

Anita Johnson

Interview at Concordia House 11/13/2020

(Some filler words removed for clarity)

Anita Johnson: My name is Anita D. Johnson. I am 73 years old. I am the storyteller. We are recording at Concordia House apartments.

Lynne Haynes: And my name is Lynne Haynes. I am 52 years old. I am the interviewer, and we are recording at Concordia House in Kirkwood, Missouri.

So Anita, just to get started, tell me a little bit about growing up in your family. What – Tell me about your family.

Anita: My family was pretty awesome. My parents had been married, at the time of my mother's passing, for 42 years, and the household I grew up in was very loving and supportive. And if I wanted to do something and it looked good to them, I could do it. So I had piano lessons; I had clarinet lessons. I did a lot of things. I sang in a choir, and my choir teacher thought I had a good voice and wanted private lessons for me, but my parents couldn't afford that 'cause they were already paying for piano and clarinet lessons. So that didn't happen.

But my household was a family that was very giving, and I was always taught that everybody was the same. In fact, it was such an obvious thing that it was never talked about. You know, my parents accepted everyone, and we had lived in a neighborhood where we had different races and backgrounds, and it was just natural for all of us. So I think I really had – It was a good beginning for me, to set a base for growing up. Because we see so many things now that could have affected me, had I not had that. That support, and that kind of just acceptance of people.

Lynne: Did you have brothers and sisters too in the mix? Or what did that look like?

A: I did have two older brothers that went into the service early on. So I didn't really – We didn't really have any communication too much with them. They went off and kind of did their own thing until much later. And we had really lost touch with each other, and then one of my brothers found me first, and so then they came to visit, and then came to stay with us, I mean, just on vacation. So that was good. So they're both passed away now. They were older. They were eight and nine years older than me. So one was in the Air Force and the other was in the Navy.

But as I grew up, and seeing that as I went through school, I was usually the only person of color in my class. Cedar Rapids had a very small percentage of people of color. Now, when I was in grade school I lived on the southeast side, which was just kind of the common man's side of town, you know? Working class people, good families, good neighborhoods. But some of my friends, who were of color also, went to that school. So I had a couple of classes early on in grade school, but only a couple, that had anyone like me. As soon as I got into what we call junior high, I was the only one for three years. Senior high, I was the only one in my class for three years.

[laughter] So I kind of grew up that way. So it didn't seem odd, but it's very obvious that you're the only person of color in your class. So I didn't have a phobia about it, because I always felt this way about myself, because my parents made me feel this way, is that I can do anything anyone else can. If it's something I want to do, I can try to do this. I don't have to be afraid to try it.

And just something that we talked about just briefly, about my parents. My mother was very fair. She was so fair people thought she was White if they didn't know her personally. And the background on that is we came from English roots, African roots, got Native American, and the English side, which was the Gibbon [?] side, from England, settled in Virginia. They were farmers. And when my parents – well, their parents – when they came to Cedar Rapids, when they got to Iowa, they – I don't know if they were farmers, I didn't really learn that much about them at that time, but that's how it started, in Virginia. And so a lot of people that came north settled in places like Iowa. So my mother grew up, and there were a lot of other kids her age like her, who looked White. And many of those kids ended up passing for White. They just made that decision. My mother was very much against this, you know. Because she knew her background was an interracial background, a multicultural background.

But I had an experience, and don't want to go off too far, but my mother had a heart condition from childhood. She got real sick. She missed a whole year of school. And so from time to time she had heart issues. My father would always come to see her after work, and just kind of worked out that way. He lived – he worked kind of close to home, so he would always go after work and have his time with her. When I got off work, then I would go see her. So this one time, this one particular time I'll never forget, I can see it all right now. I got to the hospital. My mother was a stewardess in the church. We're Methodist. And so she had kind of a way about her, you know. [laughter] Had a heart of gold, kind hearted as you please, but don't hurt her feelings. She'll never forget that. And if she sees that something isn't quite right about the way you're acting, she won't forget that either.

Well, I get to the hospital, and I walk in. I'm all happy to see mom. She's sitting up, she looks good, but she's got this look on her face. This tight lipped, cold eyed look. So I'm like, oh, hi mom, how you doing, but so she talked a little. I hardly got a chance to say hello to her. There was a lady in the bed across from her. The second I hit that door, she was asking me all kinds of questions of how I was related to this woman. Now all the time until my father showed up, see that's what started it. She thought she was White, until my father showed up. My mother had grey eyes. She didn't – She burned in the summer. She never turned brown, and she had auburn hair. So the woman was very happy with her being her roommate, until my father showed up.

Now, my father was my color. Okay? So she's already gotten a shock about that.

[laughter] I don't know what kind of questions she asked, [laughter] but by the time I showed up, my mother was like, okay. She'd had enough. So she wouldn't say anything. Not a word. But the lady is just – I can't even talk to my mom. She's just asking me one question after the other, and I couldn't understand why she kept asking me the same kind of questions. So finally I guess she got tired. She didn't want to

accept that I was this lady's daughter, but anyway. So after she finally goes quiet, but I don't think she ever took her eyes off me, my mom said, "She thinks I'm White." See mom knew, because she grew up like that. And as I mentioned before, a lot of people from Virginia – There was a lot of interracial marriages, and kids born during that time. My mother had – I was late in life. My mother was born in 1900. My father was born in 1899. I always loved to say that. It's so cool. [laughter] Different century, altogether. But there were a lot of stuff – And Virginia to be so, you know, stoic, the way it is now you wouldn't know it. You know, just the opposite. But at that time there was a lot, and it was accepted. It was common. So there were a lot of kids that looked like my mother, and so she was used to it, but she didn't like it. That was one thing she didn't care for. The whole family was very fair, but I looked like my dad.

But she did have an experience when my father and mother got married, and they were walking through the park one evening, and a police officer stopped them, and asked them different questions. Basically asked, wanted to know, well, who was she, who was he? And I don't know if she spoke or my dad – probably my mom – said, "This is my husband." And he said, "Well you don't look alike." [laughter] You know? Like I said, my father was my complexion, and my mother didn't look like that. And she said – my mother always had a smart answer – but she said, "We're not supposed to look alike. We're husband and wife, not brother and sister." You know my mom, she'd cut you off real quick. But anyway, so that's the way I grew up, understanding who I was, but also a little bit of our family history. But at the time I wish I'd known more, to ask more questions. But whenever the family came from different places then, I learned a lot as a child just listening to them. But anyway, so I grew up with – And I think that shaped a view of a lot of things in my life as far as race are concerned.

When I came to St. Louis it was culture shock for me. And when I first came, the first month, 'cause I was waiting for my severance check from the police department, I lived with my cousin, which is – Well, my aunt, my father's sister. And I think they had a daughter that was a few years older than me, and I guess I said something to her one day about, you know, I had never seen this many Black people before. Like, I really – I just wasn't used to it at all, and I must have said something. Anyway, she was offended. But I really – I can still remember my impression of that. And when you go through school, and everything in life practically, you don't... You see something new for the first time, it's like, you have questions about it. But I'm so glad that I had the foundation that I have, because I can look at things I think more objectively than maybe someone who had a different experience. So if it starts at the root, I think that helps.

L: What – So you threw in there law enforcement.

A: Yeah, I was a police officer.

L: You were a police officer, that was in, when you were in Iowa?

A: Cedar Rapids, yeah.

L: Okay, got it. What caused you to want to do that?

A: Well, I was working for the Human Rights Commission at the time. I was a secretary to the executive secretary of that commission, and I always wanted to be a researcher, [laughter] and there was – We only had two; it was a small office. But I thought since I really knew all the cases – I mean, I really knew the cases backward and forward, because I had to type everything up, and I had to do the legal documents that they took to court for discrimination cases. So I mean, I knew everything, and one of the researchers – There was a guy and a lady, young woman like myself, she used to come to me to ask me questions about – and she's a researcher! She's out there actually talking to the people. So it came a time where one of our people, I think the guy, was going to leave, but that job was not offered to me. And I didn't like that. [laughter] Because not only did I know all the cases, I took all the notes. I knew shorthand, so I took all the notes for the board meetings. I set those up. I did all the – Typed everything up on the cases. I knew them by heart. I didn't even really have to take notes if I didn't want to at the board meetings, except for what the board members said, 'cause I knew the cases so well. So that job wasn't offered to me.

So I kind of got ticked about that. I wanted to make more money, because I had – At that time I was divorced, and I had three children, and they were young children, and I wanted to make more money. So I saw this in the paper that they had – they were opening it up for civil service testing for the police department. So I said oh, what the heck, I think I'll do this. So that's how I got started. I was shocked. I was sitting at my desk one day at the Human Rights Commission, and a couple reporters came in. That's when I found out. [laughter] I hadn't even found out yet, and I really didn't know anything about it at the time. I got the letter I think at home when I got home that day. But they knew. So they were asking me questions. So that was, you know. So then my boss, suddenly he was very interested in giving me a promotion, right? So it was too late then. But anyway, so I was hired, I was accepted. I got my acceptance letter that day. So I was on the department for two years, and then I found out after I was hired - Like I said, it was already in the media, and they did some researching – the reporters – and found out that I was the first woman of color in the whole state of Iowa.

L: Oh my goodness. Wow.

A: Yeah. I'm talking about 1972.

L: That's what I was going to ask you, what year.

A: 1972. And the Human Rights Department office that I had been working in was in the – You know, in Cedar Rapids – you don't know, but my other Iowa friend would know – it's one of the few that the courthouse and everything is built – It's like an island to itself. So the mayor's office was downstairs from our office, and his secretary was real sweet. She got me this book about police women. [laughter] Yeah. And it had pictures in there, uniforms and whatever, anyway, it was real sweet. So then I had a television interview. So I had that, and of course they were writing articles and stuff. So I had a few different things happen, but I was the first woman in Iowa. But then when I got to the police department itself, you're supposed to have to take not only written, but an oral test to be

either detective or someone in the juvenile bureau. So we were across from each other. But the women – There were only 2 other women on the force. One did make it to detective. She'd been there for quite some time. And another one that was maybe 10 years older than me in the youth bureau. Well, they automatically just put the women in the youth bureau [laughter] 'cause they didn't want us on the street.

Okay, so later that got changed, about the time that I was leaving, because the men started complaining 'cause we didn't have to take the orals. You know, they just put us right there. But it gave me a lot of experience and I was able to learn a lot about my city. Because you don't work on the same side of town as you live. So I was very visible. Everybody knew me, I stood out. But I met a lot of good people. I found out a lot about my community, and it was really a great public relations kind of thing. And then, after the first year, the chief of police decided oh, hey, that worked out pretty good. They decided to make me the first woman of color to ride patrol. So I wasn't just the first woman of color. I was the first woman to ride patrol. Yeah, so that was different. So I got to meet all the guys. [laughter] So we were always, you know, two in a car, and I rode with everybody. Great group of guys. And, you know –

L: So you were pretty accepted?

A: Yeah! I was. My captain was – When I worked in the youth bureau he was very upset about it, 'cause he was a stone cold racist. He really was. Everybody hated him, in the whole department. But he really had his eye out on me. He was always trying to put me in a situation – We could choose our assignments, you know. Like a detective would see what's out there, and what complaints, or whatever. We could choose what we wanted. And I did that. But he would always also find something that he thought I was going to have problems with. Like, he sent me to a house where he told me, hey, this lady hates Black people. She's Jewish and she hates Blacks. So naturally, he wanted me to go there. Well, that lady was so sweet, and so nice, I couldn't get out of the house. [laughter] I mean literally. It was around Christmas, and so they – or, Hannukah? – and she was telling me all about that. She had a lovely home. And we just got along great, right from the beginning. She didn't see color at all. She just was glad to get some company. So he wasn't too happy about that.

So he had a fit when he found out that I was going to ride patrol. So he called me into his office to tell me that the wives of the officers were very upset that a woman was going to be riding with their husbands. So then he went over the no fraternization thing with me. Like, nobody's trying to get a man in here, nobody's trying to get a woman, they're all married and I'm not looking! So, you know, [laughter] that was that. But anyway, so it just upset him because it wasn't anything he could do about it. That came down from the Chief. So that's where I went. I really missed the juvenile bureau though, because I was able to go into homes. I talked to the kids, I talked to the parents, and then whatever the case was, you know, we had our – They did still call them interrogation rooms at that time. I would be in a room with the child, and I found out the kid would talk to you, as a stranger, and tell you things that they didn't want to tell the parents. And I had a couple that the parents were quite shocked. I mean they readily

admitted things, because they were trying to get attention most of the time, you know. So there were a couple nasty situations, but then you wrote reports. So I'm very detail-oriented about writing because everything, northwest corner of whatever – I went on some drug busts. Did that. It was interesting, let's put it that way. But when I went back to visit my dad after I left the department, the officers – There were some of my officers that I rode with were – I was at a Best Western and they were having lunch in the dining area there, and I went down to have dinner. And so we kind of had a good homecoming, you know, greeting. And they were telling me all the changes and things that were happening. They had to wear vests now because things were getting a little bit harder, you know.

But I did testify in court once. That was very nervous for me. I was nervous. But it was kind of like, cut and dry, you know. When did you start work for the department; how long have you been an officer, you know. It was like – So I only had one instance like that, but the funny thing about the police, being an officer, of course everybody knew in my community, that knew me, knew I was. Of course, I mean it was everywhere. It was on the news, it was on the radio, it was in the paper, you know. So you couldn't miss it. But I could never go anywhere after that, that they didn't ask me if I was on duty. So I couldn't go anywhere socially, you know? Because people were very, very, you know... How do I put this? They were on their best behavior always. [laughter] Which I thought was kind of strange. I'd never expected that, but my captain – I had a very good captain that when I was going through training, 'cause I was the only woman, female, in training also. So, you know, you're doing training with all these guys. So every instance of it, every step of it was something new and novel. But he told us that things would change, as far as our friends were concerned, and it really, really did. I mean people pretty much didn't want to have too much to – You know, you didn't have that close contact with people that you're used to talking to on a casual basis. They always thought you were investigating them. [laughter] So that was different.

L: So when you moved to St. Louis, were you on the force in St. Louis as well?

A: No, no. I had left, 'cause I had – Well, climbing over a fence with a shotgun one night, this murderer that at that time was a rare instance for such a horrific thing. Two college kids were murdered, brutally murdered, and it was a horrific thing. And so this person that did it and another person, one of the places he had a girlfriend was in Cedar Rapids, and there was another place in another city. So they had detectives at the front – In both of these places we had detectives at the front door and two uniformed officers at the back. Well, naturally I got picked to be one of the other officers in the back of this Cedar Rapids residence. So as I'm climbing over this fence, which I can barely get over cause I'm so short – It would be some wire fence, [laughter] you know? So I'm trying to climb over that with this big ol' shotgun, [laughter] and I'm climbing over this – All I can think of is, this is crazy! What am I doing? Well probably for my own good, that person wasn't there. My partner was a pretty big guy, and he just went [noise] right over the fence. I'm still like trying to get my leg over here, and [laughter] oh it was too much. It was too much. So that was wild. That was really wild. But it occurred to me at that time

that I could get killed doing this. You know, that man could have been there. I mean the detectives were at the front door, but he could have been running out the back. That's why we were in the back. And I thought, I've got kids I have to raise. So that was the end of my career as a policewoman. So no I didn't do that when I came to St. Louis.

L: Got it. Where did you meet your husband?

A: Okay, now I've had two marriages. Divorced the first one, and my second husband, we separated, and then he died. So, I'm widowed. [laughter] Yeah. But my second husband – My first husband, I met him in Cedar Rapids, but he didn't live in Cedar Rapids. My second husband was from St. Louis, south side boy. He's White. And again, we had this little talk, 'cause he thought he needed to talk to me, that we might have some issues. So we have two biracial children. But again, you know, this was not a situation for me. But he knew St. Louis. Actually, he knew it better than I did. He grew up on the south side. He got to meet people of color by playing basketball. He went to Europe. He had a lot of basketball scholarships, offers. So he was pretty famous actually in St. Louis. He had all kinds of awards that had never been broken at St. Mary's High School, and then he got, you know – They had a special, like a hall of fame thing, and he was one of the people after we got married that he received. But I didn't really see that as an issue.

But whenever we would go – and we really didn't have anything that I knew about – but I always remember that whenever we went to the grocery store – now we're both shopping together, with our grocery cart. So he always would go in front to take out the groceries, and it never failed, they always tried to ring me up separately. Now he's taking groceries out, putting it on the, you know – and then I'm back here putting them out too, but he's ahead of me. They always tried to ring him out, and somehow, and every time we'd have to tell them no, we're together. [laughter] He thought it was hilarious [laughter] but I was – I mean he did, but I was getting like, why do we have to go through this every time? We need to go to a different store. But it probably would have happened anywhere. Anywhere we went. But other than that, if anything happened, I'm not aware of it. But I just took it for granted, you love someone, you see someone and find someone that you care about, race was never an issue in my family so it didn't – But I had to, I was pretty naïve, I think, about that. And over the years of course, I've learned a lot about St. Louis and some other issues.

When I was on the Human Rights Commission I did have some seminars that I was part of, but we kind of talked about racial issues, or how people are feeling about different things, you know, of color, and Whites, and non-Whites, and how we could have a better understanding. And one of the seminars I went to, it was for employers, and I was just kind of there, you know. There was many of us that had to attend because we had to report back on it. But they had a panel from a state agency there, and they had some people involved in that panel, and they were trying to explain to them how they needed to change some practices, and hiring, and what have you. And I always remember the one thing that stands out about that to me, was one of the employers just flat out said, "Well how can we get around that." [laughter] He's trying to figure out how he could not

hire a person of color, but not look like he was discriminating. So I always just remember that one thing. But, unless something affects you very personally, you really don't see that something is really going on. And so I was very naïve about that. But like I said, as I had a couple of incidents with trying to find a home where I lived and grew up in my city, that yeah, people see you differently.

L: Talk about that a little bit.

A: Yeah. Like I said, going through school, I was the only person of color in all my classes for a good 6 years, plus. And so we didn't think too much about – Like I said, my parents knew all kinds of people, Mexican, whatever. My mother's very best friend was Mexican, so I was used to all – whatever, you know. And so the housing thing, I knew what was going on, but at the same time it surprised me that people felt that way. You know, you kind of grew up thinking everybody feels like your parents do, or how you were raised. You don't realize there are real prejudices about things like that, and then when I got on the police department, of course I had a couple of incidents, situations, especially when on some of our drug situations. I remember getting called every name in the book. [laughter] I mean I got called every name in the book, and it didn't bother me cause I knew she was mad, her and her friend, it was a bust, and they were – We arrested them, and brought them back to the station. But she's still calling me all kind of names. But the guys on the department were so good. They were apologizing to me the whole time, and, you know, to me it just kind of rolled off my back, 'cause I knew that she was upset, and I knew why she was upset. I didn't feel bad about who I was, so she couldn't hurt me, you know? But they were so, you know, stricken, that I was going to be mortified. So they [laughter] – I always remember, I told them, I said, "I'm fine." You know, but they felt bad for me, so that was some decency there. I appreciated that. It wasn't until I got to St. Louis I think, that I really got a better understanding of the division. Like I said, the first month we lived with my father's sister, and I remember I found a house – an apartment, nice apartment complex in the County. They lived in the City. And they were very upset about me moving there, and they called me to tell me that I – Well, they called my father first, to tell him that I had moved into an aristocratic neighborhood, because it was mostly White there, but there were people of color in the complex, but not a lot, you know. So they were upset about it, because that was something they had had to deal with from day one.

L: And you probably didn't think anything about it.

A: I didn't think anything about it. But my father called me, and my father never got upset about anything. He loved everybody. He could whistle tunes, he had a great voice, I mean he – I just thought he walked on water. Period. [laughter] You know? Yeah, but they were very close. They talked about everything. No decision was ever made in my house that they didn't discuss, my mother and my father. And like I said, I never saw my dad get angry about anything. But he called me one day, after that – I mean they were just kind of pestering me really, cause I wasn't supposed to go there I guess. My cousin was supposed to, you know, show me where nice places to live, but



she never got around to it. Well, I'm not used to waiting on people to do for me, okay? I've got kids I have to take care of, I need to get settled, you know. So I went ahead and did my thing. So my father called me one day; he was very upset. [laughter] You know, and it was all about that. Where I had moved and God knows what they told him. But see, he didn't think like that either, so he was upset with his sister. But like I said, he didn't get upset with people, period, and that was his baby sister. But he called me that day and he was upset about it, and he let me know that he didn't appreciate what she said. I didn't know she had called him too, but when I came – After being in the city of course so long – in St. Louis so long – and just growing up, a lot of it I think had to do with being young, not having that kind of exposure. You don't know what somebody else's pain, what they've gone through, unless you really get to know them and have an understanding of it.

So I have a much better understanding of the tensions, and the miscommunications, and yeah, there's flat out racism all across this country. And it's very ingrained. I hate to say it, but it's deeply ingrained. There is really a division, and I hate to disparage, but, you know, there's somebody in a very high office that has made a point out of making that divide even greater. So we've got a lot of ground to cover. Try to get back. But I do have hope, because I always have hope for the future, as well as today, because the young people don't look at things that way. Now, you know, people, you see Black, White, Asian, Native American, everybody's all mixed up. These young kids don't care about that. They just want to see people that like the same things they do. And so you see much more of that, but there is still that great divide. Parents, from their parents, and their grandparents, that were staunchly against this color, or that race, or this nationality, you know, whatever. And they instill that in their kids, so it just carries on. So there are a lot of young people, I mean, when people say oh, it's not like that anymore – Oh it's very much like that. It's like that every day. Some place. And if they examine how they feel about certain things, they might find out, hmm, they might feel that way too. They just don't want to admit it. [laughter] But you have to talk about it if you're going to get over it. So that's how I feel about it.

L: Yeah. Yeah. Like, when you were little, you said that Cedar Rapids was pretty open and that kind of thing. Do you remember having an experience that shook, a little bit? Like you know, your parents told you to love everybody and all that kind of stuff. Did you have a time that was kind of a crisis of that? Where it was like you were confronted with racism or whatever, that made you kind of second guess what they had told you or thought? Do you remember?

A: Yeah, I do. I only have just – The only thing that happened was the housing thing. And I did figure that out after going through like three different places where I made the phone call, and set specific times, appointment days and times, only to be turned away. So yeah, that hurt my feelings, but it was more confusion I think, in my mind. Because I didn't understand it. But it was pretty obvious they didn't want us, and it was pretty obvious why. But one of the things that is still going on today, and I think it was very much true when I was growing up too, people have feelings, but they didn't really act on

them that much. They kind of felt certain ways, but they didn't want anybody to know it, so they didn't do anything outlandishly racist, you know. But I remember when I – and this isn't just a White thing, Black people can be racist too even though they don't believe they can – You know, when you automatically don't like somebody because of the color of their skin, then that makes you, you know, you're prejudiced, obviously. But you can't tell that to a Black person [laughter]. They would really get mad at you. Because they're thinking about things that have happened to them, that have happened to their parents, and maybe have gone back for a long time, they've had brutality against them. And very specific things that happened to them directly. So that gave them, you know – So they're not as open, you know, they don't feel as open. So I can relate to that too. I understand that.

That's why people have to talk. You know, why are you feeling this way? You can tell this person – That person of a different color can tell them what they grew up learning, or what they have experienced, and try to find a middle ground between the two. But if you don't talk to each other, you're never going to get there. But when I went to – When I was right out of school, and Collins radio – it is now part of Honeywell, and I talk about this at Black History Month – a man named Collins started an international company, a communication company, and started actually in his garage. He built it into an international company, and Cedar Rapids was the headquarters. They have a very specific Collins radio astronaut, whatever, now, but it was all Collins at the time. And I wanted to work there. I was part of a first time program called "office education", and I was a really good typist, and I knew shorthand, so I got picked to be part of that class. So that was the first year. So I was really good at both of those things. So I wanted to be secretary. [laughter] That was my big goal. So I decided I was going to apply there. And I mentioned it to a couple of my friends, and they said, "Oh, don't do that. They don't hire people of color." They don't hire Black people, is what they said. Which, I had never listened to things like that. [laughter] You know, because I – and this is my reaction, like I said – I was kind of naïve I guess in that sense, because I was thinking when they said that, well why not? I mean, why wouldn't I do that? Why are you telling me not to? You know, it didn't make sense to me.

Of course, I didn't listen to them. I went there. I passed all their tests. I was offered three jobs the same day, started work on Monday. That was on a Friday. And I was there for four years. I was the only Black person in this huge office, but I was also the first person without a business college degree to become a department head secretary. I was secretary to the department head in research and development. And the division head secretary told me one day, she said, "You're the first person to be hired without a business college degree." But I was really good at shorthand. I was 160 words per minute typist. Yeah, I was really good. So, you know, you do things that you don't realize are a novelty in a way. Things happen to you. But I never had anything, I can't think of anything, other than that housing thing. That sticks out in my mind, where somebody was just in my face letting me know they didn't want me there.

L: Yeah. What about your kids? Cause they grew up in St. Louis, right?

A: They grew up in St. – I'm sure they have different stories, but my kids never talked to me about those things [laughter]. I mean, if I asked them now I'm sure they would, but yeah, kids, you know how that is. There's a lot that you don't tell your parents, even if you're feeling – Now Carmen, my daughter Carmen, she would tell me anything. So if she had a problem – but she never brought up an issue like that. Carmen knows everybody, and has friends of – you know both, all my kids are like that, so. But now I'm sure maybe something happened at some point.

There was one thing that did stand up in my mind in Cedar Rapids though. When the kids were in grade school, before we moved here – and you know we always had art supplies, all kinds of stuff, books, arts, whatever you want for the kids. And I remember, I think it was the first grade for my daughter Carmen, and we had a parent teacher conference, and she was very seriously talking to me and telling me that she was very concerned, because Carmen didn't seem to be interested in the art. Which I thought was very strange [laughter] that she focused on that. Everything else is great, but she didn't have any interest – but she said to me as if it was a fault. You know? Like some kind of fault with her. And I just told her, I said well, because she's got all that at home. I mean she's used to that. But Shelly, my daughter Shelly, she's the artist. Her sister loved, you know, art. But Carmen is the business, she's a big wig at – she just got another promotion at Centene. She makes six figures salary, okay? That's worth, you know, she's, and she loved, she knows – She has so much, so many networks, I mean she knows everybody. But I mean, you know, kids are different with different personalities. But she actually looked at me and talked to me as if somehow I was at fault, my child was at fault. I mean, she really did!

Other: Like art class? Or like –

A: Yeah! That's the only thing she had to say. She wasn't interested in crayons, whatever.

L: Obviously it didn't hurt her too much.

A: Yeah.

Other: I don't think I would worry about –

A: Yeah! And I just thought it was a silly thing, but I still remember the way she looked at me, like somehow I was supposed to, you know – Like she was accusing me. But I told her – Like, now that I think back on it, I think it was kind of she was coming at me like, oh, you probably don't have things like that in your house. Okay, you know? Yeah, I think that's what it was. Which you have to reflect back. At the time it's like, I thought, well that's the strange – I just thought it was strange that she was worried about that. Everything else was fine.

L: Of all the things –

A: Yeah, of all the things. So you know you don't pick up – You have to get a certain maturity I think, before you can even look back on things. Personally, I don't ever recall

anything where I just flat out got my feelings hurt because of my color. But my kids I'm sure have stories to tell. I could ask them now, but there's nothing, my kids – I don't know, I think it's the way I was raised was kind of – You kind of instinctively instill certain things, you know? Like, something had to be really bad before I told my parents about it. I had this girl, she was a friend of my – the girl's grandmother was a friend of my mother's. And every time she came to visit her grandmother, they got the idea that – and she was, I don't know, maybe four or five years older than me – that it would be nice if she would do things with me. That girl tortured me. I was afraid of caterpillars. But she was the meanest girl I ever saw in my life. So they were always putting us together. We went to the movies. Now I'm a little kid, I'm like 5 years old, and she was like 9 or 10. Now we get downtown, we're on the corner; she crosses the street and leaves me behind. I'm trying to figure out how I'm getting across the street. [laughter] I mean, everything, she – I was terrified of caterpillars, so of course my mom is visiting her grandmother, and she's there, and they've got this tree that literally is full of those big fat yellow caterpillars. I've never seen anything like it since. So naturally, you know, I was terrified. So I mean there was so many things like that.

So one day, like I said, never say anything to my mom about any of this, but one day my mom told me that – I don't even remember that girl's name – but she said that she was in town. I don't think she lived in the city, I think that's when she come and visit her grandmother, and I just burst out in tears. That's how my mom found out. I mean I couldn't take it anymore. [laughter] I just couldn't do it again. I just burst out in tears. So then, of course, you know – but my mama was something else.

When I was – they took me – Mom made sure that I knew how to get to school, right? So we walked this little path here, everybody walked to school, and this neighborhood school wasn't very far. So we did that a whole summer. So I knew exactly how to get to school, and how to get home. Of course, the very first day of school I refused to walk home. I sat on the fire escape [laughter] until the last person in the building, which was my kindergarten teacher, came and saw me sitting there. So, I refused to walk home. I'm going to wait for my mama to come and get me. So she had to call my mom. Mama came and got me, okay. She took me home. She said Anita, she said, now you know how to get to school and how to get home. She said I'm not going to come after you tomorrow. So you'll either be at home, coming home, or you'll be on that fire escape. You know, I knew she meant business. When my mama said something I knew she meant it. I walked. [laughter]

But I had an incident – this probably all too petty for you but – I had an incident when I was in first grade. There was a third grader, I was the only one – Most of my friends that I knew from church, basically, they lived this way. And I lived that way. So I had a solo walk home around the street. There was a girl, big ol' gal, third grader, she live on the – The street curved around and there was an offshoot up a street. And she lived about midway up this hill. She saw that I was walking, and I'm this skinny little thing, I mean, that's when I was skinny. Skinny little short thing [laughter] right? Frail, you know, looked frail but I was really kind of tough. So I'm walking along and I'm – She got it into her head that she would meet me every day – halfway between my house, you know, the

school and my house – and stand there on the sidewalk and not let me pass until she got done bullying me. She didn't mean – I don't think it had anything to do with being Black, I was just the only one walking along there. So okay, I was terrified of this big ol' gal, you know? [laughter] So she had me alright.

Well that went on for about a week. Finally, I couldn't take that anymore. So I had to tell mama about that. But my mama was very, very clever. She was a soft spoken woman. She didn't say a lot, but what she said she always meant. She said okay, she said, I'm going to meet you tomorrow. She said, but when you see me, don't say anything. Don't act like you know me when you see me coming. I said okay. I'm feeling good now 'cause my mom's coming. I don't know what she said to that girl, I didn't get close to her, but my mama was right – and she just walked along, saw the girl coming. She was right on time for me, you know. Her eyes were really focused on me. I don't think she really noticed my mother too much. And when she got to the spot where she liked to stand and block the sidewalk for me, my mother walked up to her. I don't know what she said to that girl, cause like I said, my mom was quiet in her words, but her words were deep. Whatever she said to the girl, I never saw that girl again. I mean that was it. It was over. And she would never tell. I don't know what she said, but mama had a way of looking at those eyes, you know.

But just a flashback about – We were talking about the way she grew up. A lot of people did pass for White that came from that area and came into Iowa and other northern states I'm sure, and passed that way their whole lives. But like I said, my mother wasn't raised that way, but I did have that understanding. Which, I was never going to pass as White, so it wasn't anything I needed to worry about. But she was a little bitter about that. The fact that you would try to be something you weren't. I mean, why say anything, you know? But those people that did that, that she grew up with, made that decision. Never claimed to have anything but white in their background, that was the thing. I mean, we all had White in our background, but they never claimed to be anything else. And there was a girl in high school, when I was a sophomore she was a senior, and there was some talk that she had been passing. And somebody found out that she had some Black blood in her, and I think she left school. Because her whole life her family had been passing that way. But see, that's the danger. And, you know, I'm multiracial, like I said, I've got White blood, I've got Black blood, I've got Native American blood, I've got, you know – So we're all that way, mostly. Some people can trace their direct line, but most of us in America are – That's how this country was founded. So unless you know all these things – Knowing these things shouldn't make you feel bad, it should make you feel good, because that means you're a part of everything. You're a part, we're all a part of that same fabric.

But those things, in those days too, people were very rigid about certain things. They made that decision that they'd be better off in life passing for a certain color. And they made that decision, that's something that they had to live with, but they had to be in fear all the time too. Because something could always happen. But when my son was born – he was my first child from my husband who was Caucasian – there was a lot of fascination about him, 'cause he looked White. And I'll never forget that I was in the

room with the child, my husband was sitting there, and they'd just brought the baby in – the nurse had brought the baby in. She wouldn't leave the room. She asked all kinds of questions about – and he had straight hair – she wanted to know if his color was going to change. [laughter]

L: Like hair color, or eye color...

A: No, his skin color! Yes, well, he ended up getting – His hair was straight for several years, but then as he got older, not like mine, but it was wavy. He still got enough of his father's blood in him to have manageable, nice, you know – but he's still fair. And my daughter too. Her hair never – Her hair was straight, and stayed straight the whole time. But we couldn't get that girl out of the room. She had so many questions. I mean like, this couldn't possibly be the first, you know? But I guess, I don't know. In Cedar Rapids that wasn't something that you did see, you know, in Cedar Rapids, but we were in St. Louis! So you think they'd be – But I mean, finally Don and I were just like, looking at each other like – But I'll tell you a little sneaky thing though that happened. I like my kids to know who they are. So when the birth cert– You know, you used to get the birth certificate to sign, the doctor's office – you usually a few days, you know, couple days before you leave. They wouldn't bring me my son's birth certificate.

L: Why not?

A: I'd been thinking, gee, when are they going to show up with that? So we got down to the time when my husband was actually on the way to pick me up with the baby. Suddenly, at the last minute, they run in with this birth certificate. Well, I looked on it and it said that he was Black. So I said, "I can't sign this." I said my son is biracial, and I want that on the certificate. So I had to scratch that out.

L: Really?

A: They knew they were going to have trouble. See, that's how people think about these things, and you don't know what they're thinking until something like that happens. So in their mind, okay, yeah, your husband's White but you're Black, so as far as we're concerned, he's Black too. Same thing happened with my daughter. So I had to do the same thing to both of them. So that made me mad. [laughter] Because they were so sneaky about it. I mean, they knew he was on his way to get me. I had the baby in the room with me, dressed to go, now suddenly at the very last second they run in and want me to sign this– I said nuh-uh, I'm not gonna do it, I can't do it. I can't do that. But so, I'm a fully grown adult by that time, so I knew exactly why they did that, but I didn't understand until they showed up and showed me the paper. So I'm reading this thing, it's like oh, no no no. But my son and my daughter – Now Adrienne kind of kept things to herself. We'd have these late evening – I would be painting, and my daughter Adrienne would come at 10:30, 'cause I would paint when they were in bed, but she would like to come back up, and that's when we would have our mother daughter talks. That's when I found out what was on her mind. And she never mentioned anything like that, but my son talked to me about everything. And I mean everything. [laughter]

And he told me – and this is after he was out of school and everything – but he said, you know – His kids, I was one of those parent assistants, you know, where you go on field trips with the kids and whatever. And I was only working weekends, so I was usually free during the week, so I was usually always able to come. So all his friends, they knew me, they'd seen me, they'd seen me and my husband there for different events or whatever, but he said, mom, he said, I've been since grade school, gone all the way through high school with these kids, they're still – Some of these kids that have known me my whole life, they're still trying to figure out who I am, what I am. Yeah. Are you an islander? Are you Peruvian? They thought he might have been Argentina, Peruvian – It's like, where are they getting this? I mean they've seen me and they've seen your father. He says, I know, I don't know mom. But yeah so, there's so many subtleties to do with race. There's so many subtleties there that don't come out unless there's an incident of some kind.

Now, I can tell now – like my mother – with a look, how somebody feels about me being in a certain place, whatever. But I'm gonna be there anyway. [laughter] I mean, I'm just gonna do it. Because if you don't, then you already boxed yourself in to some kind of isolation that you didn't need to be. Hey, you either take me or leave me, I can't help you. As long as I'm not doing something wrong, then I feel I should be able to go anywhere. So I'm never afraid to go someplace. Never afraid to try something. But a lot of the negativity that you see with Blacks, African Americans, people of color, is that they have very harshly been exposed to criticism and denial of a lot of things. So they – A lot of people are afraid or they already feel like they're gonna be rejected, so they won't even try to do certain things. So I realized my situation is not unique, except that it's different from what somebody else has had. I grew up a certain way, my parents were a certain way, and that's what I grew up in. So I understand the other side of it too. If I had been in a different household, where there are a lot of negative reinforcements of you're not good enough, you shouldn't be here, you're not worthy, you're not smart enough or whatever, and that starts to work on somebody's head. Especially when they're children, and as they grow up they still feel that way, and then if they go out into the world – 'Cause there is blatant racism in this world, and in this country. We've got some serious problems that we're gonna have to deal with sooner or later. Trying to deal with them – but you know, everything takes a long time. [laughter] You'd think we'd be further along in some things than we are. But it's very hard, and the only thing I think that you can do is just keep talking to people.

L: So to wrap up, I'm trying to decide, I have two questions. [laughter] One would be, what would be – if they could remember one – if the world could remember one message of Anita, what would that message be do you think?

A: I think what I would want people to understand about who I am, is that I don't see color, I don't see education, I don't see anything in a person that would make me say oh, I don't even wanna get to know them. I would want people to say of her, she can talk to anybody, because she's comfortable with anybody. I feel comfortable with who I am. And for me it's just – I like being in the world. I like to have new experiences. I like to try

new things, and I like to share those things when I meet friends and people who become friends. We can share it together. So for me it would be, I would like people to know I'm an accepting person, and I don't judge you before I know you. So, I don't know, that's not a really good way to describe myself [laughter] but it just – I take things as they are and I make a decision according to that situation, of how I want to react. But my first provocation is always going to be, in my mind, that I'm just gonna be myself, and I'll deal with whatever I have to face, but I'm just an American like anyone else. And I'm a citizen of this country and a citizen of the world. And I think that's how people should look at one another.