anyway, the challenges were just always there.* Once they were clearing out downtown, tearing down stores down there and building up business, that *sent the night workers into communities, and right here is where many of the prostitutes came.* They ran them out from downtown, because that's where they were.

Although the neighbors fought to clean up their community, new challenges arose and a new battle began. Mrs. Nettie talked about having to fight a new problem in the community. She learned that as long as there was a police presence, the problem would be abated. But, as soon as the police presence stopped or decreased, the problem would return.

*And what I've learned about problems that police face* is that it's always in a place where they know where it is, and almost like they—I'm sure they're working to eradicate it. They also work to be sure it doesn't spread to other places, it stays where it is. And usually it's at the neighborhoods like this, where you have—trying to have a quality of life, and you spend so much time fighting the system.

She called these solutions to community problems *mini-fixes*. These mini-fixes were “institutions” ways of dealing with problems:

These kinds of activities went on in our neighborhoods, oh, for so many years. You'd get foot patrols. They'd come out and work. You'd get them for three months. After three months, they're gone, and you're right back. So, *all these little mini-fixes that the institutions would decide to use were to help abate the problems.*

Like a number of women who get involved on their communities, Mrs. Nettie had two jobs: one paid and the other non-paid. The paid job was the one that paid the bills and kept food on the table. The other job was the one that started after work such as fighting for a better place for their families. The non-paid job was the organizing work and this was as important (or more important) as the paid job.

I worked at Sears and started in 1970, and I worked there until 1993 and the closing of the facility. And I had two jobs. One was to go to work at Sears every day, do a great job, then come home in the evening and work in my neighborhood. And that was a part of me. As my kids got older and got off to college, *I spent more time organizing, going door to door and working to try to help improve our surroundings.*

Ultimately, after the closing of the company that she worked for, Mrs. Nettie would be offered a job because of her organizing skills. She went to work for a not-for-profit organization that was created to help the poor in the city of Greensboro and to make some changes.

And after the closing of Sears, *I went to work for Project Greensboro.* Project Greensboro was organized out of a series of meetings held by Mayor Vic Nussbaum, records meetings, and those meetings, they were called because citizens like me and my neighbors—because we were bugging the mayor to do something about the crime and violence, to do something about all these prostitutes, and we just demanded some action.

This new organization was designed to help the residents of neighborhoods to develop more organizing skills and to strengthen them to be able to take control of their neighborhoods and solve their problems. Because of her work in the neighborhoods, Mrs. Nettie could serve as a bridge between the neighborhoods and policymakers who had no idea about dealing with the problems.

The most important part about Project Greensboro was that it was organized by a group of influential citizens in Greensboro. *None of them lived in or experienced the problems they were trying to address.* None of them. They also created a resource committee, and this committee was to be there to provide expertise and resources—such as computer training and other technical assistance—that we would need at Project Greensboro to help neighborhoods become strong enough and educated enough in organizing, so that they could take control of their own neighborhoods, solve their own problems, and hence, reweave the fabric of Greensboro. *Lofty goals.*

Mrs. Nettie found herself in conflict. Tactics and techniques she had used in the past that were successful could not be used now that she was working for an institution. Before she was using these tactics to fight the institutions but now she was being discouraged not to use them because she was part of the institution.

*They hired me as the organizer and T as the trainer, a Black girl and a White girl. And it was kind of hard at first. I'd go to work and—and I was already an organizer which is one of the reasons why I was hired. And it was a little different from what I did in my neighborhood, because we pushed the institution. And here, the institution was our boss, so to speak. So I will never forget some of the things and tactics I would use, I was discouraged from using because it might be biting the hand that feeds you.*

She would go door-to-door bringing neighborhoods together. But what she had to grip with was they were not the only show in town. There were other groups and people

who had been organizing neighborhood a long time before the existence of Project Greensboro.

After three years of this, we were bringing neighborhoods together. I would go door-to-door. I enjoyed it so much; getting to meet people, getting them to come together and have events and feeding, especially in the summer where we had a lot of them out in the yards. Just seeing people come together and on the National Night Out, how the food and festivities were all so wholesome and enjoyable. But there was no true leadership.

*There was nobody who could access resources, who would make change.* During this same time, Project Greensboro was started. There were also other people organizing who had been doing it for years. There was Simpkins. There were lots of people with stuff going on in the neighborhood, yet Project Greensboro was supposed to be the new kid on the block to make these changes.

All of these groups were basically doing the same thing and going out for the same resources. Eventually, foundations that were supporting this work started demanding that groups work together.

*Foundations were primarily supporting these organizing organizations, and they were saying, "Well, some of you all need to get together. You're doing the same things. And so blah, blah, blah." Others were also saying, "You all just going around organizing, making people feel good, but you're not doing anything about the problems."*

Mrs. Nettie saw that what made Project Greensboro different was they were about relationships: developing relationships and they had access to resource people. These resource people would help the organization to not just look at the problems that existed in neighborhoods but why the problems exist.

What I discovered in my gut was that we were trying to use a new model. I can't think of its name now and I'm going to training to learn how to use this model,

which had nothing to do with what was going on in the neighborhoods. *It was about relationships. And relationships are ever so important, but they don't solve problems.* We went on with this stressful kind of work, and the only part of it that was really, I guess, sort of welcoming was the part of having relationships with all these people in these neighborhoods.

With the resources, the organization began to move into new directions to address the root of the problems.

So we had, with this organization, I said, access to real resource people, And the last grant they wrote that was funded called for a new direction, There was a guy who applied, MG from Valdosta, Georgia, and he came to us and asked a question. He said, *"In order for me to work for you, I need to know some things about you all."* He said, *"Do you know why people are poor?"*

Not only did he ask a legitimate question but after he was hired, he was able to take the organization into new directions. The organization changed its name and the organization took on new skills in order to better serve the community:

And MG became the organizer in Greensboro with Project Greensboro. We've changed the name of the organization to the Partnership Project, did away with the 501(c)(3), and went under the umbrella of Uplift, Incorporated. And it was just incredible, what MG brought to us.

He said, *"In order for me to work with you, though, you have to go through the undoing racism training."* So MG came in December. In April, I went to New Orleans, to the training. *It was almost like light bulbs flashing and brightening the way, opening up so you could see, all these years you've been struggling, here's what was happening.* All these years.

This new training brought so much understanding to Mrs. Nettie. She began to understand why things never worked for long periods of time in the community. She was

able to name the problem and learn different strategies to address the problems that existed.

All these years you've been struggling, here's what was happening. All these years. *The training, the undoing racism, talked about history, gave a definition of "race," gave a definition and understanding of "culture,"* talked about how the internalization of racism impacts our lives daily, whatever race or ethnicity you are. Just so clear.

After going through this training, I could understand so much clearer the impact that racism has on us, how it plays out every day of our lives, where you get up, turn on your lights, turn on your water, go out to breathe the air. *There are controls in place for everything you think you might want to do, go, see, or be, from education—everywhere.*

She came back from the training excited and was ready to make changes in the community but what she learned was that she would have to fight "systems." She learned that systems were (and are) designed to work the way they work. The reason the problems in the community repeated itself was because it was supposed to. There was so much she had to learn about what was happening in her neighborhood and she realized that in order for things to get better, decision makers had to understand what was happening in the communities.

And what I learned, we're dealing with systems, and systems have been designed to operate the way they're supposed to. A system is something that's designed to repeat itself, to repeat itself. So if you get foot patrols out here for three months, to try to deal with prostitutes and drug houses, and after three months—they will abate for a while during that period, but after that, they go right back. And that's the system.

There was so much information that had to be understood. With the help of the mayor at that time, community members were brought together and training began all over the city.

Mayor went to New Orleans in July of that year, with 13 other people. She came back, and she organized—she brought the training to her group of 50 community members that she had brought together, and since that time, we've been doing these workshops all over, and particularly with cities—departments—that impact or feed into neighborhoods daily, such as the community development housing,

Mrs. Nettie began to understand what “unbuilt” communities but also what it would take to re-build them.

*And so we started organizing by bringing other people into this new information, new learning, because we felt like if people knew better, they would do better. So that kind of information, that kind of thing, is what we've been trying to stress, that in order to have equity, people have to have access. In order to have access, we all have to understand what unbuilt our communities.*

*If you don't understand White-flight in the 50s, how people just moved away from here and their properties, and after a period of time, they become boarded up or overgrown. And the people living there always looked upon one of the grandest neighborhoods became viewed as one of the worst. Why? We didn't do anything to it.*

*We didn't own it, and most of the property, after the problems occurred, we didn't own the property so we didn't own the problem. But the property owners were gone with no cares. And, this is what happens in communities all over the place, and this is why our organizing took on a new, I guess, identity.*

What she discovered was that for every effort that was made to move things forward there was always an entity to counteract efforts.

*Rather than trying to fight each other, individuals began to try to understand the system better, how it operated, and tried to work within those parameters to bring*

*change. And it has made quite a difference. We couldn't do it alone. You've got to have those people in the system understanding this with you.*

*And it has made an impact, but it's hard to undo centuries of injustice and centuries of an institution that works the way it was designed to work. One of the things I see in Greensboro is counteracting efforts every time you really get a leg up on something.*

### **Mrs. Mary Jeffries**

**“And While We on Our Feet, While We In Our Right Mind, We Need To Do Some Things That Will Make a Difference.”**

Of all the women I interviewed, Mrs. Jeffries was the one I knew best. I met her in 1988 while I was working for the public library. She was running an educational program for preschool age children and I was staffing an off-site branch of the public library. Mrs. Jeffries and I worked together on and off for about 6 years before she left the program. Listening to her story provided with a lot of information about her and her family. It was enjoyable to listen about a family that I so much connection with.

Mrs. Mary Jeffries was born in Greensboro in a family of ten. Her mother was a stay-at-home mother and her father worked and provided for the family as best he could. She said that her mother's main job was to take care of the family.

And one of the things that I remember about her was that we always had good food to eat. She always made sure that we had good food, that our clothes were kept clean and that we were loved.

She was greatly influenced by her mother, grandmother and her aunts. Through her family, she was left with a legacy of education, in their names and a love for God.

*My mother—as I said before—was a wonderful person. She got that from her grandmother. She got it from her mother, my grandmother. And I look back on the women in my life, and I say they were an absolute wonderful experience for me. I learned a lot from them.*

She grew up on a farm and this helped a great deal because sometimes her father would not have a job. Although there were times when things were hard, her family worked hard to make sure the family stayed together.

*Sometimes my dad didn't have a job, and sometimes when he did, he was only paid a little bit of money. We now know that sometimes he worked, and he only made eight dollars a week. But through that, we still were able to make it.*

There would be good and bad times, but her parents made sure that there was always food available. One of her greatest memory she has is of her father and mother. Her parents were good dancers and they made sure that their children had a good time in life even if times were tight. She said that people would gather around to see her parents dancing and the children were proud that it was their parents having a good time.

*And one of the things that I really know is that my parents had a good time in life, and they wanted us to have a good time. And my dad and my mom could really dance. People would circle around them, and they would be in the center of the dance floor, dancing, and boy, we were so proud, you know, that's our parents. And so that made a difference, too.*

She stated they had a strong religious background. Her mother was Methodist and while they were growing up, they attended her church. Years later they would leave the Methodist faith and follow their father to the Baptist Church. The family's faith in God is what got them through the hard times.

Mrs. Jeffries was educated in the county and city schools. After graduation from high school, she wanted to go to college but the money was not there. Since she could not go to school, she and her sister wanted to join the military because they felt there would be better opportunities for them. She said this was in the 1950's and she felt that women would be better equipped if they joined the service. This dream was squashed when an uncle found out about it and told their father. Their father would not let them join. She was very disappointed that she was not able to take this opportunity. They would later get married and Mrs. Jeffries would eventually have six children.

When I graduated Dudley, I wanted to go to school—I really wanted to go—but my parents were unable to send us to school. *My sister and I really wanted to join the service, but when we went down—and my uncle found out about it. He told my dad, “No, you don’t need to let those girls go there.” So, therefore, that little dream that we had was squashed.*

Her education background also includes training as a nursing aide, and later she would attend a business college and get a general secretarial diploma. She has had an acting career and has been in two films. After the acting career, she was with a performing organization and she has worked in the school system. She said her greatest achievement was working with an educational program.

I worked in the elementary schools—kindergarten, second grade—and that was still working with children, and that followed the biggest thing that *I did I guess one of my biggest achievements was working with the Claremont Educational Program, Incorporated.*

She started working with the organization as a secretary and would eventually become the program director. She would work for the organization for over 22 years. This

is the organization that she and Mrs. Mary Oliver ran in their public housing community. They started the program because of an educational need of the children. She saw this program as her mission. Her previous work with children made her very well suited for this program.

Because we do believe that you have to get children early in order for them to achieve their full potential. Because once a child is born into this world, it's up to us to take care of them. *They don't belong to us, they belong to God, but He gives us a mission to take care of them. And I've always believed that.*

She said that an incident that happened to her after she had her first child left an indelible mark on her memory. It was this incident that led her to believe that we need to work with kids. The incident has racial overtones but she felt that it was also an example of kids not being raised correctly. She stated that because she lived in the county, the civil unrest that was going on in the cities in the 1960's didn't affect her. She knew about the sit-ins and the demonstration but those in the county were not a part of it. On a snowy day she would go to the grocery store and would be pelted with snowballs by three young White men as she was leaving. She would return to the store and ask for assistance from the store owner but he would refuse to get involved. She left the store and would go into a telephone booth to call her family for assistance. The entire time she was in the booth, the young men were throwing snowballs at her and calling her names. It was then that she realized that the hate and bigotry these young men were exhibiting was something someone had instilled in them.

*Nothing like that had ever happened to me in my life. I have to say, the young men were White, and that's when I realized that this hate and this bigotry was*

*getting into the minds of young people. They did not know who I was, and to do that made me realize that something would have to be done. It was a long struggle, and then that's when I really got interested in it.*

I have read this story a number of times and, for me, her response to this incident took me by surprise. When I first heard the story and after I read the transcript, the first thing I thought of the incident was an example of pure racism. For her, it was a need for better education opportunity and a need to help young people feel that they are important.

*And, really, the point that I felt that I could do was to instill in our young people that they are somebody that they are important, and no one can tell them that they're not. I realize now that they need to be told that even more, because what's going on now is, our kids are being influenced by the world, and some of it is not good.*

She acknowledges the existence of racism and has been a victim of it.

I remember years ago, when we would ride the school bus, and we had to go from where I lived, away from the White schools, to Rena Bullock. And there was a school bus that would pass us every morning, and of course we—*I know some of us would call out, too, but we were taunted, called names every morning, and I always thought that those children, those kids, looked forward to getting up in the morning, eating their breakfast, brushing their teeth, getting on that bus, passing us, just to be able to call us a name. They didn't have it in their mind, "I'm going to school to learn."* I felt that the way they did it, it was the highlight of their day.

She had hoped that things had changed but there are a number of ways that racism is affecting children today. She feels that Black people think that things are better for us because we overcame segregation and discrimination. But she feels things have not changed. It just has been given a new name.

Some of the things that are happening now—and I look at it, and I’m like, “It’s been so many years,” but some of the things that happened back then are resurfacing. And maybe it’s because they never went away, or maybe it’s because we thought we had won, when we sang, “We shall overcome.” *So we had to overcome that. But now, we’re being called names, but we’re being called names in a sweet, underhanded way, and we need to realize that a lot of things have not changed.*

Her greatest concern is for Black children and their relationship with schools and education. She feels that Black children are being cultivated for the jails.

We need to start realizing that we need to look at some things that need to be changed, find out a way to change them, and work together to make sure that our children are not being cultivated for the jails.

She sees that Society is building bigger and more jails and the positive firsts that Blacks have made in the past are now being replaced by a negative first.

*They’re building more jails but cutting off teachers’ pay, cutting schools and everything. We are the first in suspension, first in jail, and these are some of the firsts that we really are not proud of. We don’t need to be proud of them.*

While I listened to Mrs. Jeffries, I wondered how much of this philosophy was based on the murder of her oldest grandson. She talked about having hard times and the murder was one of her hardest time. She sees him as a victim of a senseless crime but she sees the young man who killed him as a victim also.

*He was a victim, and in being a victim, we all became a victim. And in being a victim, and we all became a victim, it let us know that we have to work harder. We have to work harder to ensure that our young people don’t suffer out here so that they can become not only the victim of a crime, but the perpetrator of a crime, because it was a young person who did this. He belongs to someone, too, and I look at it that way. He just took the wrong path. And we have to know that*

there is forgiveness in this world, because if we don't, our lives won't mean anything to us if we harbor hostility, anger, and bitterness.

In this interview with Mrs. Jeffries, her conversation was a great deal on the necessity to address the needs of children. She feels that the school system is failing children especially Black children but she also feels that parents have to take responsibility for their children's education.

*And while we on our feet, while we in our right mind, we need to do some things that will make a difference. It doesn't have to be big things. It can be a small thing, just to hug a child or to tell a child, "Oh, my, you really know how to read. You know how to do this." We need to let them know that they need to read and understand that they have to take control of their own life.*

One of the things that was interesting about Mrs. Jeffries' interview was her comparison of her days as a student and what children have to deal with today. She talked about not having the best books for learning.

*I remember going to school, and our books would be ragged, some of the pages torn out, but that's what we had for school. We had to use those. We got the – it wasn't even second hand. I wouldn't even call it second hand. It was junk. And that's what we got. But we had some teachers that could teach. I don't care if every page had been torn out of the book, they could teach. Those teachers taught from the heart.*

She feels teachers today are more concerned about the behavior of the child. It bothers her a great deal when the teacher is more concerned about whether a child is in green, red or yellow than about the child knowing how to count or being able to spell. She has served as a "Foster Grandmother" as a tutor and to help children to learn.

Another thing that is a great concern for her is hungry children. She stated that she knows that children can't learn if they are hungry. What really bothers her is the wasting of food she sees in school cafeteria. She couldn't understand why they would rather see a child go hungry from not getting enough to eat rather throwing the food away. She remembered a time when there was a cafeteria worker who would bag food and give it to a needy family. To keep from getting in trouble, the worker would put the food in big garbage bags and place it in the dumpster for the child to pick it up. She thought this was a great example of a caring person usurping the power of authorities.

*Can you imagine a person actually knowing that a child is hungry, knowing that a family is hungry in that vicinity, and not being able to help them? We had one lady who worked, and she would take the leftover food, put it in a garbage bag, take it to the dumpster, and put it in the dumpster so that when the people came to check, you know, what was left or whatever, what was left would be in the dumpster. And because it was in the garbage bag, you'd go get it back out.*

She remembered a time when the government helped by requiring poor people to stand in long line to receive surplus food. Although the food was needed the distribution of the food was degrading. She says that even the requirements to get help today keep a number of people from receiving help.

A lot of people who need help don't go for it, because they don't want to deal with those rules and regulations that go with that. I remember the cheese line. *I remember being in that cheese line in the rain, standing out there, and it would be so long, and it was like you were moving like a snail.* And there would be elderly people in that line, and they knew that would happen, and they didn't accommodate the elderly or the sick, except that that would have emergency vehicles on site. And I used to look at that and think, *"It's unbelievable. It's unbelievable."*

What was so redeeming about this memory was the reaction of the people who were forced to stand in line. What started as a degrading experience for the people turned into a praise to God and a reminder of other times.

I remember one time, someone in the group started singing an old Negro spiritual, and it just flowed all the way down the line. *That was the most riveting experience I've ever had*, to know that, years ago, years ago, that the slaves sang the spirituals. *It was a message that they gave to each other, but it was comfort, and I'm like, "That's still going on!"*

I see that Mrs. Jeffries's greatest concern is that children are not being taught about the possibilities for them. She sees that is a need for children and young people to be shown that drugs, violence, early pregnancies, and dropping out of school is not the way to a better life. She is *an advocate* for children and young people. She talked about how she sees children being indoctrinated into society the wrong way. Children having to stay in straight lines with their hands behind their back. The short time they have to eat their lunch and if they don't finish it, they are forced to throw it away. All of these things reminded her of how prisoners were treated.

*You're walking with your hands behind your back – and I tried that – and sometimes you can't be as steady as you would like to be with your hands behind your back. So you have to walk with your hands behind your back, stay in the second block, where the tiles are in the floor. You've got to make sure you do that. And I thought, "These are very young children, and it's almost like a prison, like the prisoners have to do this, and they have to do that."*

Recently, I heard a college student after observing the policies, procedures and rules of a local elementary stating that students were being "breed" for prison. After hearing that from him reminded of Mrs. Jeffries concerns about children today. She feels

that a lot of the problems with the indoctrination of children in school could be prevented if parents would get involved with the school. She doesn't want an overtaking of schools by parents; what she wants to see is a true partnership between the teacher and parent.

In 1988, Mrs. Jeffries and Mrs. Oliver started a preschool program for the residents of their public housing community. They saw a need for the community and found a way to address it. There was a great response to the program that they decided to expand it to include an afterschool tutorial program. They brought in other services; a dental clinic, various family literacy programs, and an African American History program that led to many trips to show children the importance of education.

We took the kids to so many different places. And it's a question of letting them know that education—and we say education is the key. Nobody's really saying that much now, but education is the key. It's the key to unlock many doors, and it makes a difference. We worked with them, and we would get—absolutely, the teachers would work with us. They would send us the homework assignments, and we got books donated.

They partnered with the public library to provide services to the community from the community center and this led to a full-service free-standing library. They provided a lot of programs and got parents involved.

We also ended up with the library there at one time. Mr. Viele was there. We had the library. It was the beginning of the—I guess that was the background for McGirt-Horton Library, because we did it there. Basically started in the community, and then it went to McGirt, and now they're getting a brand-new library there.

One of her projects today is gathering pictures of children who were involved in the educational program and giving it to them. Most of the children who were in the

program are adults now with children of their own. She feels now it the time to share those memories with them. She said she has been holding on to these memories; she even has their attendance sheets. Some memories are hard to let go.

So what I'm doing is putting all their pictures together and giving them. Those are mementos for me, and I said—I have the scrapbook with the pictures of the kids, and as I said before, a lot of them, they have children of their own now, and it does make a difference. *But that was one of the highlights of my life, working there in Claremont with those kids. It really was.*

### Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell

**“They taught us the discipline for giving back to the community, getting along, and being a silent person making contributions, so I place myself into that category.”**

Although I wanted to interview at least three women from High Point, Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell was the only name that fit my criteria for Black women community activists or organizers. Her name came up in a conversation I was having with a woman from my water aerobics class. We were talking about a variety of topics, and I mentioned that I was working on my PhD and the problem I was having finding Black women in High Point to interview for my study. She told me about her mother who was an activist but now deceased, and her mother's friend who worked closely with her. Subsequently, I contacted Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell who was very reluctant to be interviewed. However, she eventually agreed and it turned out to be a very exhilarating experience for me.

Like most of the women who were interviewed, she began the interview talking about her early beginnings and her family. She has always lived in High Point and was raised in what is now public housing. During the time she was living in the area, it was a community of families getting along and trying to get ahead.

I can tell you that I was born in High Point, and I grew up in public housing, where families were families during that time. *Even the single parents, they instilled in us that we can rise above being poor.* And a lot of us didn't know we were poor because we always had a roof over our heads, the lights were never cut off, and we were one family. It was just a community of families getting along and trying to get ahead.

Her mother was a homemaker and who started a church. Although her father was of another faith, he would leave his church and help her mother to get the church started.

*So my mother was instrumental in starting a church within our home. We, as children, understood that my mother had a mission and that was to rise above poverty.* And in doing so, we had a spiritual background. My father was a deacon at a Baptist church, which was one of the biggest churches in High Point at the time, and it's a historical church. He came alongside my mother, and my mother founded a Church of God.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell's mother provided additional income through her crafts. In later years, her mother would be recognized for her work as a quilter.

She was a quilter—I mean she was a homemaker, but she had a whole lot of skills, and you know how our counter culture, when they stay home, they want to get paid, because they say they work. *She raised seven children while my father worked. She did what she could to support his income:* She did sewing for people. She did needlepoint. She made quilts for AIDS babies. There's one that's supposed to be hanging up in the Morehead Recreational Center. She was a member of the White quilting guild, and she won awards. For her to have been the founder of a church that's still standing because, you know, a lot of churches are now in storefront, her vision lived on.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell added that her parents taught them discipline aimed at giving back to the community, getting along, and being a silent person while making contributions.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell was a very unassuming and quiet woman who never raised her voice

during the interview. I did notice, though, an undertone of strength and vigor as she talked about the activist portions of her life.

As I was listening to and analyzing her story, I realized that of all the women I interviewed, Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell's story dealt more with racism and discrimination than any of the other women. Throughout her life and with her different jobs she experienced many aspects of racism. She did not march a lot in the Freedom Movement in High Point because she did not have the disposition to tolerate abuse and the subsequent call-naming.

*We often participated in the Civil Rights Struggle I didn't do a lot of marching because I didn't have the temperament to be called "nigger" or to be spat on, so I supported the ones who did. During my last year of high school our class members from the class of '63, and there are others, marched because of discrimination and a lot of other things that happened.*

I also worked with the guy who did an underground newspaper, but that wasn't too popular back then. My classmates went on to leave town because they were not able to find jobs. They went into the Air Force, got married, or worked somewhere or went to college.

After graduation from high school, she went to a business school where she strengthened her clerical skills.

*I went to Penn U Business School, which was headed by two White females. And we didn't have a whole lot of places that we could go, like Guilford Tech or places like that. Really couldn't afford to go to college because I was married then and had a baby. So in order to strengthen my skills from what I learned in high school, and I always say that at William Penn, which was a Black high school, we got a college education.*

During the mid-sixties, Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell decided to apply for a job in downtown High Point. This was when integration was in its infancy in High Point. She had some trepidation about applying downtown.

*So it's not that I think this is so important, but I lived and breathed discrimination.* Before I got the job with Mr. Chess, I was standing on the corner of Washington Drive and 4th Street when my mother said, "Well, why you going downtown?" She said, "You know they're going to say no." I said, "Well, I want to go up and look them in the face and have them to tell me no." But, I didn't get downtown to hear them tell me "No, I don't have any work for you" because they hired the Whites. They told me that I needed to have experience even though the ad said no experience, we train.

She did go downtown later to get a job selling clothes to women but wound up with a cleaning job. She wouldn't stay long but it taught her a lesson about racism and injustice.

And then some of the stores like Tobias, I went because I wanted a job. I think it was a Tobias. It was not Tobias. It was another store way down Ellis and something. *But anyway, it was an exclusive store and they had me cleaning. I didn't stay there long. They wouldn't let me sell then.*

So a lot of places, I think they did me a favor because I would not have had the experience that I have. Even the factories wouldn't hire me. But had I known that there was a law, I could have sued them. But that information was not available to me at that time.

One day she met one of the two Black lawyers in High Point. His question would change her life and lead her on the path to a future that she had not planned. She would stay in the legal profession until her "retirement job."

Mr. Chess asked me could I type, and I said yes. *So that's how I was able to go and get involved in those things.* I worked for the Chess from 1960 or 1964/5 or

somewhere along in there. I don't really know because it's been a long time ago. And we worked on Washington Drive, and it was the most vibrant business district.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell learned a lot working with this lawyer. It was that initial experience that would lead her to becoming the first Black hired in a number of positions.

*But when I was a paralegal working for Judge, we were like the welfare office. A lot of people didn't know where to go for certain things and we were the welfare office, we were the EEOC, and we represented all kinds of cases. In fact, we had to have the criminal, the domestic, and estates. We were a diversified law practice.*

The one thing that continued to come to mind as I listened to Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell was our initial conversation on the phone. She stated that she had not done anything to warrant an interview. During the interview, though, she referred to her others a number of times who had been very active in the community, more so than her. I discovered that she had made a number of contributions of her own in very meaningful and lasting ways.

The lawyer she was working for made history himself. He became North Carolina's first Black Superior Court Judge appointed in the South in the twentieth century. She worked for another lawyer for a short period of time after the appointment of her former boss. Later, she would find herself working in the court system.

When Mr. C went on to become the first administrative law judge, I worked for another attorney. But, I didn't work for him long, That's when I went into the court system. *And I started out as a deputy clerk, and I moved up to the superior court.*

She was the first Black person to work in the Superior Court office in High Point and the District Attorney's office in Greensboro.

The only other things that I've done, *I integrated the court system*. It's been so long ago. *I worked in the Superior Court of High Point judges' office*. I worked for a Black judge and a White judge and that was between the years of '73 and '75. *I was the only Black possibly in the state that served as an African-American*. It was never broadcast; I just know that.

Then *I was one of the four secretaries in a DA's office, and that was in 1975*, and it was a strange type of environment. We were accepted by the community, as far as the work in the community. But, I remember that my function was to be a liaison between the court and a DA who dealt with child support and, I guess, battery.

When she went to work with the District Attorney's office, she publicly experienced racism from different. She would weather this experience and move on to the next challenge.

And so there was this little White man that came in. He had on bib overalls, and they told him that he needed to go see me. Raymond Alexander was the DA at the time. And so the lady told him that he had to talk to me, and rather than to talk to me, he went home. *He didn't get his business taken care of. I don't know if he ever did, but he just would not, so.*

Her gentle temperament was what I experienced when I was interviewing her. I think this quiet nature of hers is what made it possible for her endure the "groundwork" steps she made in her life.

But in order to serve in these capacities, *you had to be a person where your personality would not allow racism to affect you*. You just had to do your job and execute whatever the complainants came in to see you about, and you had to be very impartial and very, very strong.

She was one of the first Black women to work as Eligibility Specialist for the Department of Social Services.

*I worked for Guilford County Department of Social Services as an Eligibility Specialist. At that particular job, a coworker and friend of mine, who was Black, there was a lot of discrimination there, we started working at the same time.*

So while we were working there, there was a gentleman who made 50s and 60s on the test, and we made 85 and 95 and a 100. And the two of us were able to change a test question because they had it marked and had us marked incorrect. *But we were correct in our answer and our supervisor had to notify whoever the testing facilitator was for the state to change the answer. We gave the reason why.*

Years passed and she was busy working, raising her children, and helping run her mother's church. But she saw many changes over the years. Some of the Class of 1963 who were involved in the freedom movement stayed but never reached their potential because of their involvement.

But we had to stay here and just go through a lot of things. And the institutions haven't been that fair. Like, say, for instance, in order to buy a house then, it was not under the best circumstances either to buy a car. *We were discriminated especially women.* So we just stayed here and just kind of made it better. And we're not out here in the public, tooting our horn. We're just trying to do what we can here.

*Others had to leave in order to make a living. They don't understand the struggle that she and our class of '63—the struggles that we went through for them to come back and just kind of waltz through. Things are better for them to participate now.*

It was heart-wrenching to hear this part of her story. I had read stories by other authors who talked about the unfairness and the mistreatment of those who had fought freedom movements in their community. “For instance, our scholarship chairman, he

graduated from A&T, but he couldn't find a teaching job here. *He had to go somewhere else and then come back, many, many years later.*"

Those who experienced this mistreatment told stories of not being able to get decent jobs, homes, or to have "a balanced life" as Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell called it. Some of the people she mentioned were people I knew as a teen and adult. What was disturbing was to find out that the reasons a number of us were able to be successful in our lives was because of the sacrifices by some member in the Class of 1963.

And BD was politically active, and they kept on until the Establishment shut him down. MB, who was one of my neighbors in the project, *he was a political activist, but when they finished with him, he didn't even have a job.* He sold newspapers, and I think he had another business on the side where he would go to the flea market in Winston and sell his wares.

This interview was a history lesson for me because I didn't know these kinds of things took place in my hometown. As Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell stated "High Point is a sleepy town" and things can happen in a sleepy town without much knowledge. "So they had a way, if you were very vocal, they had a way of shutting you down. We've been trying to get somebody to write our history but nobody has time."

I listened to her talking about experiencing the Jim Crow laws and segregation.

And I would guess if you just start it with the now, because I remember the fountains downtown, but I pretended not to read. *I remember the Colored fountains, but I just I just drank out of each one if I got thirsty.*

Most Black communities had their own theater, a few restaurants, grocery stores, and drugstore where Blacks could shop and eat. But most of the clothing stores were not

accessible to Blacks and if they were, we couldn't try on clothes and shoes. We had to either come through the back door or through the basement.

*But because of the Washington Drive experience, we had everything except stores. I think we had maybe a men's store but didn't have a woman's store. But we did have a drugstore where we had the fountains like they had. We could go and sit and order our hotdogs and smoothies or whatever.*

The city changed over the years, the community changed, the school system changed and those things that had seemed important to the Black community changed. Integration had taken a foothold in the city and there were changes that would eventually affect the William Penn's Class of 1963. Some of the people who were involved in the freedom movements in High Point had left to live in other places. A number of them stayed, though, and watched the changes in the city. An issue arose that put Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell into the forefront of the issue and changed her forever.

In the mid-1960s the decision was made that in order to achieve desegregation in the school system in High Point, William Penn would close and a new high school would be built. Black students would be bussed to the current all White high school and the new high school. This was typical during the desegregation of school system in the South. Black schools would be closed and either Black students were bussed to an all-White schools or new schools were built to house the Black and White students. In Virginia, South Carolina and other states, schools were closed to prevent integration. The Black community and their leaders protested this decision but to no avail. In the summer of 1968, William Penn was closed and in the fall of 1968 integration began in the High Point school system.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell and others worked hard to keep the love of William Penn alive. There was such love for that school and you can still hear the pride of attending that school when Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell talked. She talked about how this high school prepared them for a future and how without a college degree, she was able to become successful.

*I'm just saying that the education that I received at William Penn trained me for whatever direction I was going to go in. So, in order to strengthen my skills from what I learned in high school, I always say that at William Penn, we got a college education. The curriculum was such that even if you were a C student, our teachers always encouraged you to be the best in whatever field you chose.*

If you were not going to college and you decided to work at High Point Regional, be the best orderly or whatever, or if you worked for the city, be the best. And, we always learned, even in school if we were in a math class and we spoke very bad English, they would address it and say, "Oh, I can get you some help for that."

Years later after William Penn was closed in 1968, the school was slated to be torn down.

*So those of us who remained were still active in the Civil Rights process. When we graduated, there were years later that they wanted to tear down William Penn. I think of our teachers who told us that they were going to do this.*

They wanted to keep the school because of its history and its connection to the Black community. A group was formed to fight the tearing down of William Penn. Members of the 1963 class and some other community people got together and formed the William Penn Foundation. Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell would work with this group as a member of a restoration committee. She also co-founded The William Penn Tigers Association.

Working within these two organizations, Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell helped keep the history of William Penn alive.

So DL, DB, and a few others came together with DK, and we formed a group, the William Penn Foundation. *And I got married, so Mrs. L and others continued to pursue the idea of keeping William Penn alive and not bulldozed like they wanted to.* So there were a lot of processes and the school is still there. I was invited to work on the committee called the Restoration Committee.

She and her friend Mrs. DL, along with other members of the two organizations, were instrumental in saving the auditorium of their former high school. They continued to work to maintain a presence in the community focusing on the high school. They worked with the school system to keep the name of the high school and the nearby middle school, Penn-Griffin. She worked with other members to make sure that they supported similar efforts in the community. Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell's owes her inspiration for her community efforts to her "college education" at her former high school.

Another thing about the William Penn Tigers we were the only group that considered giving back to the community because *we felt that our education at William Penn inspired us to give back to the community.* This group comprised of other members, the Southside neighborhood, other alumni, and anybody who has the same vision as we have and mission.

Under her leadership the William Penn Tigers they raised a substantial amount of money to restore the auditorium.

Another thing that the William Penn Tigers did under my leadership and with the help of *my other members was to put ten thousand dollars' worth of memory-chairs in the William Penn Auditorium.*

Working closely with the principal of the “new” school, Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell makes sure that the Tigers and their families supported the programs of the school.

What I liked about listening to her story was how much she stays connected to the community through her work with the William Penn Tigers Association and her work with the church her mother founded. She and her sister are still active in the community through the church and continue to give back. “Giving back” is a term that I have heard from a number of the women I interviewed. It is a theme that runs in other stories that I have read of oral histories by other Black women.

*I have worked in my church as a trustee board member and other functions, and the church is located in a predominately Black neighborhood, which my mother started, so my sister and I are still working diligently to keep the doors open.*

She works to give support to other people in the neighborhood by acting as a role model for community activism and taking responsibility for improving your own station in life.

And we try to practice, I guess even though we’re after saving souls, we’re trying to be role models so that a lot of kids can look at our lives and pull themselves up out of poverty. There are a lot of people who are without income, or they’re ill and whatever, and their parents are struggling to get them even out of middle school and high school.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell is very aware of the changes that continue to happen around her.

She watched the area near and around the high school deteriorate and has concerns about other institutions encroaching.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell has two children learning the same lesson of giving back that she was taught by her own parents. Her son is a mentor to young people and her daughter is a philanthropist. She sees that they remind her often about what they learned from her and work to apply those lessons in their own lives by helping others.

*I have two children that I've encouraged to do their best. My son is doing well. He works at the post office. He went to Winston-Salem State. So my son is a mentor to people. My son mentored to a young man who lost his brother.*

*And my daughter went to North Carolina Central, she's married with three girls, and she's back in school. I guess you could say she's a philanthropist, too, because there are families that, say for instance, she was in real estate, and she taught single women with children how to become homeowners. She has been a provider of clothes and food and things like that.*

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell has done so much in her life and has made positive changes in the lives of others who crossed her path. She is a very unpretentious and humble woman who does not seek glory or recognition for what she does.

*It was just a humble growing up and I don't have any regrets to where I am, when I can see that things are coming back. And they keep me happy to know that even though I didn't finish college, that I was able to be a part of something positive.*

### **Mrs. Evelyn Terry**

**“Sometimes I don't know what it's all about, except it is just a matter of wanting to see justice roll down like righteous, you know, that's just it. It's kind of who I am.”**

I interviewed with Mrs. Evelyn Terry on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. The weather was beautiful and the ride to Winston-Salem was both inviting and exciting. Mrs. Evelyn Terry knew about the interview because she and Dr. Virginia Newell discussed it. In setting up a time for the interview, I discovered that our husbands knew each other. At

the time they both worked at a historical Black university and sometimes had lunch together. I feel that the connection between them helped to ease our interview and put us both at ease immediately.

Mrs. Evelyn Terry started her interview off introducing herself and talking about her family. Her first statement made me really want to hear what she would say about her life. "I am a native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina by way of a number of places throughout the past years since my birth." Where did these places take her and what will I find out about her and these places?

I found out that she was the only daughter to her mother and she was raised by her mother and her maternal grandfather. Her grandmother died shortly before she was born. Her grandfather and her mother were her role models. She had a younger brother and sister but she never talked about the other siblings or her father. Her grandfather was a brick maker who was known nationally and internationally for his work.

*I am the only daughter of my mother. I am one of two others of my father's children. I have a younger sister and a younger brother. I was reared mainly by my mother and her father, my grandfather, who was, in fact, a very famous native of Winston-Salem. He was a handmade brick maker, whose living was made making bricks. He went on to become really internationally known because of that craft.*

For Mrs. Evelyn Terry's family's education was very important. She was taught and trained by Franciscan nuns which is where she learned to speak well, write well and learned how "present myself anyplace among any people."

*But basically my childhood mirrored that of practically any other person born in my generation except for the fact that probably I had a parochial education. I went from kindergarten through high school being taught by the Franciscan nuns.*

Her home was a virtual laboratory for learning with exposure to fine arts and music. Mrs. Evelyn Terry was expected to succeed on all levels of education. Sunday afternoon gatherings of music and arts began when her grandmother was living and continued when she was a child.

*But my home life was equally as good or better. My mother was reared in a house where on Sunday afternoon such as this, the family gathered to do music and poetry in the parlor; because that was the way they entertained themselves. *When you grow up poor, you don't have money; you don't have things to do.* You know there was always a parent in the house, and cousins to play violin, clarinet, piano, and anything that made noise.*

Through her mother, she learned about the association of mathematics and music and to appreciate what these would teach her.

*We recited poetry, we read, we sang and played music. *The arts were extremely important.* My mother said that you could not do mathematics and arithmetic if you couldn't learn how to read the notes on the piano anyway.*

I would learn later that her grandfather had little formal education. He was not allowed to go to school because he was needed to help support his mother and other family members after the death of his father. His wife taught him how to sign his name and he knew how to count money.

*My grandfather never went to school a day in his life. He was totally taught by my grandmother who also taught him to sign his name. But, *he was a leader in his church, helped to found his church United Methodist.* I just don't even understand*

how it happened, but there was something about those days. He was born in 1879 and my grandma was born in 1878 I think it was. *But they just came through whatever a time when, if there was somebody who was literate who knew something, there was somebody else taught that person what they knew.*

But he could count quickly and accurately the bricks he made. Education was extremely important to him and he encouraged his grandchildren to get a good education.

*So, education was really very important and as I say, I grew up, I guess, as normal as anybody. We didn't have very much, but we were very proud poor people. I was one of those born and reared where education is something that, if you get, nobody can take it from you. You had to be extremely conscientious about it, and just had to do your schoolwork, period. So I did because I was a pretty good student.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry graduated from high school in a class of only nine students and would go off to college. She chose to go off to college away from home.

*I ended up graduating. There were only nine of us in my graduating class. I tell you, they flipped coins, I think, for averages. I didn't get to be the valedictorian nor the salutatorian. I went over to Johnson C Smith University and I graduated from there.*

She went to college in Charlotte, North Carolina and after graduation headed north.

Although her mother did not like her leaving, she would not stand in her way. Like so many others, her family would let her spread her wings but would always be there to catch her if she fell or failed.

*And when I graduated from there, I did not want any part of Winston-Salem, so I just packed my bags, spread my wings after I finished and took off to the north. My folks were the same, but they never stood in the way of your creativity, zest for adventure, and would allow you to go as far as you needed to go before falling, without being too critical. They would always come back to the rescue if need be.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she worked, went to graduate school, and began her activism. Living and working in Philadelphia made her aware of injustices in the world and in her own backyard.

*I did not get to participate a great deal with the civil rights movement in Winston-Salem, per se. What I grasped from my college years and then the year of my graduation and moving to Philadelphia was what Winston-Salem was like for other people that I had grown up with all my life and knew. But, I did not feel and get to experience the same way they did.*

She would begin to understand some of the problems that existed in her own hometown which provided the impetus for making changes.

*The way I was able to mirror those experiences about others who had grown up right here with me was through my experiences that I had after moving to Philadelphia, being on my own and seeing from the outside back in, more or less.*

Looking back, Mrs. Evelyn Terry realized just how prejudiced and discriminatory life had been in her childhood in Winston-Salem. Armed with this new knowledge, Mrs. Evelyn Terry became more active in communities in Philadelphia than in Winston-Salem. In Philadelphia she worked as a teacher, social worker, and community organizer. Her day job was as a caseworker for the county. In the evening she worked as a community organizer teaching others about their rights and responsibilities with welfare, and helping with voter registrations among other things.

*Working in Philly, especially for the county in the social work field, by day I did the administrative work that you do as a caseworker, and by evening I was organizing people on my welfare roll case load and teaching them about their rights as well as their responsibilities, and helped to do voter registration.*

The people that she helped to organize were the same people Mrs. Evelyn Terry worked with during the day as their caseworker. Her position within the welfare system provided insight into the discrepancies in public policies that affected her clients. She would use this advantage to help to make things better for them.

*An excellent thing, but more than that, I helped to start a chapter of a welfare rights organization. And that's where there were a lot of the contradictions regarding public policy and what was happening with people. I had those kinds of experiences there, and didn't know, necessarily, about those kinds of experiences in Winston-Salem.*

Teaching adult literacy classes coupled with her experiences in community work in Philadelphia helped her jump start her career once she moved back to Winston-Salem.

*My mother was anxious for me to come back to the South because she knew the stuff I had gotten into, and she wasn't very pleased about it. But, anyway somebody said, "Oh, they've got a job over there that might be interesting to you."*

She applied for a job and beat out three hundred applicants. Taking this job would require her to learn about the social and economic fabric in her hometown. Although she grew up in Winston-Salem, she knew nothing about the conditions or struggles of Black people in this city. She was sheltered growing up through her education in the Catholic schools. When she came back home she realized that she was removed from the central issues affecting Blacks in Winston-Salem.

*So I got here ready to hit the ground running. It was a lot different and I had to really learn about my hometown of Winston-Salem, North Carolina particularly from the standpoint of my not having known my hometown. Like I say, I was one of those little Catholic schoolgirls who went to school from kindergarten through*

high school and I had lots of other friends around because we had to because our school was small. *But still, I just didn't know the real deal.*

As a child growing up in Winston-Salem, Mrs. Evelyn Terry was minimally aware of what was happening. She knew that there were demonstrations and other freedom movement activities that occurred in the city. It was not until her job exposed her to the plight of Black citizens that Mrs. Evelyn Terry really understood the plight of Blacks in the city.

*I for real learned about the struggles of Black folk in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I for real learned about the story of the Saint Bus Company, how we had to ride on our buses, but then on those other buses, how everybody had—of course, I had known, going to Smith. I knew I had to sit in the back in the Greyhound buses and those kinds of things, but it seems like all of that came to life for me in a very different way.*

She had to start taking a hard look at what was happening and how to instill changes. In order for her to help her clients and her community, though, Mrs. Evelyn Terry had to take a step back and educate herself about the social strata in her hometown.

*I really had the need to learn about why and to with every fiber in me try to do something about it. I then really understood why I was marching before, doing and participating in some of the civil rights activities from college and then into my first job as a new college graduate. It just came alive for me when I came back home, to see that just many things just weren't right. And, so I became what I guess we call today an activist of sorts.*

As I listened to Mrs. Evelyn Terry's story, I realized that she was like so many people who don't realize that problems exist in their community until they leave, live in another place then come back home. She was sheltered as a child from what was happening in her

own city. Once she went away to college and worked in Philadelphia was she able to come home and look at her home with a new and experienced viewpoint.

Mrs. Evelyn Terry worked with the North Carolina Fund, an organization that was part of a program started by a former governor of North Carolina. She ended up working with them for ten years. The North Carolina Fund was designed, administered, and operated by local communities. It was started as an independent, nonprofit corporation as the first project of its kind in the country. The purpose of the program was to develop a variety of programs across the state that would address the needs of the community and to assist the poor. The North Carolina Fund included several programs: a service corps program to train college students to work in rural communities, community action and civic engagement programs, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), economic development initiatives such as Head Start and Neighborhood Youth Corps programs, and low-income housing development among others (Smith, 2005).

Through funding from the North Carolina Fund, Mrs. Evelyn Terry worked for an organization that was a *community action program*. *Community action programs* were started in the 1960's under President Lyndon B. Johnson. They were designed to provide

services, assistance, and other activities of sufficient scope and size to give promise of progress toward elimination of poverty or a cause or causes of poverty through developing employment opportunities, improving human performance, motivation, and productivity, or bettering the conditions under which people live, learn, and work. (Rubin, 1967, p. 5)

Her program, ASR, addressed the need of people without proper housing, provided employment training, addressed education needs of women in the community, and started a weatherization program.

We created a program back in the mid-70s, I guess it was, so I stayed there about 10 years, where during the energy crisis, the energy agency of the US government—I remember getting a million-dollar grant for what was called the first weatherization program there at ASR.

The weatherization program was a first for ASR. It was through her grant writing abilities that they were able to provide this program for the community. Mrs. Evelyn Terry received a million dollar grant to work with the Mechanical Engineering Department of a local Black university to learn how to create and implement the weatherization program.

*I ended up going over to the Mechanical Engineering Department where we worked to do things to actually learn how to measure heat loss and work so that we could build with that 6-and 8-mil plastic storm windows to put on some of these little shotgun houses where people were paying rent to landlords who had become cash cows, even then, because of the wretched conditions in which many of the people around Winston-Salem were living in.*

Although this program would be beneficial for a number of poor people in Winston-Salem, Mrs. Evelyn Terry found herself in trouble because of her forwardness and not following protocol. Throughout her interview, she would tell of a number times she got in trouble because she didn't follow proper procedure because she saw a need and acted upon it.

*My deputy director was upset with me because of the grant application. I put this grant application together and led the team. That's actually how I became what I am known; a lot of people think I am a good grant writer, government grants kind of thing. But, I cut my teeth on them because that was the way we were able to get new resources to help people who needed it the most and who had been ignored, or just sort of cast aside.*

As I listened to her story, I thought to myself, "This is ME!" Many times I put my neck on the line for the women and families in the communities I worked only to get in trouble for not following the proper procedures. She then made a statement that made my hair stand up and gripped my heart.

*And that was sort of the catalyst that probably started a lot of the controversy with my presence here in this community as kind of an active, sort of forceful voice for the voiceless.*

I realized that I was listening to part of my own life story told by another woman. She talked about her supervisors who took the heat for her and probably covered for her a number of times as she made decisions that she knew were right for the community.

*They would not let the people just throw me out to the wolves. They always protected and then they would call me back in there and Ms. Wilson would shake her fist and say, "Don't you go out there doing this, that and the other." She would say, "These people fund us; they give us our money and they help us with all this stuff."*

She discovered that although her supervisors and others who were in leadership positions in the community would try to rein her in, they were also very supportive of her and her work. They could not publicly support her actions but did so privately.

*Ms. W was involved in this community and was supportive and helpful, sometimes not publicly, but sort of behind closed doors. People's livelihoods depended on those jobs. They were getting those checks where those people who were in leadership or political decisions were holding the purse strings.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry admitted that she made a number of mistakes but was able to continue to work for the community and continue to make changes helping to make things better for residents.

*It was an exciting time but it was a lonely time. I made a lot of mistakes I promise you. Because I just was like a bull in a china shop. I had been in Philadelphia where I saw how a welfare rights group got organized and how they were able to go down to Washington and start lobbying for some of the changes that had been brought about from that 1961 Civil Rights Act that passed. I just thought that at home we should be able to at least do similarly.*

A number of times her job was threatened but she would continue to fight for others and carry on being "the voice for the voiceless."

*I worked like that to sort of truncate this thing for that first 10 years of being at ASR, and like I say, got into trouble. Somehow I managed to come out unscathed to the point where I never just truly got fired. They wanted to get rid of me a lot of times and I know that. But somebody always saved me. Lord have mercy, God was on my side. I know that it had to be.*

She met her husband while working for ASR and together they would fight for social justice and keep on challenging public and welfare policies.

*It was during that time I met my husband. He was an intern at Winston-Salem State University when I was working at ASR and was looking for an opportunity to do community work. He became a street worker for young folk, a youth worker, and then worked with us, too, at the problem center.*

The challenge in working with poor communities is that there is just not one problem or issue in the community; there are many. Poor communities suffer from “lack of”- good housing, proper food, comprehensive health care, money. In other words, there was an overall lack of sufficient resources to maintain a minimal lifestyle. With the “lack of” come many social problems: alcoholism, substance abuse, substandard housing and/or homelessness, violence, diseases, and other societal problems. While with ASR, Mrs. Evelyn Terry dealt with all of these problems. Her organization was viewed as a “problem center” dealing with all the problems that were associated with being poor and the “lack of” syndrome.”

*Our problem center was there to give emergency one-time help to people who were just losing jobs or couldn't hold a job or had all kinds of problems. There was everything from alcoholism to illness and everything else.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry learned how to challenge the welfare policy, especially housing issues.

*We indeed through that 10-year period got a few of the slum houses began to be either put on within the redevelopment or some of them were actually condemned. At any rate, we were getting people out of this housing that you could look through the ceiling and see the sun outside, out of those kinds of places into public housing*

*We also worked on health issues such as tuberculosis because that was just how bad it was in the inner city. Winston-Salem had some terrible, dreadful places they called the shakes, on the pond and 11th Street, and bottom and all in back at 16th, 17th, and 18th Streets. West 10th and a half Street, back behind Trade Street all back in there, there was even active tuberculosis. The Public Health Department discovered active tuberculosis on West 10th Street in Winston-Salem.*

But, on this other track you had these people who were working in R.J. Reynolds who had come out of Atkins and some of them probably were not high school graduates, who were making fabulous salaries for this area and amassing the kind of creature comforts that people have who really have means. *So, it was hard to*

*distinguish and discern that very lower rung of the totem pole, where there was misery and just downright abject poverty.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry did not see herself as giving people a hand-out. She wanted to make an indelible positive mark on their lives. She wanted people to see their way out of their situations and to get them to understand that they could make a difference.

*But my experiences had come out of not doing for folks, but with what they now call social capital, social engineering, or whatever the new term is. I sometimes say, we always sometimes were way ahead of our time in so many ways, and that probably is really the case. It wasn't a matter of handing a person something.*

We wanted to be alongside of people and show them the way to becoming involved with the process so that you understand how to hold people who are in leadership positions responsible for what they are to do. *At the same time help them understand that they are no different from you and that if you prepare yourself, you can be just as they are.* We can help them by being there to take their place if they don't necessarily work in your best interests.

Age and experience teach you that in order to keep fighting the fight you have to change your methods but remain passionate with the cause. As Mrs. Evelyn Terry continued to work and struggle with making changes in her town, she would temper her methods and her strategies but not the cause.

*With time, you temper your strategy and your methodology. The reality is that I stand with causes, systems to change and move in new directions.* The movement of the civil rights era is really where I learned by doing and testing, if you will, some of the processes and organizing other people so that they understood how to go about doing these things.

Mrs. Evelyn Terry gained a lot from her experience with ASR. Not only was ASR training ground for those who went through the programs, but it was a training ground for

those who were running the program. The program created opportunities for those who wanted to take advantage and benefit from it. The philosophy of Mrs. Evelyn Terry was that with so many social programs, those who work with the program must believe that opportunities are there for people to take advantage.

*ASR was really like a training ground. For a lot of people who could do better, I was always pushing them out and encouraged everybody else to push them out into other areas. The philosophy was that Mrs. Wilson's aim for those persons was that they could go further and do other things and even with education as well. You were encouraged to do that because these were people who had never had the opportunity.*

As with some of the other Great Society programs and the North Carolina Fund, ASR would be a proving ground for a number of the participants. A variety of skills were taught through classes that addressed everyday needs. People were prepared for the workforce and taught how to make things better for themselves.

*We had things such as community houses where we taught sowing, cooking classes, and had folks coming in trying to do all kinds of things to help people better themselves. Then, they could just go on and get out and venture into the workforce.*

Even with all good programs like ASR, there is always the battle of fighting with those in the community who don't want to see success: groups or organizations that wanted to continue to reinforce stereotypes about poor people but especially poor Black people. As I listened to Mrs. Evelyn Terry talk and analyzed her interview, I realized that although we had done the same type of work, those same negative attitudes still existed more than two decades later. Her words rang so true.

*A lot of good came out of some of these things. It was a struggle to get to the levels where you could get the money to do it with to get the support from the community. All the way from the same old myths that probably is still out here to this day. These myths are about the fact that those people don't want to do anything and they don't do anything. If you give them a chance, they steal, they stink. They are just stereotypes, negative stereotypes.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry was influenced by so many people as she worked in this community. She was influenced by her supervisor, Mrs. W, whose philosophy of “a hand up and not a hand out” helped to support the work of Mrs. Evelyn Terry. Other influential women were Louise Wilson, Velma Hopkins and Maisie Woodruff.

*And during that time, too, I met these other two giants in this community. That's how I got kind of politically active working with Maisie Woodruff who had been a County Commissioner, and Velma Hopkins, who was never an elected person. But, Ms. Hopkins was truly, truly, truly a trooper. She was the organizer's organizer.*

These same names were at the top of anyone's list whenever I inquired about community organizers in Winston-Salem. Everyone would talk about these women as if they were still living, but they were all deceased.

*The thing that I admired, and the truth is that Maisie, Velma and Louise Wilson, the three of those women were probably the forerunners. Anybody you talk to may mention any one of those names, too, as really true kind of grassroots out of the African-American community leaders.*

It is through these women that Mrs. Evelyn Terry and Ms. Johnson learned to temper their approach to things and to figure out how to work through the system, not against it,

to accomplish their goals. Mrs. Evelyn Terry stated that they learned not to make a move until they had run things through these “wise women.”

*That’s when we kind of got a little bit of sense and learned that we better not go down there ourselves and just shake our fists in somebody’s face and raise a little hell. We would go through these elders who had been around the block and who had taken this crap and knew how to deal with it. Some of that was how I learned, especially, to sort of temper my approach with some of the things.*

Mrs. Evelyn Terry left ASR and went to work at the local Black university and Title III initiatives to establish a cooperative education program. Once again she will shake up things at the university with these new initiatives. Once again, she had the support of her supervisor to move forward making changes.

*The school was a little resistant to some ideas. I had been a person to go in and upset the apple cart and then have everybody mad at me because I’m telling the truth. There was a bit of resistance amongst faculty. The whole notion of moving a person out of an STE slot for a semester and then going back created a big problem. But anyway, I survived that. I survived that and ended up as the director of Institutional Research before I left there.*

She would try to “infuse some of my values about the University needing to be a part of the community.” She put into practice her philosophy of community activism at the university for ten years. According to Mrs. Evelyn Terry, her experience at the university was an unfinished fight.

*I spent an interesting 10 years over there. Still maintaining my identity as a community activist but working within the educational arena. I don’t know which one ever really embraced me and received me as one of them, but I’d like to say that we did do some things. I know the University finally did get its cooperative and it’s still alive. Of course, the places have just grown exponentially by leaps and bounds since the days when I was there.*

While at the university, she also worked to develop a program that addressed the needs of students who need remediation without spending state money dedicated to college-level students.

When I was there I helped them discern some of the programs and kind of work with some of that supplemental education and all those things. That's because we found students who came somewhat less than prepared in many instances to negotiate a college curriculum. That was a real challenge to the system where you are funded through the state legislature that says that you are dealing with students who have graduated high school. So, you can't spend this money to remediate kids; you got to teach them college level courses.

After leaving the university, Mrs. Evelyn Terry went to work with public housing units. She worked with the Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) to develop programs and grant opportunities for those who lived in public housing. These programs included drug elimination and skill retraining programs.

We did a lot of grant writing for developing programs that caused people to get retooled so that they could try and move themselves at least into a better quality of life. Even if they didn't get out, they were able to figure out a way to live decently without having to depend on the great economy and all that kind of stuff. I don't know how many millions of dollars we got in programs for drug elimination.

Other programs were concentrated on the needs of children who lived in these communities. These included computer labs for children, and decreasing school retention.

*We put up a strong policing presence, but not just policing presence but computer labs with success maker software and things like that for the children. One of the astonishing statistics that I found, I can't remember the numbers, but I know that less than one quarter of the kids eligible for high school graduation in public housing were graduating from high school. I mean, there were fewer than 25*

which was something! It was just a ridiculous number and it was just totally unacceptable.

With her help there would be a strong presence of academics in the after-school programs in public housing. She discovered that there were a lot of people who were willing to give money to make things happen in these communities for the children.

Anyway, the public housing years were productive in that we were able to really turn around some things, put some strong academic presence into after-school programs. Because my concentration for all of that grant writing was really for the children.

One of the greatest strengths of Mrs. Evelyn Terry was her ability to write grants. She could write grants to support the organization's mission and objectives.

*Basically, that was kind of like a 30-year working career. The fortunate thing about all this is that I was able to work, have paid employment, while it was somewhat turbulent, while really making a difference. It wasn't an easy task; it was a lonely task in many ways.*

Because we had such a huge problem, the thought was you had to spend scarce resources where they could have the greatest amount of impact. That happened to have been in education and with children which is where a great deal of those HUD initiatives went.

As I listened to Mrs. Evelyn Terry and her story about all of work in Winston-Salem, I was waiting to her to talk about her service as a city council member. I knew from conversations with other people in Winston-Salem that both she and her husband had served on the Board of Alderman for their ward. She only briefly talked about their roles.

And so, at this juncture, both of us have served publicly. We've had a chance to, in fact, be in a process of developing and causing public policy that helps people. That's the good news. Some of those battles were won, some of them were not.

She credits her husband for providing the necessary support to accomplish her goals.

When her job was jeopardized a number of times, her husband was there to encourage yet ground her along the way.

*Was it not for my wonderfully supportive husband, who just recognized that he was married to a complete nut and who was not going to stop at almost anything, I may not have been able to succeed with some of the things that I did. I'm very grateful for that. But his heart is pretty much there, in some of the same places but he expresses it somewhat differently while he continues to work.*

When I look at all the things Mrs. Evelyn Terry had achieved through her activism, I realized that there had to be something that pushed her and moved her to act for others. There had to be something that spoke to her to make her fight so hard for others. I know that injustices of others are what usually make a person fight so hard for others.

*Through the ministry in many ways, the teaching and preaching is definitely Jesus-centered. That organizer who was born in that barn and who believes that everybody is somebody, and whatever it is that we can do to work together so that we can all share some of this good earth, then that's what we ought to do. That's our job. And I have felt all my life that that's my job. I'm driven. Sometimes I don't know what it's all about except it is just a matter of wanting to see justice roll down like righteousness you know. That's just it. It's kind of who I am.*

What I saw in her story was an impetus for being the voice for those who thought they had no voice, to make a difference in the life of someone, and to help that person

achieve some success in their life. I heard in her story as she talked about why she and her husband do what they do.

If you can see things from a broad, holistic viewpoint, then you can understand how important it is and why there has to be some rabble-rousers somewhere. This is especially true in minority communities where people have generally been somewhat curtailed by either fear from external pressure or from their own internal understanding of what they believe they can or cannot do. So we just continue the struggle.

### **Ms. Johnson**

**“But I am not going away because being a part of the community is in my blood, and I intend to not do your job, no, but I intend to be engaged.”**

When I began to analyze this interview, I realized that this interview would not fall into my neat categories or themes. Ms. Johnson is the youngest of the women that I interviewed. Just like Dr. Virginia Newell and Mrs. Evelyn Terry, she served on the Board of Alderman in Winston-Salem in the same ward as Dr. Virginia Newell. Of all the women that I interviewed, hers was the most difficult because she had a hard time talking about herself. Ms. Johnson said that she was “not used to or comfortable talking about herself.” She did begin the interview by talking about her family as did the other women I interviewed.

*I guess when you talk about community organizing, it's that community sense that we have always been brought up with by mom, or grandmother, my dad. Everybody's been there to talk about how all of us come together to do things together as family or as a community.*

Where Mrs. Mary Oliver saw her work in the community as a calling from God, Ms.

Johnson saw it as “Biblical.”

When you consider the kinds of things that makes one get engaged and involved in the community, for me it's Biblical for it takes all of us. It's not just the "it takes a village to raise a child," it takes a committed, spirit-filled group to do that, and church has always been a strong part of what I believe, and what I do.

Although Ms. Johnson did not talk a lot about her parents, she spoke a number of times about her grandmother who which Mrs. JJ grew up.

*So that whole organizing piece just kind of started early on in looking at family, and my family has always been engaged in some way, like I say either in the church, or within the community. Oftentimes, it's my grandmother or just a friend would be having an event. She would have ice cream on the front porch, and even kids now who are my age or a little older will say, I remember when your grandmother used to do the ice cream on the front porch. You know, that kind of taking care in the sense of community always being present from a little one.*

There were many influences in Ms. Johnson's life that led to her involvement in the community: her school and teachers, her church, the segregation and separation she saw as a youth, and going off to college.

As with other students and parents, the death of President John F. Kennedy focused awareness on how communities supported its members. Now, the tables were turned and it was time for the younger generation to support their elders during this tumultuous time.

But Kennedy was killed that year, so the year after they changed the school name to Kennedy. But there again, one of our instructors had been the Teacher of the Year, and had actually shaken his hand. When the announcement was made, it was like everybody flocked to her to say, "How can we support you through this?" You've had that one-on-one as kids. *She was our elder and it was still significant for us to be there for her.*

Throughout the history of activism of Black women, the church has been a major component in their community work. During the freedom movements, the Black church provided a public sphere in the social and political life of Blacks. According to Marla F. Frederick (2003), “African Americans, experiencing exclusion from public debate, have historically cultivated space in Black churches.” It has been the Black public sphere that was central to the organizing efforts of Blacks especially women. It has been the Black church that has been responsible for the development of many of the movements in the Black community.

But it—it—it’s who I am, my personal spiritual beliefs, and my sense of family and community that has made me do some of the organizing pieces that we’ve done in the community.

Ms. Johnson has always been an active churchgoer which is the mainstay of her support. It was through the church that she developed her sense of organizing and leadership. She was involved in a number of church organizations and a number of them led to her being president of the organization or chairperson of a committee.

I’ve been active in my church family with our missionary department, with our musical department for years, and served as the president of our youth missionary group from the age of 14 or thereabouts. But, *that created that organizing piece within the church*, but there again, I’ve always talked about how we can, and believed that we’ve got to go beyond the sanctuary in order to do the work that the Lord would want us to do.

The training that she received through the church would help her develop leadership skills that aided her as she went through high school, college, and an internship.

*As I went through high school, I was a leader within our classroom settings because I believed in academics, was a member of the band, and all of those kinds of good things, but going on to Bennett, and finishing school there.*

Although she was exposed to organizing through the church and her family, it was the 1960's civil rights activities in Winston-Salem that ignited the spark to support and help others.

During the mid '60s and all the discomfort downtown with the whole civil rights piece, although we were younger than those kids who actually sat at the counters, we oftentimes would go down and stand there and support the ones who were there, or just go by, and almost physically practice civil disobedience, if you want to call it that.

She was constantly asking questions about segregation and the Jim Crows in which she was forced to live. She could not understand why everything had to be Black and White.

*How can we make our mark known? My mom oftentimes reminds me that when I was young, it was like why is there a Black and White? Why can't I go into the areas for Whites? Why do I have to drink from the Black fountain?*

Those "why" questions were not answered and the situations stuck with her.

*So I guess the envy, not envious of what was happening, but the "why" about it had always been a part of who I am, digging into its root causes. Not just treating the symptom, what can we do to really remedy things?*

Ms. Johnson's first exposure to actual organizing began while she was an intern with a Redevelopment Commission and working with the Housing Department. She would be exposed to the inequalities of housing and became concerned about how to make things better.

*My internship year was with the redevelopment commission there at the time, and really piqued my interest in housing, and how to better our community for some of the things that I saw there. Things that were, I guess, somewhat evident here in Winston, but still some areas are a little more devastated, or maybe I was just becoming more aware of the inequities in some of the housing situations that occurred.*

After graduating from college, Ms. Johnson got involved in the community where her mother's family home was located. Before she moved back into the neighborhood, she would begin some organizing and raising the awareness levels of the residents of the neighborhood.

*Consequently, when I came back to Winston, got involved with the old neighborhood where we grew up, that was my mom's side of the family's home place, and went back into the community. But prior to actually relocating to the house, I tried to get the community organized to do some things to improve the conditions.*

The neighborhood was comprised of mostly elderly homeowners; the plans that were being developed for the neighborhood were not advantageous to the residents. This move and its changes would be beneficial to the city but certainly not to these residents.

There was a redevelopment plan in place that would have eliminated the street that we lived on. But, there were a number of elderly homeowners there who may have had some recoup of dollars from redevelopment, but would not have been enough to actually be beneficial for.

With what she had learned as an intern with the redevelopment commission, she was able to use those skills to rally the residents, write grants to improve the homes in the neighborhood, and to make sure that they were able to reap the benefits of the changes. They would make their own decisions.

*So we fought city hall, and kind of said “yes,” and because our street was paved, and the street behind was not. There were really more unstable, substandard houses on the streets behind us, so we fought and were able to keep our street within the redevelopment reconditioning rehab piece, and got those seniors eligible for grants that would make their houses work.*

The community would have to fight the city for ten years before the whole community would benefit from this hard work. Ms. Johnson adds that “It took probably 10 years for the whole community to come together, but working with the neighborhood association we made it work.” They would have to give a little and demand a lot to get what they needed and wanted.

It wasn’t an easy task, for they just kind of wanted to take it all and redo, but we went on and worked with the city in trying to make sure that the areas that were taken away were up-fitted, that our houses were put back online with what the new structures were, and that the community was going to blend together.

She would become the president of the community association and would take on developing not only her community but other communities around their area.

I served as the president of that organization, East Winston Restoration for a while, but there again, the focus is what I call human development. Not just community development for, you’ve got to look at what’s going on in the neighborhoods, within the neighborhood, the peripheral of the neighborhood, and then the more global pieces to see how they all can interact.

The housing and the nearby park in community around this area would be named Harambee to represent the changes that were happening in the community. Harambee literally means “all pull together” in Swahili. The community had pulled together and was working hard to make sure that positive things were happening.

*Our park on 14th Street was where we were trying to come up with a name for the area and the housing community there. We called it Harambee, which I suggested because it was a community pulling itself back together with the neighborhood association working. That's where I saw us because we were coming together to do the kinds of things we wanted to see on the human development side.*

During this time, Ms. Johnson began to do some work with the city. She was involved with the city council sitting through housing and public works meetings. She would be there especially during the budget time and would take the budget and scrutinize how it would affect her community.

*I did a lot of work with the council. I sat through meetings, there are housing meetings and public works meetings in particular. When it came time for budget, you would have thought I was a council member beforehand, because I took the budget, literally took the whole budget, both the basic budget plus the capital improvement budget, and went through it page by page to see how it was going to affect our community. Then we go to their Finance Committee meetings before the council, and for the council to say, these are things we need for our community.*

This involvement with the council before she actually became a member helped her a great deal later as a council member. She saw this as an important way to help her community.

*That was before my days on council, so when I got the council and I still do that, even this year, I took the budget book and say, because you know, you learn through repetition, and old habits are hard to break. You do what you need to do for the community.*

Ms. Johnson worked with the Housing Department at the request of the mayor. By networking, she would later benefit from the relationships that she developed.

*There's got to be some balance between all of those,* and I eventually worked on the city's housing committee at the request of then Mayor. I worked a lot with the department so when I ran for council, I knew half of the staff already in place because of being out in the community and doing some work out there.

Mrs. Woodruff, a senior commissioner and grassroots organizer, was a very positive force in Ms. Johnson's political career.

One of the senior commissioners who is now deceased, Mrs. Woodruff, asked when she learned that the city council member/alderman at that time was not going to run any longer, she says, "All right, it's your time."

As she was telling about the community work she had done, Ms. Johnson began to share more information about her parents. It was interesting to hear her talk about the accomplishments of her parents but it was a bit confusing to me why she did not include them in the beginning as the other storytellers had.

*My dad worked for Reynolds. Both of my parents were high school graduates, which I guess for some, and learning now that that was probably not the norm, but for both of them to have been high school graduates, my dad was in the military. So there again, a sense of community within the household has manifested itself outside the home.*

I thought this silence about her parents a very interesting aspect to *silence* and *selectivity*. Her interview was conducted in her mother's house and she introduced me to her mother but yet they were not an important part to her story. She doesn't mention any siblings but she does refer to a niece. When talking about her mother going to school she refers to "we" as if there was someone else besides her.

My mom graduated from high school, then Russell's Ann McLain's Business School. *And, then seeing my mom, she went back to school after we were old enough to do homework together, which was encouraging for us to do so.* I always had a strong interest in math and science, and even as far back as three years ago. As my niece was doing Algebra II, it's like Aunt Rosa helped me with this.

She talked about being a single mother. It was very interesting to listen to her as she explains why she gave her son his name. There was much expectation from the family for him to be a success.

*Single parenting I have done it. And, I think that some of the strength that he has is because of the pushing and family pushing to say "Be the best that you can be." The tagging of being a single mom wasn't significant to me. It was that I have a son, and we're going to raise him, and he's going to be a great one. And oftentimes when folk ask, well why did you decide to name him Frederick? I said, well, as I was looking at names, Frederick meant great. And that's what I wanted him to be, I wanted him to be great.*

Ms. Johnson shared the same concern and prayer that all mothers have following the birth of their child: we give our children to God and ask Him to help us do our best in raising our son or daughter.

*My prayer when he was born was that, Lord, give me the opportunity to see him in an adult situation where he can handle himself and not have to be dependent -- not that I didn't think family would take care of him, but I wanted him to be as independent.*

I had heard this prayer by so many mothers and after those children reach adulthood, the prayer changes. I could hear universal prayers of other women.

*When he got to be 21, my prayer changed. Because it's like, okay, Lord, you've fulfilled that for me, but now give me the strength to go on and do some of the other things that we want to do. And He's granted that, so yeah.*

As I listened to Ms. Johnson, I realized that she revealed her whole life in fifteen minutes. I knew there had to be more to her life than this mere snapshot. Ms. Johnson minimized the extent of all she had accomplished in a short time like so many of her peers. I reiterated "Tell me your life story." She continued to add events that shaped who she was. As a social worker, she made great strides as the second Black person to be hired in the Social Work Department at Baptist Hospital.

*Then they had an opening in the Social Work Department, and when I went to Baptist, they did not have a Social Work Department, to give you a little history there; and I applied and got the job. I was the second Black hired in the department after the department had been maybe 2 to 2-1/2 years old.*

Her strong interest in math and science led her to work as a substitute teacher and a respiratory care technician. Eventually, she would become a supervisor in that Health Department. However, her priority as a parent forced her to take a day-job even though it meant a reduction in salary.

*But also while it was a reduction in salary for me, it was better because at that point in time Frederick was in school, and to call home and check to see if he had done homework, it was going to give me the opportunity to work days. My days were long, we still did some of the things we needed to do to make it happen, but it gave me the opportunity to come home and be with him in the afternoons and do homework, and then get involved with the sports pieces.*

To spend more time with her son, she got involved with his sports organizations with leadership positions and pulling families together.

He went from tennis to football to baseball, off during the summers. *I eventually wound up being the president of the tiny Vikings Pop Warner organization.* Here again, which helped to pull kids and families together in a positive way.

She would be working with organizations while her son was involved in sports.

Did the same thing with him when he went to high school for Sara Lee, which is now Hanes brands. He had started there for his academic team, and he was on that academic team. So very supportive of him and others trying to make sure that they got the support that they needed from the community from businesses. I may have had some dealings with individuals that we could network with to help strengthen programs that they were doing.

However, Ms. Johnson continued working to make positive changes even after her son left sports.

*When I left the organization, they were in the Black.* So, just kind of working together, helping folk understand they need to sacrifice because these are our kids, making sure they were scholastically and athletically where they needed to be. *But, it took me two years to get out of that system after Frederick had left.*

During the interview, Ms. Johnson would continue to express that she was not comfortable talking about herself. No one ever asked her to tell anything about herself. Yet, her accomplishments were many. While on the city council in Winston-Salem from 1993 to 2009, she served on a number of committees including the Public Works Committee, the Community Housing Committee, and the Finance Committee. For the last eight years on the council, she was the chairperson for the Public Works Committee. Dr. Virginia Newell and Mrs. Evelyn Terry also were city council members in their respective communities where they honed their organizational skills to address various issues in their wards. The first issue facing her as a new councilwoman was the closing of

the only Black cemetery owned by city government. The first time the issue was brought before the city council when she was serving, she was able to fight and save the cemetery.

*One of the things that happened when I first went on council was the Evergreen Cemetery, potentially the city relinquishing its responsibility to keep it open as a public cemetery. I said to the committee members, "Why do you want to close the cemetery?" They replied that "It's not making money for us." And it's like, well, it's there, and what do you expect people to do to be buried? I pushed that, and we were able to salvage it. The only one that was owned by the city of Winston-Salem was based upon some dollars that came to it from the West Side Foundation.*

The issue would rise again several years later. Ms. Johnson went to the community to get them involved in saving the cemetery. She worked with other neighborhood organizations and groups to work together for this cause.

Several years ago, though, there was another big push to close the cemetery. And what we did at that point was got the community involved, primarily through the Black Leadership Roundtable and other groups.

The community got involved and took ownership of the issue. Not only were they able to save the cemetery, but were able to get the city to regenerate a perpetual fund and to make it an enterprise fund. Community participation was the key.

*But got the community engaged, and what we did was redid the way the perpetual fund was done and made it become an enterprise fund for the city. It is doing well, purchased additional land, and it's because of being at the table at the right time, and then getting the community involved.*

Ms. Johnson's terms on the council were spent making sure that the community was informed and connected to issues that were essential to them. She believed that information should be shared to make sure that the community was engaged at all time. When issues or problems would arise, she worked close enough with the community to be informed and responsive. She saw her place on the council as being the person who could take needed information and translate it for the community to use.

*Lots of times I find we get information, we know information, and things happen that are detrimental. But, that could have been resolved earlier if someone had taken the time to really study it and get the community engaged, and that's not just the Black community: it's Black/White community, anybody who has some sympathies toward a particular situation.*

While on the council, she made many advances to improve her community but always with the help of the community. She had to fight the stigma that was related to certain communities she represented and find ways to get people to understand that change was needed.

*But, yet we are still fighting the traditional stigma that—this is East/West thing. And even our own African-American brothers and sisters who have not been, or who have never lived in the community, feel like it is less than everybody else. And, finding ways for our community to understand that things are changing and you need to come and look. How do we continue to break the barrier if you're going to continue to have the same type of attitude that you had before? So community-wise, it's hard trying to do that.*

One of the most interesting things that I found with listening to her story is her level of community commitment. Ms. Johnson left her community as a young woman to

complete her college education. Yet, she was never far from home spiritually. She came back to the community that she grew up in to make positive changes.

We've done all kinds of good things like I've talked about, like the area where my maternal grandmother's home, where I stayed for about 25 years as an adult. That whole area is totally changed. I feel like I had a significant part in making that happen.

She sees that there is still a need to change perception of the community that she has fought so hard to improve and transform. Her fight for change has given her the opportunity to use her social work skills, her organizing skills, and her leadership skills to pool together again the sense of community to make it happen.

*I was able to pull in social work skills, and social work agency knowledge-based information to help our city staff and others to pool together again the sense of community to make it happen.*

Her time on the council was important to her to represent her ward to gain equitable treatment for residents.

*Being on council is more than just coming to meetings the first and third Mondays, and coming to community meetings, going to committee meetings, and just doing the fluffy things, the ribbon cuttings. You've got to take the time to really sit, read, and analyze what's going on.*

*My interest in the council, the work I was doing was not because I was interested in ever running for council. That was not my goal. I just want to see us have a better place. Where I live, I want it better. I want it to be like—I want you to think of it historically.*

What was interesting about listening to her was this sense of history and community connection that she brought to the interview. Mrs. Evelyn Terry had talked

about Winston-Salem and brought some of the history about Black Winston-Salem. Ms. Johnson was able to bring the history to a different level because she never left her hometown. She has spent her whole life learning about her city and fighting for her community.

*And if you're not from the community, and it's not that you have to be born, bred, nurtured, and want to be one of our leaders. That's not the issue at all. But, if you don't go back and study and understand how things occurred in our community, then you don't know.*

Her connection with the history of the city and the things that happened (or didn't happen) to transform her community and city into what it was (and is) are key to understanding her and her involvement.

*So it's—part of that organizing is history telling. Some people don't want to hear the history, but in order for you to go forth, you've got to tell the history and then move on, but you've got to be able to acknowledge and tell the history as we do.*

Although the other women talked about their contribution in their community, there was more passion from Ms. Johnson which was more intense than from any of the other women. When she talked about being an organizer and organizing in the community, there was a different perspective of her involvement.

*I don't know how people define the organizer, because I know we talked earlier about not the woman's perspective not being whole, because we're out there kind of pushing the men because they were you know, the head of the house. That's who God gave all the power to. They have diminutive control. I'm being ugly now. But, it's that you want to see them go forth.*

Listening to her talk about what she saw as the reason some people would get involved with organizing brought a broader understanding of organizing.

It's almost like the community 100 years ago, if you had one or two Blacks who were educated, it was probably the teacher in the church which was the minister. *And you'd listen to the minister because you didn't have the wisdom to discern and read for yourself, or what you were able to learn and read for yourself, you were able then to become on your own.* So, we have been able to kind of push through that.

When she talked about people working and doing things in their community and their stories not being heard and told, I realized that this woman who told me that she didn't have a lot to say really had a great deal to contribute. She touched on many key points that I had read about community organizing and involvement.

. . . and now you do have the histories of those women who were out there, who serviced Winston, and there are a whole lot of folk, and men included. But you have the leadership, whoever the leadership is being at the top of the tier, not realizing or acknowledging, telling the story that there were other people who were out there too whose stories have not been told. *Those things won't ever get into the lights, but they were out there pushing, organizing, activating, whichever you want to term them to be.*

She knows every person who is out there working and their community and making changes is being recognized. But they are there and still working just as hard now as ever before.

You know, it's not all the Al Sharptons of the world. It's others who have been out there. And you know he talks about better community activists. It's whatever—*it's however internalizes the definition.* But like I say, *I'm just a nosy person, and I just want to see things better for God's creatures.*

Two people that she talked about a great deal in her interview were two well-known Black women grassroots organizers. Dr. Virginia Newell and Mrs. Evelyn Terry had mentioned these women in their interviews. From Ms. Johnson's and Mrs. Evelyn Terry's interviews, I learned that the women were very influential and important in organizing and creating huge changes in Winston-Salem and the county. What was remarkable about talking to all the women from Winston-Salem was that when they talked about these two women as if they were living. It was later through Ms. Johnson that I learned that they both had been dead for years. It was their influence over these women and their community that was amazing to me. These two women created such a legacy that Dr. Virginia Newell, Mrs. Evelyn Terry and Ms. Johnson would be the beneficiaries of it.

*Even if I had been suggested if you only have three people, and they say you could only do three and you said I want you, I would say "no" if Mabel Woodruff and Velma Hopkins were not on that list. Then no I don't need to be on that list. But we are by-products of them.*

From them, I found out that Mrs. Woodruff was not only a grassroots organizer but a County Commissioner as well. She ran and won the commissioner race when it was hard for Blacks to win in the county. According to Ms. Johnson, Mrs. Woodruff was able "to break the barriers for some of the folk out in the county, and was able to garner some kind of support."

*But she is just a down-to-earth person. Like we were sitting here talking, and she would share her wisdom, share her experiences, and just kind of talk about what we need to do. And for you young folk, the very first committee I served on for*

the county, which was the historical properties commission, she asked me to serve on.

Ms. Hopkins was a community organizer who helped to bring the union to Reynolds. She lost her job because of her work but she was able to “bring in the need for equality for women and for Blacks back in the 1920s.” Ms. Johnson stated that both of these women were instrumental in encouraging young people to get involved in local politics. They would nurture the young people.

*They didn't tell you to go do it, they walked along with you and still gave you—and that was the beauty, they still gave you the latitude to expand with what you wanted to do. They made suggestions, and you could really have a conversation, as opposed to being a dictatorship. But at the same time they were able to impart wisdom, share, and then go together. They would push you sometimes, sometimes you are there, and they will be here, or vice versa. But that interchange, that interpersonal relationship was always in place.*

Ms. Johnson is no longer a councilperson but she is still very active in her community and still involved with organizing work. She is currently the president of our Missionary Department, and a special worker for Forsyth County Missionary Union. She works with our United Way Steering Committee at the hospital with the African-American Leadership Initiative.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Only the Black woman can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and with suing or special patronage, then and there the whole . . . race enters with me.” (Anna Julia Cooper, 1892)

As I began my journey to receive a PhD, I thought of a number of topics I could have chosen to research. I thought about a study of teen mothers, a study of the origin of Black public libraries and their connection to Black colleges and universities, or a study of people who had strokes and their ability to return to “normalcy.” None of these captured my heart. I know as a storyteller that in order for a story to become yours and to be effective with an audience you have to take ownership of the story and make it become part of you. Although all of these topics were affected my lives, none made we want to really spend time with it and make it truly a part of my life.

I thought about what events in my life had the greatest impact on it, what had created the biggest change in my life, and what helped to make me the person I am today. Although surviving two strokes did create major changes in my life and lifestyle, it was my work with Black women in poor communities that stood out as the greatest life changing event in my life. My journey to find evidence about the power of Black women and their ability to change their families and homes, their lives, and their communities resonated as the one piece of research I was willing to spend a great amount time wit

### **Finding My Research**

The above quote by Dr. Cooper is powerful when you think about and speak of Black women. It has special meaning for my study of Black women because of the understanding of the power of Black women to change lives. For generations, Black women have had to confront slavery, poverty, social policies, racial and sexual discrimination, and being relegated to the status of being a “second class citizen.” They have been forced to fight for their families and homes, their children, their communities, and their images. From slavery until today, Black women have had to struggle against class, race, and gender, to find their place in this society. They have shed blood, sweat, and tears as they have watched their husband and children ripped from their arms, their images destroyed and distorted, and being regulated to economic disadvantage. Out of these stereotypes and disadvantages has emerged a strong activism among Black women.

Black women have used the negative aspects of their lives to emerge as activists for their race and gender and as advocates for abolitionist movements, for civil rights and freedom movements, for feminist movements, and for public housing and welfare reform. As I began to research my topic, I became very aware of a number of points about Black women and their involvement in activism. For a number of years, I didn't think there wasn't much written about the work of women in their communities. I found a number of articles, papers, and books about the work of Black women in their community. My introduction to the history Black women's club movement was an eye-opening piece of research. To read about Black club women by Lerner (1974) made me realize how uninformed I was about the activism of Black women in this country.

I have to admit that my research did not start there; it started backwards. My research started with reading about the freedom struggle. I was frustrated by the lack of information about women in the struggle. I knew there were women who were involved in the struggle and there were more women involved than Rosa Parks. Her name, Fannie Lou Hamer, and a few others were the only names that I could associate with the struggle. As my knowledge expanded about other Black women in the struggle, so did my frustration. I needed to know why there wasn't more public knowledge about the contributions of the women in the struggle. I decided that I wanted to do my research on women who were involved in the freedom struggle in North Carolina, particularly the Greensboro area. I knew that a number of these women were still alive and would probably be willing to tell their stories about their involvement. As I searched for them, I realized that I would need a way to identify them. How and who could help me to identify them? What were these women doing now that the freedom struggle was over? What happens to women who were very active in their community and who were making changes happen not only locally but, in some cases, nationally? Did they just stop being involved or did they shift their involvement to something new?

To answer these questions, I looked at my own community at the women who were currently involved in the community. Were any of these women ever involved in the freedom struggle? As I began to work in poor communities with Black women and as I began to learn more about my own activism, I started to work with women from other organizations and agencies who had been very involved in the freedom struggle. They had marched and demonstrated, had been involved and trained at the Highlander Center,

and they were very active in making changes in the communities where they lived and worked. As I continued to work with these women and as they trained me in the skill of participatory learning, community empowerment, and social justice, I realized that these women were using the skills they have learned from their experience of community building in the 1960's and 1970's. They were using those same skills to deal with issues of the late 1980's and 1990's. But who knew about these women; and who was telling their stories?

### **The Search**

After working with these wonderful women, I started looking for stories told by Black women and their experience in the freedom struggle. I was surprised to find a number of books by C. S. Brown (1990), Crawford et al. (1993), and Robnett (1997). These books began to introduce me to the stories of Black women and the freedom struggle. As I worked more with Black women in the various poor communities in Greensboro and I began to see and read more books and articles about the involvement of Black women and their activism. This search would satisfy my need to read about Black women but then questions were formed about women in *my* community who made a contribution. I was hearing and reading about the civil rights experience and activism of Black men in North Carolina including Greensboro and surrounding area, but what about the women? Where were their voices and stories? I found a book by Christina Greene (2005) that discussed the involvement of Black women and the freedom movement in Durham but nothing about the Greensboro area.

There were books written (Wolff, 1970; Chafe, 1980; Sieber, 1995) about the freedom movement and struggle in Greensboro, Guilford County, and other Triad cities, but nothing was mentioned or discussed about the participation of Black women in the struggle. I decided that in order to hear their stories about their activism and any participation in the freedom movement, I would have to do the research. I began to search for Black women and after finding ones who were willing to tell their stories, I began my study. I was searching for particular things that I wanted to hear. I learned that to hear their stories, narrative research would be the best method to collect them. As I began to understand narrative research and its methodology, I also began to be aware that I was not hearing anything about the freedom struggles or anything else I had perceived in my mind.

### **Journey to Understanding**

The seven women I interviewed for this study was from Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina; the Triad. The journey that I took with these women would not only answer questions for me but would also open a door of understanding that I did not know existed. These women were selected for this study because of their willingness to share their stories and because of their contributions to their communities.

Black women have participated in change in their communities for generations. The women I interviewed for this study came from varied backgrounds but all ended in the same place; fighting for social justice and “wanting to see justice roll down like righteousness.” (Mrs. Terry, 2011) Black women’s activism has moved from narrow areas of traditional women’s groups such as religious groups and social gatherings to

more active areas of the welfare rights, public housing, employment, and politics (West, 1990; Tait, 1999; Ross, 2003 & Williams 2004). Books and studies (Robnett, 1997; Rodriguez, 1998; Springer, 1999; Collins, 2000; Coddon, 2004) have shown that Black women's participation in political and social movements have taken a backseat to the involvement of Black men in the same arena. The stories of these seven women have helped to create a framework of activism of Black women in the Triad area that has not been recognized.

### **Common Themes and Patterns**

The analysis of the women's stories reflects common themes and patterns of construction. As I listened to their stories and the way they approached their stories, I found that they did not all seem to tell the same story. It was only after reading the transcribed texts and unraveling the words was I able to find the common threads. The threads were (1) family and family influences, (2) church influences, (3) education and achievements, (4) civil rights and (5) social justice and their activism.

#### **Family and Family Influences**

Most of the stories by the women in this study began with their family and their influences. Their parents and family members were the biggest and most important influence in their lives. It was through their families that they learned to deal with the adversities that confronted them as Blacks in this country. Some lessons were easy to learn but others left an unforgettable mark on them and helped to shape them into whom they are today. These women grew up during the time of Jim Crow laws and segregation. Schools, water fountains, restaurants, transportation, theaters, and even local customs

were segregated and Blacks were restricted to where they could live, shopped and work. Juan Williams (1987) notes that “under the Jim Crow of life of way . . . Blacks were expected to tip their hats when they walked past Whites, but Whites did not have to remove their hats even if they entered a Black family’s home.” In some states, Blacks and Whites were prohibited from looking out the same window. This was the time that the women of this study spoke of in their interviews. Growing up as Black women during this time meant that their parents tried to shield their children from the harshness of racism. They worked hard to teach their children how to feel good about themselves. They made sure that when the children had to deal with racism, they would be equipped to deal with the positive and negative aspects of society.

Although the women talked about the influence of their fathers on their lives, it was always the mother who made things happen for the family and kept the family together. It was through the strength, sacrifices, and struggles of the mother that the family was able to survive and the children able to move forward and be successful.

### **Church Influences**

The church played an important role in the lives of the women in the study. This is where the lives of some of the women were shaped and their activism began to take hold. Some of the women were explicit about their connection to the church; others talked about God’s plans and direction for their lives. The church was a sanctuary from racial oppression and segregation. It is where people could revive their hearts, their spirit, and their lives. The church was also the place where Blacks could create the connection between the family and the community. Katie Cannon (1985) says that the Black church

“was the only place outside the home where Blacks could express themselves freely and take independent action. The church was the heart, center, and basic organization of Black life.”

All of the women had roots in the Black church. Mrs. Oliver was the only participant who constantly talked about the connection she has with God. The point that always stayed with me about Mrs. Oliver is her talk about God leading her life. Everything she did, every move she made, she gave credit to God. None of the other women talked about God in the same manner as Mrs. Oliver. Ms. Johnson talked a great deal about her involvement with the church but not her relationship with God. Mrs. Terry is a minister's wife and she made metaphorical references to the work that she and her husband have done in the community. Mrs. Jeffries discussed her involvement in the church as it relates to activities in the church. She sings on the church choir, ministers to other members of the congregation, and participates in other church activities and ministries.

### **Education and Segregation**

Black women are in a unique position when they fight for change in their community. Not only do they have to deal with racism which is prominent in their lives but they also have to deal with being a woman. In my research, a number of the writers and authors (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1995; Roberts, 1995) talked about the triple threat of race, class, and gender. In my interviews, Ms. Johnson was specific about the lack of information about Black women. With the other women, their stories also dealt with the problems and issues of their community as associated to race, gender, and class, if class is

defined as economic discrepancies. Their concerns were about the collective well-being of their community. Concerns about poor housing, homelessness, education of the community children, well-being of the elderly, and dealing with other deficits were among the issues they brought to the forefront.

Under the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, services, facilities and public accommodations could be separated by race, if the quality of each group's public facilities was equal. Blacks were entitled to receive the same public services and accommodations such as bathrooms, transportation, and water fountains. The "separate but equal" doctrine was extended to the public schools in *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* in 1899. According to Williams (1987), in 1935 all Jim Crow states had separate schools from elementary all the way up through colleges and graduate schools.

This decision by the United States Supreme Court became the law of the land and all schools were segregated until the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this decision, the Supreme Court outlawed segregated public education facilities for Blacks and Whites at the state level. All of the women of this study were affected by the *Cumming* decision. Although, they benefited from the Brown decision, none of the women made an obvious connection to either of these decisions.

The women talked about education being important, how it affected them, and how education helped to improve their lives. Their parents and other relatives were motivators and instilled in them the need for education. Some did regret that they did not take full advantage of their education opportunities but they were able to make sure their

children did. Education took the form of Catholic parochial schools, home-schooling, or public education. All of the women knew that whatever form they received, education meant a chance at a better life. Segregation in schools meant that parents had to work hard to make sure their children received a quality education even if it meant sending their children away to other relatives. Dr. Newell followed the footsteps of older siblings and lived with other relatives in order to obtain a better education. Others pursued education after high school in different methods of learning.

### **Does Education Matter in Activism?**

The educational background of these women was a point that was brought out by some of the women I interviewed. Four of the women I interviewed did not have college degrees. One of the interesting points to me about the women from Greensboro and High Point was their need to discuss their educational levels. In discussing their work, they made a point that although they did not go to college, what they did was as valuable as anyone who had a college degree.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell in two occasions in her interview pointed out that although she didn't have a college degree she was able to make a contribution. Both Mrs. Jeffries and Mrs. Nettie wanted to go to college but the opportunity was not there. Mrs. Nettie stated that she choose another path because, according to her, she didn't listen to the lessons of her mother. For Mrs. Jeffries, the desire and hope was there but family finances prevented her from pursuing a college degree. She would later go to a business college and get a secretarial degree after the birth of her children.

Naples (1998) discusses the subject of educational level of women who do community work in her book. The women who she interviewed felt that their lack of education prevented them from being taken seriously in their work in their community when working with outside agencies. The women in her study felt that they were discriminated against because of their lack of education. What she points out is that although these women did not have education beyond high school, they were able to advance in their community work career.

The women in my study from Greensboro and High Point also advanced in their community work career without a formal college education. Mrs. Cuthrell was the first Black person to hold positions in a number of jobs. She currently works for a local Black university. Although she was hired as an administrative assistant, her work background and her talents have been discovered and she has been awarded with more responsibilities which include acting as a consultant. Mrs. Nettie took her training and was able to serve as a bridge leader. She went through some of the best organizing training in the country and is now training others.

Mrs. Jeffries and Mrs. Mary Oliver started an educational program for preschool children in their public housing community. This program expanded to include an afterschool program. Although they have both left that community, they continue to be involved in other issues in the city. Mrs. Jeffries is involved with the school system and has served as a volunteer. Mrs. Mary Oliver is involved in her church and making differences in the lives of young mothers in her neighborhood and church. Although they

did not receive a college education, all of their children did. They worked hard to make sure their children received the college education they did not.

### **Black Women and Politics**

The three women from Winston-Salem are college-educated. Dr. Virginia Newell has a doctorate degree, Mrs. Evelyn Terry has a master's degree and Ms. Johnson has a bachelor's degree. If Ms. Johnson has a degree beyond college, it was not mentioned in her story. According to their stories, it was expected by their families that they would go to college. The women did not receive their degrees from the colleges in their hometown. They would leave to pursue their education and other work in other cities and then later come back and make their mark on their hometown. Ms. Johnson was the only one of the women who left for college and returned immediately to begin her community activism. All of these women served in the political arena in Winston-Salem on the city council. Mrs. Evelyn Terry *and* her husband both served on the city council.

Before they got involved with politics in Winston-Salem, they worked in various positions that would later lead them into their political careers. Dr. Newell's career was with academia. Her political career began while she was living in Raleigh and her husband suggested that she should run for the Board of Education. She would move to Winston-Salem and later serve on the Board of Alderman for sixteen years.

Mrs. Terry became politically active when she met "two giants in this community." These women were two of the most active community organizers in Winston-Salem at that time and were very influential in getting young Blacks involved in the city and county politics. Ms. Johnson got involved in politics with the help of these

same women. She was involved in the city council as a private citizen before she thought about running for an office. She would attend council meetings and get involved with the council in other ways.

As I analyzed the interviews of these women who were involved and had gotten involved in politics, I wondered why Black women would get involved in politics. These women were activists in their communities and were making differences. Changes were happening through their work. Was the political arena another form of activism? Elice E. Rogers (2005) examined the politics of Black political leaders, especially those of Black women. She looked at how learning experiences of Black women influence their leadership development. From this study she discovered that the politics of Black women was constructed differently than that of mainstream politics. She coined the term of this type of politics, *Afritics*. According to her, *Afritics* is an Africentric understanding of politics.

*Afritics is an African-centered perspective of politics and operates as a defining construct in which people are viewed in an existential context as being participatory, collective, subjective agents in history who have been and continue to be manipulated by the Western concepts of the political process.*

This Africentric viewpoint takes a world and cultural view looking through multiple lenses as it examines and reconstruct the political values of Western concepts. According to Rogers (2005), “*Afritics* is the recognition that there exist two worlds: a White World, which is the home of politics, and a Black World, where the women in this study learned from their experiences acquired in family, church, and community how to use *Afritics* and move from margin to center.”

The involvement of the women in Winston-Salem came from different community experiences but the results were the same; serving their community through the city council. Dr. Virginia Newell's experience was mainly from an academic and community view. Most of her work was in an academic setting but she was also very involved in organizations that were known for their community involvement. Mrs. Terry's experience was mainly as a human-service worker. According to Naples (1998), these were workers who were hired by the state to work in communities under community action programs (CAP). They were there to assist and train community residents in creating, designing, directing and staffing newly created paid positions in their community. These positions were "casework, health, education, and childcare aides as well as the more general position of community worker." (Naples, 1998)

Mrs. Evelyn Terry participation in social movements in Philadelphia could also be argued as the reason she became so involved in her hometown. Working as a human service worker exposed her to the vast needs and problems in her hometown, and the lack of resources and attention being given to them. Ms. Johnson's experience was that of a grassroots organizer. After returning home from college, she became involved in issues that were affecting her city and particularly her neighborhood. These experiences awaken their awareness of the needs of their communities. Most White politicians were not concerned about what was going on in the Black communities; even the Black male politicians were not effective. From my understanding of these women in Winston-Salem and other Black women politicians, their understanding of the needs of the Black community is different from those of other politicians even White women. Deborah King

(1990) (as cited in Rogers) discusses how the awareness of multiple consciousness affect the politics and the interaction Black women have to their world.

Black women have long recognized the special circumstances of our lives in the U.S., the commonalities that we share with all women, as well as the bonds that connect us to the men of our race. We have also recognized that the interactive oppressions that circumscribe our lives provide a distinctive content for Black womanhood. (King, 1990)

Black women bring to the political table a strong affiliation with their community. They are the ones who are not only speaking for their families and community as their constituents but they are speaking for all people in the city or county. Dr. Newell made such a point when she talked about her service as a councilwoman. “That’s what I did. I served the White, I served the Black, I served the older people, and I served the children. I was on with the senior citizens. I got them things that they did not have. I supported all of their legislation.” (Dr. Newell, 2005)

In the interviews, the politically aware women talked about the oppression, race, and classism in their wards. The conditions of some of the communities were appalling; poor housing, substandard sewage systems, poor education opportunities for children and adults, and the lack good healthcare. These women fought to improve the conditions. They were able to use their political power to speak for the powerless. None of the women are currently serving as an alderman but they are still involved in their communities working to improve conditions for everyone.

### **Community Activist, Community Organizer, or Just Nosy**

This study has been a very interesting and soul searching journey for me. I have met some of the most wonderful and fascinating women in my life. Although I think of myself as a *community activist*, I assumed that the women I would interview for their stories would identify themselves the same way. Never did I realize that I would learn some much from such enchanting and supportive women.

In my search for women to interview, I was lucky to have worked with or sat on committees with the women I interviewed from Greensboro. When I asked around for Black women who were *community activists* to interview for my study their names were the ones that others told me I needed to interview. When I asked people in High Point for names, most wanted to know what was a *community activist*. After I explained to them my definition of a *community activist*, they would then tell me they didn't know of any and if they did, the women did not meet my criteria. I would finally get a name and would be able to interview her but no other names would be shared. Ironically, a few months ago, one of the prominent Black businesswomen of High Point died. After her death, I was told that I should have interviewed her because she was a notable activist in the community. I knew her as a very shrewd business woman but I did not know of her involvement in the community. Neither her name nor her activism came up when I was searching for someone to interview for my study.

As I searched for women to interview from Winston-Salem, I approached a number of people who I knew from Winston-Salem but they could not think of anyone who was living. I was lucky to see a former classmate from the ELC department and she

gave me the name of three women who could probably help me find Black women to interview. When I called one of the names given to me, I was told that she did not know “any *community activists* but she knew some *community organizers*.” Not wanting to show ignorance, I asked her to give me the names of women I could interview. I was given five names and three of the women agreed to meet with me and tell me their stories.

The conversation I had with my source from Winston-Salem created a question for me. What is the difference between an *activist* and an *organizer*? I had used the terms interchangeably and was thinking they were the same. It was the first time that I really began to search to find out the difference. As I began my interview with the women, I became very aware of how they would identify themselves as they talked about their work. Some of the women made a simple statement about their activism and others explained how they defined their work.

In researching the definition of activism or organizing, Blanchard (2011) describes an organizer as “an activist who calls others to join them in action, and coordinates that energy into a strategic series of steps using a variety of tools.” According to Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Black women activism goes beyond this definition. Black women activism is a form of resistance. Without understanding the forms of oppression that women face, a definition of activism for Black women cannot be defined from the “structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power” (p. 203). In order to understand the activism of Black women, it was very important for the women to define how they would define their activism.

Dr. Newell described herself as *an activist and organizer*. She stated that some people would *organize* but they did not believe in carrying things out. She saw herself as one who organize and then proceed to make sure the things were carried through. An *activist* is involved from the beginning to the end. In her description of being an organizer and an activist, she described a number of programs and businesses she organized and proceeded to see them to completion. She started a school for her children. She created and organized a math and science program, a center for children who parents were incarcerated, a Black-owned bank, a local shopping center, and the computer science department at a university.

Mrs. Nettie and Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell described themselves as *activists*. Mrs. Nettie's activism began with her children. This is a common place for Black women to begin their activism. Most of the time, their activism begins with an issue that was observed when their child begins school. Naples (1998) states that as parents get involved in programs at their children's school, they begin to see other problems that lead to a growing awareness that is brought to other parents. This awareness leads to a collective presence that leads to organizing programs to improve conditions in the school.

Mrs. Nettie's involvement with the school system led to her participation in organizing the community in other activities such as safe places for neighborhood children to play, better sidewalks and streets, better housing, and more police presence. Her activism led to her being trained and hired as a community worker. She has served as a *bridge leader*. She is currently training people in the city about racism and its affect on society.

Ms. Johnson defines herself as just being nosy. She goes on further to explain that she would identify herself as an *advocate*. For her an *advocate* has the qualities of both *an organizer and an activist*. The advocate pulls people together to share your message, or who has the same sentiment that you have. She feels that an activist has the passion but not just the organizing. Ms. Johnson thinks that trying to define what she and others do in the community, whether it is organizing or advocating is just a play on words. It makes little difference what it is called if that at the end of the day, you have the same history repeated and change not happening. She said the term does not matter because there have been a lot of people who have fought for change in the community but their stories have not been told nor have their work been acknowledged. Although their work is not known, they were still working, fighting, and have making big changes.

Mrs. Terry considers herself as *community organizer*. Her background has been organizing people around issues. She has worked to organize people teaching them their rights and responsibility as it applies to welfare rights; organize people about public housing rights; and organize voter's registration. Mrs. Oliver and Mrs. Jeffries did not describe themselves or their community activities in any particular terms.

### **Social Justice and Their Activism**

According to Charles Payne (1993), most women who joined freedom movements did so primarily because of religious belief or preexisting social networks of kinship and friendship. Many became involved because of their children or a sibling. Other reasons for their involvement were based on humiliating experience or treatment at the hands of Whites. (Payne, 1993) This was true for a number of the women who were interviewed.

Concern for children and their families served as the underpinning for struggles among Black women. The experience of community mothering has led many Black women to become community activists in order to make a better life for all the community's children (Collins, 1987).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to women activists in their community as "*community othermothers*." These women are the ones who's "relationships can be key in stimulating Black women's decisions to become social activists" (Collins, 2000).

Nancy Naples (1988) described *activist mothers* as those who become active because of their community work and "their experiences and acts of resistance defied the dominant definition of motherhood as emphasizing work performed within the private sphere of the family or in face-to-face-interaction with those in need." Naples (1993) also stated that *activist mothering* involved nurturing work for those outside one's kinship group but also involved actions that addressed the needs of their children and community. These actions included social activism.

Grassroots activism has been a large part of the changes that have taken place in the Black communities. Those who are involved in local needs worked to create better places for their families and others in their communities. They saw various needs and decided to act upon those needs. In the 1970's, many women in poor communities were hired for community-based programs but these women were already active as unpaid community workers in their neighborhoods (Naples, 1988). A number of women were hired because of their experience. This type of community work helped organizations and agencies to "bridge" their place in the community. Because the women lived in the

community, were active in their community and now were being paid for their work, organizations were able to use the newly hired resident community worker to serve as a *bridge* between organizations and agencies and the residents in the poor community. The worker could “interpret the community’s needs to the professional, nonindigenous staff and act as role models for their neighbors.” (Naples, 1988) Mrs. Nettie, Mrs. Jeffries and Mrs. Oliver could be described as bridges for their community.

### **Revelations, Understanding, Questions**

When I started this PhD program many years ago, I never knew that I would have so many changes in my life. After two strokes, I am finally near the end of this journey and along the way I have made some wonderful people, acquired new knowledge about Black women, communities, and social justice, and discovered some things about myself that I did not know.

The women for this study were the best part of the research. To hear their stories and to read their words have made this an experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life. Through their words, I have been able to understand the work that I have done in the various communities where I worked but also I have been able to understand what my mother was doing in her community. This study has required that I look inside myself to understand why Black women work so hard to create changes in their communities. The activism of Black women has a long history. It didn’t start with the Civil Rights movement or freedom struggle; it began with the first freedom actions during slavery. Black women have been fighting since they came on the first ship of indentured servants to make difference in the lives of their family and their communities. Had it not been for

the sacrifices of some many Black women before us, Black women would not have the ability to continue to fight for the survival of our race.

Black women have been beaten, murdered, raped, and dehumanized but they continue to raise above all the negativity they face to keep on fighting. Black women have to look at the world through multiple lenses, consciousness, and images that face us in our daily life. We have to be constantly aware that our experiences are affected by our family, church, community, and society. It is through understanding these multiple consciousness that we are able to move from being marginalized to being moved to the consciousness of others. History shows us that as Black women we do not and cannot move as an individual. We move as a race. When we move forward our race moves forward with us. From social clubs to women's clubs to churches to communities, Black women have looked to their own groups as means for advancing the race. They have depended on each other to provide safe spaces to "foster Black women's empowerment and to enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects." (Collins, 2000)

The seven women who I interviewed were strong, determined, and resolute in making differences in their communities. They used the power within their reach to advocate, promote, encourage, induce, and in a number of cases, force the issues of their cause to the forefront. Some felt they were moved totally by God, some were moved by the need for changes for their children and families, and others were moved by the conditions of their neighborhood. Whatever moved them to action; it created a transformation of the whole city.

When I started this study, I thought I would find a group of women who I could define as *grassroots community activists*. I went into these women homes thinking that it was going to be easy to listen to and analyze their stories and finish my dissertation. What I discovered was some many variations of how these women see their role in their community. I not only did not get a definition of what I thought a *grassroots community activist* was but I got many definitions of who these women were. These women were advocates, organizers, activists, trainers, leaders, trailblazers, teachers, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, wives, sisters, granddaughters and much, much more. For me they were sisters in the fight; the fight for change and equality. As I listened to these women tell their stories, I realized that on so many levels their story was also my story and the story of so many other Black women.

Where there any questions provoked in the interviews with these women? One thing that I would like to investigate is intergenerational activism. Dr. Virginia Newell, Mrs. Jeffries. Mrs. Mary Oliver and Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell talked about their children. They all mentioned that their children were involved in their communities but they did not elaborate on their level of involvement. I would be interested in finding out at what level, or if, their involvement was based on what they experienced with their mother's activism.

Mrs. Nancy Cuthrell's involvement with the William Penn Tigers Association would be a very interesting project for someone to pursue. The history of the Black high school and its connections to the Black community; the story of those who were involved

in the freedom movement in High Point; and the subsequent fight to save that piece of history is something that is needed to be documented.

Anna Julia Cooper's quote could have been said by any of the women I interviewed for this study. Dr. Cooper, a nineteenth century social activist, advocated for the educational, moral, and spiritual progress of Black women. She wanted Black women to be a force in the change for all Black communities. If she were to meet the women who were part of this study, she would be very pleased. The seven women have demonstrated that in order to make changes in our communities, we have to speak up and work together. But mainly they have shown that as they have fought and struggled to make changes in their individual community, they have made changes for the whole race.

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