

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

I'm just going to, so tell me what you want to know. Yeah, so make sure this, yeah, this is on, so I told you on the phone, we're working on a Lithonia community engagement slash oral history project wherein we are meeting people who have lived or live currently in Lithonia as a way to build up that collection. So in the History center, we have a little bit from Lithonia, mostly from the 1860s to about the 1950s. So anything after 1950s and anything after that period is just sort of missing and blank. So we're coming out into the community to sort of help tell more of the story of Lithonia because we know it's so much more than what was happening in 1860 to 1950. So that's what we're here for. And it's also a way to get to know you and to get to know you and be able to let other people know your story. You've been here a long time, you've had a career here, you're a poet, so it's just a way for people to get to know you as well. So, it's about Lithonia and it's about when. Okay. So let's start from the beginning. Okay. You were born in

Speaker 2 ([01:08](#)):

Indiana? Indianapolis.

Speaker 1 ([01:10](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 2 ([01:10](#)):

Indiana, 1952

Speaker 1 ([01:15](#)):

In. And tell us about your family.

Speaker 2 ([01:17](#)):

Okay. I'm from a family of historians. I can tell you that my father, Guy Russell, was a history major at Indiana University in the 1930s. My parents met at Indiana University and married in 1939. Eloped. My mother quit school as a junior. They got married, so he was born in New Albany, Indiana, which is just across the bridge from Louisville, so just across the Ohio River. But as you know, Indiana was a free state, and Kentucky was a slave state. So we have some knowledge of some of the ancestors prior to that are in Kentucky. That's as far south as I can trace. My family, my mother's family, on the other hand, my maternal grandmother was born in Canton, Mississippi. Her father, my great-grandfather, Solomon Love, fought in the Union Army in the Civil War. We have his copies of his enlistment and discharge papers.

([02:35](#)):

He was part of the Sherman's March to the Sea. So at a point he was in Atlanta, no doubt, and there's a marker. My first job when I divorced and went to work full-time in DeKalb County schools was at Redan Elementary School, which is on Stone Mount Lithonia Road, and there's a marker there, denoting that. That was one of the paths that they took Sherman's, March to the sea. So it could be that I started out right where my grandfather may have walked right past. So that's really powerful. My grandfather, maternal grandfather was born in Louisiana. So they married and she was at a wedding of a cousin or something or another is the family lore, and she was already engaged, but he decided he wanted her and he went to get her supposedly on, of course, with six shooters. I don't know if that part is just made

up, but that's part of the story. And so she moved there to Louisiana. They owned some property there, and that's just outside of, it's actually across the Mississippi River from....

(03:49):

So Monterey, Louisiana is where my mother was born. She's the third oldest, the last one to be born in Louisiana on that property. And she was born in 1918. So she's listed on the 1920 census. So that's how I know for sure about that part. And what's your mom's name? Doris Evans Russell. My father's name is Guy, and he was named after his great uncle, Guy Levi Grant, spelled L-E-V-I-S. So Levi's is what people often mispronounce because that's what it is now, but Levi is the way it was pronounced. But anyway, she named my father after him. He was at Indiana University, and he is one of the founders of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, which is one of the Divine Nine. Divine Nine. Nine. Okay. Tell me about

Speaker 1 (04:50):

That.

Speaker 2 (04:50):

The Divine Nine are black fraternities and sororities. There are nine. They began with Alpha Phi Alpha in 1906 at Cornell. Next was Alpha Kappa Alpha. That was at Howard in 1908. Wow.

Speaker 1 (05:17):

And that's the sorority that you're currently a member?

Speaker 2 (05:19):

Absolutely. 52 years.

Speaker 1 (05:22):

You've been a member for 52 years?

Speaker 2 (05:24):

Yes.

Speaker 1 (05:24):

Wow. Founded in 1908.

Speaker 2 (05:26):

Yes.

Speaker 1 (05:28):

And you've been a member since

Speaker 2 (05:30):

1971.

Speaker 1 (05:31):

Wow.

Speaker 2 ([05:34](#)):

My mother was a member also 1938 Indiana University. So, my father and my brother, our members were members of Kappa Alpha Psi. My brother's still living. He's 81, and he's lived his whole life in Indianapolis. My father moved to Indianapolis when he was three, and he died at age 84. So he was there his whole life. My mother was born in Gary, Indiana. My grandparents on the maternal side were part of the Great Migration, so they moved first to Arkansas when they left Louisiana. So I have one aunt, the one that was born after her was born in Arkansas, and then they went to Indiana. And so all of the rest of the siblings were born there. So there were three that were born in Indiana. My grandfather was foreman in the steel mill, inland Steel. He was the first black foreman at Inland Steel.

Speaker 1 ([06:49](#)):

And that's in Indiana?

Speaker 2 ([06:51](#)):

Yes. There's an area called the Harbor. There are several cities between Gary and Chicago, and that's where they were. My mother grew up in Gary, Indiana, known of course for the Jackson Five.

Speaker 1 ([07:08](#)):

Right.

Speaker 2 ([07:10](#)):

Some of my sisters were in school with, I think Jermaine is my age. Oh,

Speaker 1 ([07:15](#)):

Wow. And you said you had siblings?

Speaker 2 ([07:22](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([07:22](#)):

Mitch and your brother?

Speaker 2 ([07:24](#)):

Guy, Guy Evans. Guy Russell. He's 81 years old.

Speaker 1 ([07:29](#)):

And he's living where? In Indianapolis? He's

Speaker 2 ([07:31](#)):

Still in. Okay. I'm the only one who left. My sister is Gayle, G-A-Y-L-E, Coyle, C-O-Y-L-E. She's 77. She has three children, and she's also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, as is her daughter. And as is my daughter.

Speaker 1 ([07:54](#)):

Did you and your sister get involved in the sorority because your mother was involved in the sorority or were there other reasons?

Speaker 2 ([08:00](#)):

Reasons? Well, there were other reasons for me. My sister didn't have the opportunity to become a member. As an undergraduate, you do have the option to be invited as a graduate of a college, but it was started by undergraduate. So there's an undergraduate component. And then in our organizations, the Divine Nine, we can continue to be involved after we graduate from college.

([08:26](#)):

So that's kind of a distinction between the other organizations, fraternity and sorority and ours, is that we continue to be involved throughout our lives. So definitely my mother, having made that choice, I was an influence. And then when I got to Purdue, the Alpha Kappa Alpha chapter was new, and I only this year processed. God had it there just in time for me. It was chartered in December of 1969, and I started there as a freshman in September of 1970. So there had been two AKA chapters that were chartered early on. There was one in Indianapolis and this one at IU in Bloomington. And then for a long time they didn't have any. So when my sister was in undergraduate school, they hadn't yet gotten a chapter. They got one not long after she graduated, she went to Ball State University.

([09:28](#)):

So she came in as a graduate member. But I was able to come in as an undergraduate like my mom did. So, yep. But I think the influence was probably more my father than my mother. She never really, I don't think, I can't remember her ever saying one way or another that was something she wanted me to do or anything like that. But when I got to the campus, I was just very impressed with the ladies. I was already leaning that way. But I have a first cousin who's a member of our rival sorority, which is Delta Sigma Theta. All of the founding members of Delta Sigma Theta were initially AKAs, and they broke off in 1913 and started a separate organization. So both of my mother's brothers married ladies who were Deltas.

([10:16](#)):

So my first cousins are Deltas that are anything. And so I went to Purdue. The Deltas were already there. They had been established the year before the AKAs. So there was an outside possibility that I might have, because my cousin that was there, who's adults was at that time, my favorite first cousin. She's like two years and two days older than me. So we just always were very close. But there was several things that happened as I look back in retrospect, that set my path to the a k side. And one of them is the president at that time when I got there as a freshman was she's probably four 11. She's not as tall as I. And then the chartering president who lives here now, she's five feet like me. So there was that relationship, that connection, I

Speaker 1 ([11:13](#)):

Think.

Speaker 2 ([11:15](#)):

But then I had gone to visit the campus when I was a senior in high school, and my cousin had introduced me to all of her friends who were Deltas. And at a point I was like, okay, don't you go any a k you could introduce me to. So the person she introduced me to was one of the chartering members of

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the AKA chapter and was so nice. And so she just made a great first impression. So all of those things were factors.

Speaker 1 ([11:39](#)):

Can you talk a little bit about some of the work that you've done or that the chapter itself has done, the Alpha Kappa Alpha, that the sorority has done over the years, the decades that you've been a member?

Speaker 2 ([11:50](#)):

Well, do you want global AKA or do you want the specific ones that the chapters

Speaker 1 ([11:57](#)):

Either

Speaker 2 ([11:58](#)):

You can talk about both. Okay. Well, when I joined in 1971, our international president who just passed in November, Matilia B Grays, was from Houston. And we get a new president now every four years. At the international level. We do have chapters that are established overseas. We have one in Germany, we have one in The Bahamas. We have one in Japan. We have one in South Africa. We have one in the most recent overseas one was Dubai. Liberia was one of the early ones. (Doorbell rings- interview stopped)

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Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Every four years we get a new president. So the president who was in office in 1971, as I said, just passed away. She is from Houston, was from Houston, and I dunno what that is. Anyway, so her theme, every four years we have a new theme and her theme was personal involvement now. I just got through reading her program from her funeral, and she was really emphasizing the importance of local chapters tuning in the needs of their community, their local community. And when I moved to Houston, I joined the chapter that she was in. Of course, I thought she walked on water. One of her big accomplishments was, and this was at my first international convention in 1972 in Denver, Colorado. Coretta Scott King had been made an honorary member, and Alpha Kappa Alpha gave her a \$20,000 donation that was used to purchase the birth home. She was going around the country trying to raise money for the King, what is now the King Center. So we were one of the first major donors, and that money was specifically earmarked to buy the home. And so if you go to the house, there's a marker there that denotes that and makes that known a permanent marker there to tell people that that is where the money came from when we gave her the purchase at home.

([01:46](#)):

So that's one of the many outstanding things. I could talk all day about this part. So one of the other international presidents that I got the opportunity to know was here in Atlanta, well, there's another one in Houston too that I became friends with, but here in Atlanta. And her name was Dr. Mary Shy Scott. She was an educator music teacher, and she really emphasized, one of the things that she did was to go to Hawaii to put a permanent historical marker there for a black, I guess he was a Navy, he was a naval person who was a cook and went and got guns and started shooting the Japanese and whatever his name was, Dory. I'll have to look up the last name. But anyway, now they recently have done a lot more about him and his place in history. But anyway, that's one of the things that I, Mary Shy Scott did under her administration and all of the chapters, just about every chapter, even we as undergraduates give money for scholarships to help other people be able to go to college. That's one of the big things that never changes, that always happens. And every year we give scholarships here locally in the Stone Mountain/ Lithonia community, primarily

([03:24](#)):

To graduating seniors. And for years we gave 'em just to women. And then at a point we realized, well, we need to help some men get there so the women can have some people to very, so now it's open to men, young men and women.

Speaker 2 ([03:36](#)):

Wonderful.

Speaker 1 ([03:37](#)):

Yep, yep, yep, yep. So there's that. Then for us, the Stone Mountain/ Lithonia chapter, our longest involvements have been a highway cleanup. We've been doing that partnering with DeKalb Clean and Beautiful. When I was vice president, so that was probably 98, 99, 2000, somewhere in there, at least 2000 cleaning, a stretch of Stone Mountain Lithonia Road. So now we used to go out every month and now we go quarterly and do that, pick up trash and stuff. And then we have a senior Citizen Rehabilitation Convalescence Center in Stonecrest. Traditions is the name of it, on Evans Mill. So we have gone there and played bingo with residents and give them prizes. Now we do money. We figured out at a point where we were taking little things, give them, and we ran out of little things and we started going in our pocket, giving 'em money. We realized how much really they wanted that more. So

now that's what we do. We just set aside an amount of money and then whoever's there, once we run out of the money that the chapters are allocated, we just go in our pockets and give them some more because they love to do it. So during the pandemic, of course, we couldn't go, but we still sent Christmas gifts at Christmas time. And so we've been doing that for 20 years.

(05:08):

And then we've done here locally, a lot of partnering with the libraries, DeKalb County Libraries, setting up

Speaker 3 (05:17):

Exhibits. Oh yeah.

Speaker 1 (05:19):

So we had an exhibit for our 20th anniversary at the Stonecrest branch. I did the 25th anniversary exhibit at the Hairston Crossing branch. And this is our 30th year. And we haven't, Theresa hasn't told us the location yet, but Theresa Totten, who's coordinator for adult programming is one of our members. And so I'll be doing another exhibit to celebrate our 30th year in March for Women's History Month. Wonderful. We've done several projects at the Wesley Chapel, Williams c Brown Library, which is five minutes from my house. This artist who just passed away. This "Words Never Stopped". That was my theme one year for one of our events. So that's an original piece of hers. But I had usually the art teachers who I worked with at the school to do designs, cover designs and that kind of stuff for those books. Most of them have that. So she was one of the ones. But we did an exhibit one year for her, and another friend of mine who did this painting of me, her name was Malika Favorite, so I called that Exhibit Two, Women at Work. So we had an exhibit up of their work when I was president. That would've been 2002 probably.

Speaker 3 (06:51):

And while we're on the subject of "Words Never Stopped". Never stopped. Talk about your poetry and how you got into poetry and into writing.

Speaker 1 (07:02):

Well, I've always written, since I was small enough to put poems and little prayers together. I have a book that I used to write in. It was probably uncle, my uncle that started the fraternity was a dentist. So I think my grandmother had a book, one of those little something that you write, and she used to write a grocery list in. But anyway, I have that and I know that when I was numbering my pages, when I got to 100, I didn't know that you're supposed to drop a zero out. So it goes from 100, then it's 1001, 1002. So that was probably second grade. So that I have, so I've been writing that long, was writing long before I knew how to make the right letters and all that stuff. But since my brother and sister were so much older and they were already in school, I realized, okay, I take this stuff to them and they can never figure out what I was saying. I was going to have to go to school and learn how to make the letters they could read. So I talk about that when I do writer's workshops with kids a lot because it's like I've always written.

(08:17):

When I moved to Atlanta, I was able to focus more on the writing. This was after my oldest two children were born in Houston. As I said, I stayed at home with them and I had this friend, the Madam CJ Walker heiress is a journalist. She was working at that time when we moved here for NBC. She did their nightly

news and then she changed over to ABC. But she was in Houston at a point in time before we moved. And then she got transferred to, and we kind of followed her. But anyway, she suggested this book and the title was Black Women Writers at Work and by Claudia Tate. And in that book, she had interviewed several of the significant female writers of the time.

[\(09:15\)](#):

And one of them was, Toni Cade Bambara, B-A-M-B-A-R-A-T-O-I-N-I-C-A-D-E, Bambara. And she, in her interview, had said that it was a good idea for writers to connect with other writers. And if there was an opportunity to do that, that was what she would suggest. And there was a group here in Atlanta called the Southern Collective of African American Writers, aka, S-C-A-A-W. And so when I moved to Atlanta, I looked for that group and I found a little ad and creative little thing. They were meeting at the Neighborhood Arts Center over near, used to be near the Turner, what is now the Georgia State, but used to be Turner Field. So I went to a meeting and I connected with other writers, and that was very significant. And we had that group. And there's a local artist whose name was Alice Lovelace, who has been, she was the president of it at that time. And one of the significant things, they had gotten some grant funding and they brought Octavia Butler here who is a significant science fiction, one of the very first.

[\(10:46\)](#):

So I had an opportunity to meet her. I was pregnant with Tynan and he's 39 now. That's, but she was here. Well, then they decided they were ready to disband SCAAW, and some of us decided that we wanted to keep meeting. We weren't ready to disband. So, we reformed under the name First World Writers. First World Writers. So there were five of us who decided to do that. Now, that decision was made in the living room of Dr. Mary B Diallo, who was one of the three first black freshmen to enter the University of Georgia. They have just named a freshman dormitory after her and her two compatriots that were the first three. So she has been a friend all this time, and she, you and her living room, we decided, our first world writers talked about what the name would be and all of that. And then we met every first Saturday of the month at the Fulton County Library downtown for a decade at least.

[\(11:58\)](#):

And many people have come in and out around the table there. Kevin Powell is one of the ones who's very well-known now. Robert L. Price, who's a playwright, Akbar, who just passed away. My friend Akbar, who was a storyteller and a puppeteer here in Atlanta, a cultural icon is really who he has been. And the ladies, there were four of us, five of us. Well, more than that because we, I mean, I'm still in touch with most of those people, and they're around the country now. Mary just retired from FAMU. She was teaching at Morehouse when I moved here, when I met her and working on her doctorate in French at Emory. Then she went to teach at FMU, and she taught there probably 30 years. Then a science fiction writer, Melanie Ross, who also was at FMU, she just retired also from FAMU. One is in Columbus, Ohio. Tony Short Smith, she's teaching now at Oberlin, I think is the college in Ohio that she's teaching.

[\(13:20\)](#):

And then Felton (maybe Edey)Dy, he was one of the founding members of First World Writers, along with Mary and myself. And he just recently moved back to South Carolina. That's where he's from. But he worked for years in the Fulton County Arts Council, and taught at Clark Atlanta. And then Dennis McCluster was one of the others. He moved to the Virgin Islands, I think, but they're all over the country. Pamela used to be Pamela Farmer, Pamela (maybe Corrals) Quas is her name now. She went back to her maiden name, but she teaches now at maybe Alabama State. I think she's in Huntsville, I can't remember. But she's in Alabama. These people are all over the country now. But we used to meet every



month, and at a point we had the energy to meet twice a month. We started meeting at the Neighborhood Arts Center that moved right down the street from the zoo off of Moreland, it used to be. And now it's over near Tyler Perry

Speaker 2 ([14:33](#)):

Studio.

Speaker 3 ([14:37](#)):

So, between Alpha Kappa Alpha and the writer's group, you have quite the network.

Speaker 1 ([14:42](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 3 ([14:42](#)):

You have quite the network.

Speaker 1 ([14:43](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 3 ([14:44](#)):

So you lived in Houston for how long? Five years. And then when did you move to Atlanta?

Speaker 1 ([14:50](#)):

New Year's Day of 1982.

Speaker 3 ([14:52](#)):

Okay. Did you come to Lithonia right away?

Speaker 1 ([14:54](#)):

No, we started out in Decatur. Our first house was right down the street from Agnes Scott on South Candler. I remember jogging down to the courthouse. I used to be a runner. Well, I used to be a jogger. Can't really call myself a runner, but I used to run. And so I jogged down to the courthouse to get myself registered to vote soon as we got here that first week. So, I live right down the street from Agnes Scott. And then we moved down the street from the Avondale train station between the train station and what used to be DeKalb Medical Hospital, which is now Emory. And that's where Tyna was born. We were living there when Tyna was born. He was actually born in the hospital. My ex-husband's a pharmacist. He worked in every hospital in Atlanta, probably. But then we moved to Lithonia, that was 1983.

Speaker 3 ([15:49](#)):

And now Stonecrest is a fairly new city, right?

Speaker 1 ([15:54](#)):

2020? 2016.

Speaker 3 ([15:56](#)):

2016. So can you talk about when you moved here in 83 as compare now, so your address is Stonecrest, right? So, it was Lithonia, now it's Stonecrest. What sort of changes, if any, did you notice between the time you got here in 83 to the time it became a city?

Speaker 1 ([16:16](#)):

Oh, tremendous growth. I mean, lots and lots of new things. That library was huge in our community. The Wesley Chapel, Williams C, brown Library, Williams C Brown was a county commissioner for me, and he was very instrumental in library to get that library built. The one on Wesley Chapel, the one that's on Wesley Chapel, and it was really a community hub. And there was the branch manager who opened that branch. Doris Wells was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, and we became friends. She was the first black librarian hired in DeKalb County. They had her working in the basement, cataloging and whatever, so she wouldn't be seen. She was the first professional librarian hired in DeKalb. So I used to have a lot of events there because we became such good friends, and she loved having a community in and would call me and say, okay, I need you to write a poem. Pearl Clay's coming. I need a poem. And this person's Williamson, we are having a celebration. At 10 years. They had a celebration with William C. Brown, need a poem, that kind of thing. So I've been very connected to that branch since it was really, we had our second, the second year that we did this big event, this collaborative event, it was at Westley Chapel. The first one was at the Barbara Loar Library in Northlake, which is very near where June lives.

([18:04](#)):

She lives right near Lakeside between Lakeside High School and that library. She lives there. So we had it there first, and then we went to Wesley Chapel, and then we went to downtown Decatur branch. And so it has skipped around to various public libraries. One year we were in City of Atlanta. The library was on pots. We did one there. I did one there one year. That was the year I met Malika. Her husband poet is a poet, and he taught English at Augusta State. So she's a poet and a visual artist. And so I met, he was in the event that year and she was having an art exhibit at a gallery. And after we finished the poetry reading, we went to this gallery where she was, and that's where I met her. And she's from Louisiana too. Interesting enough. But anyway, so we became friends, all that are connected. So I have a lot about five of her original pieces.

Speaker 3 ([19:13](#)):

Fantastic.

Speaker 1 ([19:14](#)):

Yep, yep, yep.

Speaker 3 ([19:16](#)):

You talked previously about doing writer's workshops with students. Is that in the public library or do you go into schools?

Speaker 1 ([19:23](#)):

I was going into schools, Felton. I was telling you

Speaker 3 ([19:26](#)):

What age group is that?

Speaker 1 ([19:27](#)):

Well, at that point I was not working full time, so I was able to do, I've done every age group. One of the first ones that I did was at Milton High School in Alpharetta, and they had a riot there that next week. But some of my work is a bit, some people might find it a bit controversial. Yeah.

Speaker 2 ([19:53](#)):

Okay.

Speaker 1 ([19:54](#)):

Yeah. So I've done every age. Then I taught creative writing for Georgia State for maybe three years in their continuing ed program. I was working in Dunwoody at Kingsley Elementary. That was my second day job assignment. Started out at Redan Elementary, then they moved me to Dunwoody. I did not want to go, but I had to go.

Speaker 3 ([20:22](#)):

Do you want to say a little more about what people find controversial about your writing?

Speaker 1 ([20:27](#)):

Well, the piece that, one of the pieces that I wrote was the only one that I've ever submitted a competition that won a first place prize. And that really is an interesting story too. I was working in then, but "ever search for Peach on Peachtree, know that Georgia Peach holds a hard dark pit. Ever wondered why Stone Mountains stands flags waving towering tribute to topple tyranny" so that I, a had a fetish about the Georgia State flag when I moved to Georgia

([21:21](#)):

And I held a lot of rallies. I put a lot of stuff in my work about that flag. I wanted to see that flag change. When I took my son Quinn to kindergarten, I saw that flag flying in front of his school. I was incensed. And then my mother went back to college. She was 74. She finished the month before her 75th birthday. But when she graduated in Indiana at Butler University and went across that stage, they had the flags of all 50 states. And that's when I realized not only is it an offense to me here, it's all over the country. So I prayed and prayed about it, but I also worked to see it change. There was a state representative and there was Frank Redmond and Vernon... Vernon Jones also was one of the ones who fought, wanted to see the flag change. Tyrone Brooks was very instrumental. He was a good friend, had a good close relationship with Roy Barnes, who actually changed it. And I was ecstatic. And then of course, Republicans came in and changed it back, but at least didn't put that Confederate battle flag back on it. But it still is the Confederate, it still is part of the, it still represents the Confederacy for those who know.

([22:57](#)):

And I know because I did the research on

Speaker 2 ([22:59](#)):

It.

Speaker 1 ([23:01](#)):

So I was upset with, for settling and convincing black people that we should settle on it. But it is what it is.

Speaker 3 ([23:11](#)):

And there's traction, there's movement at Stone Mountain Park in terms of trying to remove flags there and do some contextual things about what's going on there.

Speaker 1 ([23:23](#)):

And one of my friends who I worked with at Kingsley when I was in Dunwoody, her name is Angela, and she was working at the park, and she came to me with this idea. We did a whole proposal about what needed to be changed at the park and presented that. And then one of my friends who was initiated in the Alpha cap alpha in my chapter, her father mostly was appointed by Brian Kemp to be the head of the Stone Mountain Memorial Association. So I have been involved there as well. Yep, yep, yep, yep, yep,

Speaker 3 ([24:12](#)):

Yep. Talk about your career. You worked in what? DeKalb County schools? What grade level or what was it? Elementary, middle.

Speaker 1 ([24:24](#)):

Well, I started at elementary school every day in elementary. Then they shipped me to Dunwoody. I did not want to go. Of course, that involved a cross county drive. They wouldn't let me out for seven years. And then I finally got the opportunity to come back to Stevenson Middle School. I spent 17 years there. And then I ended my career at Shallow Rock Center, which is the DeKalb County and Rockdale County Center for severely, emotionally and heavily disordered children, severely and profoundly have that diagnosis, cannot function in a regular classroom setting. So I ended my career there.

Speaker 3 ([25:23](#)):

What's the setting like for a classroom at the Shadow Rock Center? They

Speaker 1 ([25:29](#)):

Have a very small student population, teacher pupil ratio, a teacher. Two paras, maybe 10 children. Yeah, I have what I could say about that too. But yeah, the school was designed, it's like it's beneath. It's on the lower level of Shadow Rock Elementary School. So you're starting out with children in the basement and the environment was, it really felt like a prison when I went in there. Initially,

([26:09](#)):

The books in the media center were, what I would say reminded me of 19 55, 19 54. They were discards, having been a librarian at that point for 20 some years. I know we periodically do what's called weeding. You have to take the old books out and whatever. Well, that whole collection was made up of discarded books. That's basically what was there when I got there. And fortunately for me at that point, the director of educational media is good personal friend of mine. And we had lunch together last week, can I say? Because books are, you get money based on the size, the student population. It's a per pupil ratio of what money you have to spend.

([27:00](#)):

And of course, with that small population, there wasn't a lot of money. I was like, why you going to have to give me some more money? So she did find me some more money and I started buying books, new books that children might possibly want to pick up and read. Those parents pay the same taxes that everybody else pays. Those parents deserve those children deserve to have new books, nice things. I mean, like I said, I could do a whole other thing about just how that works because Georgia is one of the only states, in fact, I think it's the only state that has this, what's called genius, this program for these children. And when Obama was president, the Justice Department has started doing investigation on, I mean, it's almost all black boys. Oh, my. And Savannah, they were doing that research about Savannah's program, but it's called GA Georgia, I forgot what it's called. What the acronym stands for. The GA is what it's called.

Speaker 3 ([28:14](#)):

And their funding is just county supplemented or there's no foundations or other kinds of

Speaker 1 ([28:19](#)):

Federal money. I'm sure some, yeah. Because the schools actually get more, you're going to get me on this whole political thing. The schools get more money when the kids are in special ed. They get more money for special education. So in theory, there's a monetary benefit to having special ed kids.

Speaker 3 ([28:45](#)):

And yet the books, and yet they're in a basement, assuming, seemingly no windows. It's

Speaker 1 ([28:51](#)):

The windows, but not,

Speaker 3 ([28:52](#)):

But is still in the basement. Absolutely. And no access to new books. And they have all the money. Right. Somehow. Okay.

Speaker 1 ([29:01](#)):

Yes. Yeah. It caused a lot of problems over there. That's why I had to retire. I was like, okay, this is caused something to happen. What little bit of retirement I would get. I'm not going to be able to get, because I'm going to be in litigation. I'll be in the courts, so I'll just come home. And that's what I did.

Speaker 3 ([29:21](#)):

So how long in total did you work for DeKalb County Schools? 27 years. What year? Do you remember what year you

Speaker 1 ([29:26](#)):

Retired? Yeah, June of 2016. Started in October of 89. I had done some substitute teaching prior to that. And then I worked for Save the Children part-time for a while, and did training with family daycare providers. And then I was a professional volunteer. I was on the writer every ca board of Greater Atlanta. The DeKalb. DeKalb used to have its own Y on Lawrenceville Highway. And that's why I started teaching fitness classes. I taught fitness classes for 20 some years.

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Speaker 3 ([30:08](#)):

Wow. Volunteered at the History

Speaker 1 ([30:12](#)):

Center? Yeah.

Speaker 3 ([30:15](#)):

Taught fitness,

Speaker 1 ([30:16](#)):

PTA, president, YWCA board, all of that professional volunteer. I was that for 11 years? Well, maybe not 11, let's say nine of those years. Fantastic. It wasn't really until I got here that I started volunteering and doing the community. Came work on that show, and I was a professional volunteer.

Speaker 3 ([30:42](#)):

Fantastic.

Speaker 1 ([30:43](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 3 ([30:45](#)):

Alright, Gwen, anything else you want to talk about? I feel like we've covered so many things. I'm going to go back through my notes and see if I have anything. Do you have anything else you want to talk about?

Speaker 1 ([30:54](#)):

Well, the city of Stonecrest, definitely. I was not one who voted for cityhood. When I decided to start looking at the political arena, I found that I was not eligible to run for office in the city of Lithonia because I lived in unincorporated Lithonia. So I did not live within the city limits. So the city limits, all of this was unincorporated Lithonia. So Jason Larry was working with Lithonia. He had been working with, they have an amphitheater there, and he had been working with the amphitheater, bringing acts to the city and stuff like that. The second go around, they had another person working with that that made it pretty successful years ago. But anyway, so he decided to create the city of

Speaker 2 ([32:02](#)):

Stonecrest

Speaker 1 ([32:03](#)):

And was successful in getting it on the ballot. I think Ronald Ramsey helped because somebody in the legislature has to put that forth or whatever. So people voted for it. I did not. Do you

Speaker 3 ([32:17](#)):

Want to talk about why you were opposed?

Speaker 1 ([32:21](#)):

Because I knew we didn't have the resources. We didn't have the tax base to support a city. Stonecrest Mall has been near bankruptcy a zillion times since it was built. And all the infrastructure for that mall was here when I moved out

Speaker 2 ([32:36](#)):

Here.

Speaker 1 ([32:38](#)):

But it was another, at least decade before the mall got built, they couldn't get any anchor stores. So dealers and Rich's were the two anchor stores that committed, and that's how the mall got built. But we don't have the kinds of resources, tax based stuff that other, that done what he has with Perimeter Mall up there.

Speaker 3 ([33:00](#)):

So, since 2016 when cityhood happened, has there been more of a tax space? Do you feel like it's better or worse? The same than it started in 2016? I

Speaker 1 ([33:12](#)):

Don't think it's much better, no. But the film industry is coming this way. So there's that. And there are a few businesses that have lasted at Stonecrest Arizona's, although it's been, it's changed hands several times. But Olive Garden has managed to stay open. Panera Bread Company has managed to stay open. That's it.

Speaker 3 ([33:44](#)):

So now, as a City of Stonecrest resident, you could run for office in the city of Stonecrest? I could. Yes, I could. All right.

Speaker 1 ([33:51](#)):

I sure could. Yep. I ran for county commission. I was trying to get a subway way up here at Thompson Mill Monroe where they've had a zillion accidents. And I started that when not Larry Johnson let other Johnson, my congressman, Hank Johnson, when Hank Johnson was the county commissioner, then Lee May. Then, when Lee May finally relinquished the seat, he had been appointed to be the CEO when Burrell Ellis got arrested and all of that. He only had maybe 18 months if that law still left in his term. So I ran for county commission then. And then Marita Johnson, who was one of the 10 people who ran, somehow won. That's a whole nother, I could talk about that for a really long time.

Speaker 3 ([34:45](#)):

Also. What was your experience like running for office?

Speaker 1 ([34:48](#)):

Well, first of all, I approached it as if I was taking a class, because it's expensive to run for office. The qualifying fee was over \$1,500. And when I investigated to see where that money went, nobody over

there could tell me. I finally did find out why it was that much, and it's 3% of what the salary would be if you got the office. So I found that I had to dig to find that out.

(35:22):

And then I wanted to know where this money went. So the person in the office said, well, I'm not sure. She said, I think some of it goes to the Democratic party. I said, well, no, because I ran as an independent, so we couldn't go to the Democratic party. So there was no answer. I never really got an answer. I never really got an answer about where that money went. And I know, Jennifer, that the money couldn't be budgeted in any way because they have no idea how many people are going to run. So it's not like you could put it in a slot because you don't know who's going to pay it. You don't know how many people are going to run. Interesting. Yeah. What year was this? 2015. So would you do it

Speaker 3 (36:10):

Again?

Speaker 1 (36:12):

Quite possibly, yeah. My mother passed away in 2014 and she left me a little money. So I had some money, so I spent it. And then my sorority sisters, I didn't ask anybody to donate. You have to be able to get money from other people to run her office, and I really did not do that. Finally, somebody convinced me to do a GoFundMe page, but I didn't. I was vice president of my high school senior class, and I didn't contact any of those people. And then when people found out, if they found out on my Facebook page, some people just sent me money because they knew. But so that piece, I would have to figure out better if I did it again. But I won't say that I wouldn't do it again. I very well might. Time will tell. Yep, that's still open.

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