

DeKalb History Center

Lithonia Community Engagement Oral History

Stephanie El-Amin, Roy El-Amin, Monica El-Amin

Speaker 1 ([00:01](#)):

Okay, so I'm here with Monica. It's Jennifer. It is Tuesday, March 5th, 2024, and we're conducting an interview about Lithonia. If you'll please say your name, Ms. El-Amin, we'll start with you.

Speaker 2 ([00:17](#)):

I'm Stephanie El-Amin. Stephanie Sample. Roy El-Amin.

Speaker 1 ([00:24](#)):

Okay. Thank you both for being here. Thanks so much for doing this. So Mrs. El-Amin, we'll start with you. Can you talk about where you grew up, where you went to school, and sort of your

Speaker 2 ([00:35](#)):

Young life to start? My young life is all foreign based. I was born and raised in a village called Fyrish on the Corentyne coast of Guyana in South America. And my early schooling was done in Fyrish at the Fyrish Congregational School. It was a religious school, but it served the entire community where my father was the principal. My mom was one of the teachers. And our elementary school or primary school as we call it, our schooling was based on the British system. So we went from primary to high school or secondary school. We didn't have middle school. So from Fyrish Congregational school, I went to Berbice Educational Institute as my high school. And after I was finished there, I went immediately into nursing at the New Amsterdam Hospital School of Nursing, and I graduated from there. Lord, I have to remember the years. Anyway, after I graduated, I subsequently went on to do a course in midwifery. So I was a, what we call a staff nurse midwife.

Speaker 1 ([02:32](#)):

What does that involve?

Speaker 2 ([02:34](#)):

It involves their system back there. The system was based on a lot of practical nursing. You did theoretical nursing, but you did more practical nursing. So by the time you graduated nursing school, you were able to, if thrown into it, manage, we had wards. You were able to manage a ward on your own.

Speaker 1 ([03:07](#)):

So were you in a maternity ward then, since you were focused on midwifery? No,

Speaker 2 ([03:12](#)):

Well, I wasn't exactly focused on midwifery, but you had to do midwifery in order to enhance the advancement of your career so that you could be promoted within the system. If you didn't do midwifery, then your chances of being promoted beyond the staff nurse were very limited. So then in 1984, I immigrated to the United States of America, and in December of 1984, and by February of 1986, I had to take the state board exam in this country in order to practice. But prior to that, I had to take an exam that said that I was proficient enough to take that state board exam. So I took that exam and passed it, and I worked at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford, Connecticut as a

Speaker 1 ([04:43](#)):

Staff nurse

Speaker 2 ([04:44](#)):

Or as an RN, and that's where I focused on in labor and delivery.

Speaker 1 ([04:56](#)):

Did you find that when you came here, other than taking a test, did you have to do more coursework? No. Once you were finished with your, okay. No,

Speaker 2 ([05:06](#)):

The test was, test was just a challenge to see if you were proficient enough to take the state board. So I did that and passed that and then did the state boards and passed that. So I guess they figured I was proficient enough, so they turned me loose on the nation. So in Connecticut, I befriended some very good friends of mine, the Oyesikus, and he was worked at Emory University Hospital as a neurosurgeon, and their family invited me to come to visit Georgia, and the rest is history. I came, I visited Georgia and I said, I'm coming back. This is where I'm going to live. Because Connecticut's climate wasn't conducive to me. I came from a warm climate and I was living there where I had to dig out snow. Not fun. Not fun at all. So yeah, I came to Georgia and settled in Lithonia, and that was in 1990, and that's where I met my husband. Very good. That's where I met him. And then we got married. We met in 1991, and we were married in 1993, and this daughter of ours made it

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

Birthday girl. As it turns out,

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

She made her appearance in 1994. Very good. And I stayed in Lithonia. We stayed in Lithonia until 2004. And I truly enjoyed living in Lithonia because I made a lot of friends. I got to know the place, and downtown Lithonia was very quaint and it gave me vibes of being back home in Guyana. I remember there was a little candy store on Main Street, and you could go in there and buy penny candies. Nice. Wow. Nice.

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

I wonder if it's still there.

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

Me too. I don't know if it's still there, but that was one of the neatest things that I found in Lithonia. And I used to go there all the time. Of course, I had a sweet tooth and we, the Guyanese society...what do they call them, the gy, is

Speaker 3 ([08:35](#)):

It the

Speaker 2 ([08:35](#)):

Guyana Association? Association of Georgia. We had used to have our meetings in Lithonia, and then every year they'd have a celebration of Guyanese people living in the area. So they used to meet a park in Lithonia and we'd celebrate there.

Speaker 1 ([08:59](#)):

Very nice.

Speaker 2 ([09:00](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 ([09:01](#)):

How big were your groups?

Speaker 2 ([09:03](#)):

Huge.

Speaker 1 ([09:04](#)):

I bet.

Speaker 2 ([09:06](#)):

That's amazing. I used to be a member. I was one of the founding members of, apparently there was the association, but it wasn't formally organized until I came in 1990. Then they got together and formalized it, and I was part of the membership committee. So we used to try to find all the Guyanese that came down and encourage them to join our group.

Speaker 1 ([09:43](#)):

Fantastic. Do you know if the group is still in existence?

Speaker 2 ([09:46](#)):

It is still in existence.

Speaker 1 ([09:49](#)):

Fantastic.

Speaker 2 ([09:49](#)):

And it has grown exponentially. Unfortunately, I fell by the wayside I had a child to raise. Yes.

Speaker 1 ([10:02](#)):

And were you also working as a nurse at that time? Yeah. Where were you working?

Speaker 2 ([10:08](#)):

When I came, I started working at Dunwoody. It used to be Shallowford Hospital. Then they changed the name to Dunwoody Medical Center, and I worked there for four years. And then I kind of branched out and I worked up north. Subsequently, I went to kind of a circuitous route. I took, because I worked at South Fulton Hospital, and then I started working at Northside Hospital, and I remained there for 27 and a half years until I retired in 2022.

Speaker 1 ([10:55](#)):

Oh, wow. Congratulations.

Speaker 2 ([10:57](#)):

Thank you.

Speaker 1 ([10:57](#)):

27 years. Retired in 2022. So do you miss it or do you love retirement?

Speaker 2 ([11:06](#)):

Okay. Oh, well, absolutely. I love retirement. You miss it. And you love, love retirement. We'll preface it with that. I do miss certain aspects of it. Everything has become computerized, a lot of it. And I missed being able to sit at the bedside and really get to know my patients and really get involved in who they were and help them experience the joy of bringing children into this world. But you had to be focused on the computer and because it's such a litigious field, you had to be wary, which of course you should be, always practice exemplary care and all of that. But you had to keep in the back of your mind, okay, if I do this despite my best efforts, sometimes the outcomes weren't what you wanted to see or to have. And that part was gut-wrenching. But when you saw these little ones, just fight and make it, that was the best part. And to see the joy in the eyes of the parents and the grandparents and the aunts and the uncles and brothers and sisters, that was unmatched. I do miss that. I don't miss running the halls. I don't miss, there's a shoulder dystocia hair or whatever, some emergency cropping up somewhere. I don't miss that aspect of it. It was exciting,

([13:25](#)):

But I needed to take a step back from that.

Speaker 1 ([13:28](#)):

So besides the use of technology in the later years of your career, were there other changes that you were aware of in your 27 or plus years career as a nurse?

Speaker 2 ([13:41](#)):

Well, the institution grew because that was one of the things that made the hospital popular. And because it grew the comradery and the older folks, it was hard to fit in with the younger folks. But it was

fun being able to mentor and tutor be a preceptor to some folks. But yes, there were a lot of changes. There were a lot of changes.

Speaker 1 ([14:28](#)):

And you were still working during Covid?

Speaker 2 ([14:31](#)):

I

Speaker 1 ([14:31](#)):

Was. Can you talk a little bit about that,

Speaker 2 ([14:34](#)):

What

Speaker 1 ([14:34](#)):

That was

Speaker 2 ([14:34](#)):

Like? That was a nightmare because you had to become used to wearing a mask from the time you entered the doors of the hospital until you left at the end of your shift. The only time you could take it off is when you went on a break to eat something or if you were going to drink something. And the one thing that I understood afterwards about myself is that a lot of the cleaners that they used, I was intolerant of because it affected my lungs being able to breathe properly. So when they had to do all this, we had to sanitize everything at the beginning and ending of each shift. And then if you went into a room with a patient who had Covid, then you had to be gowned from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head. Well, I should go the other way. The crown of your head to the soles of your feet. And if that person was very needy, you had to remain in that room for a long time. And seeing some pregnant women sick from Covid, that was gut-wrenching because you watch them suffer and struggle trying to be able to breathe, and you're trying to ensure that both mom and baby are safe. So that was very rough, those two plus

Speaker 1 ([16:35](#)):

Years. How long is a shift for you?

Speaker 2 ([16:40](#)):

12 hours. Oh, wow. Yeah,

Speaker 1 ([16:42](#)):

It's a long time to be in a mask.

Speaker 2 ([16:45](#)):

So it was more than half your day? Yeah, 12 hours in a mask. Wow. Yes.

Speaker 1 ([16:55](#)):

Thank you for sharing about that. It's still pretty fresh in all of our memories, I'm sure. Oh, yes. So Mr. El-Amin, let's talk about you. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? How did you get to be in Lithonia, et cetera?

Speaker 4 ([17:11](#)):

Okay. Well, I was born in Auburn, Alabama, and I went to elementary school, school called Boykin Street Elementary School. And from there, after I graduated from there, we went to a school called Drake Junior High School. And it was a middle school life. And from there I went to Drake High School, which I graduated from. And after high school, I went to a college called Tougaloo College, which is in Mississippi. I graduated there with a BA degree in history. And later on in life, I got a master's in psychology and counseling. And that came from school called Argosy University, which was here in Atlanta. And I started with my career. My career began in the insurance business when I left college. When I left college, I had received fellowships. I had received three fellowships. One was to Atlanta University, and that was in history. One was to John Carroll University in Cleveland, which was in urban study, and also Georgia State University and Urban Study. But I decided to not go to any of those schools because I wanted to make money. I thought I could make money fast in the insurance business. And so I started with Atlanta Life Insurance Company.

Speaker 1 ([18:59](#)):

And what did you do there?

Speaker 4 ([19:01](#)):

Okay, I was an agent,

Speaker 1 ([19:02](#)):

Which you

Speaker 4 ([19:02](#)):

Call debit agent. So from there I was learning that I could make more money working with Prudential Insurance Company. So I went from there to Prudential. So I think I stayed with Prudential about three or four years. After I left Prudential, I got into, well, I developed my own agency, which was AA American Insurance Agency, which I did that. I sold a lot of auto insurance at that time. That's when no fault first came to Georgia. But after a while, the rules was tighter regulation and things were tighter. And what happened was I was losing a lot of clients because of the clientele wasn't stable, that the type of market that I was working in, because oftentimes people would buy insurance just to go and get the tag. And then about two months of they left the insurance and then you got to pay back everything, all the fees that you Oh, wow. Wow. So that became difficult. So I said, well, this is not the best place for me right now. And that's when I started working with youth at the DeKalb Detention Center, DeKalb Juvenile Detention Center.

Speaker 5 ([20:36](#)):

Oh, wow.

Speaker 4 ([20:37](#)):

So I did that for about three or four years. And what happened, the state of Georgia took over the, and it became Department of Juvenile Justice. So with the Department of Juvenile Justice, I became one of the counselors there at the center. And then I started getting promotions. So I became what you call a probation officer at the time. And after that, I became what you call a program manager of a center, which was on Lawrenceville Highway. But I was in charge of probation, juvenile probation officer at the time. So I stayed there most of my career in charge of other probation officers. And I finally retired about 11 years ago. And so that's pretty much my career.

Speaker 1 ([21:41](#)):

How long did you work for Juvenile Justice in total?

Speaker 4 ([21:46](#)):

In total? 25 to 27 years.

Speaker 1 ([21:50](#)):

Wow.

Speaker 1 ([21:53](#)):

So I imagine you saw, I always like to know the sort of arc of changes that you see over a career that spans as long as each of yours has. So what kinds of things, what kinds changes did you see in terms of youth offenders and also just the system itself?

Speaker 4 ([22:12](#)):

Okay, let's talk about the youth and then first, what I noticed in the youth, when youth were fresh coming into the system, they came like little petty crimes. Maybe they were shoplifting, maybe they were stealing purse from stuff like that. And every now and then you saw you was a rare case, somebody, someone broke into someone's home. But as the years went by, the crimes became more hideous, more violent. And that's when they started doing carjacking, snatching people out of the cars and taking their cars, shooting peoples and stuff like that. And kids was becoming more depressed. You saw a lot of more suicide.

([23:01](#)):

And also, I remember one crime that a kid committed that he killed his girlfriend and threw her in a lake and over here in Stone Mountain. So that type of crime, and that was hard to deal with because when you come from a background of caring and nurturing, because that's when I came into the system, that's what we was doing. We was trying to turn the kid back home. Maybe he didn't have all the resources, parent didn't have all the knowledge to work with the kid and stuff, but then they start threatening you. I remember a case in Fulton County where a worker was hijacked, this was her client, and the client hijacked her and took her car. So I'm saying that, so it just became, the streets was meaner and the clients was meaner. So I mean, it was difficult to deal with that if you coming from a caring background. And then the system started changing too. The system became more of a correction system, more like a prison system than a system that was out there, social services agency. So it was just about correction, locking them up as much as you can. We had a system that you call designated felony. These was the kid that was in the system up to five years, up till the 21. So all of this, we had more kids start fitting into that type of system. So what I was saying, if you are a person that want to help someone, it's hard. Then we had more kids involved in sexual crimes too,

[\(24:49\)](#):

And that was difficult to deal with because of the fact, most of the time when those kids get to that level, it's hard to rehabilitate them

Speaker 6 [\(24:57\)](#):

Because

Speaker 4 [\(24:58\)](#):

Those type kids become repeat offenders, and you see that altering in the drugs and the community and stuff like that. So that was more stressful. It was more stressful on me and also on the peoples that worked under me. But those was the changes. And like I said, when the system changed to a more correctional type system, what it did, it required more training and stuff like that. And what happened was some of the training to me as a person just wasn't good for the youth because it was treating the youth. It was more violence, practice on violence, the youth of violence. And we were using more violence on them in order to control them. And then you had to do, I had workers doing home surveillance at night. They would be out there till 11 o'clock trying to check on the youth. Now, if you have a youth that's involved in drugs and stuff, or you have youth involved in prostitution and thing, that means you're going to have duck criminals. You're going to have duck drug dealers. You're going to have the duck pimps and stuff out there that out there willing to do harm to you because if you wasn't their kid to them, you're messing up their business.

[\(26:22\)](#):

And that's a financial thing to them. So you had to be careful because we didn't have weapons or anything. So we was just out there with a flashlight and a car.

Speaker 5 [\(26:33\)](#):

Oh my goodness.

Speaker 4 [\(26:37\)](#):

So that's what you was up against. And then you had a lot of turnovers too. So if you was a manager of a unit or whatever of a program, you're going to have a lot of turnover in your program because you got a lot of young people, they're afraid of the violence. So they'll come in and work for a while, and then after they find out what's really going on that case load, they'd be looking for other jobs every place there. So it became difficult. And so I was eager to retire. So when I retired, I was happy.

Speaker 1 [\(27:08\)](#):

Yeah, I can imagine. Did you ever have to appear in court to talk about?

Speaker 4 [\(27:13\)](#):

Oh yeah. All the time. I mean, that's when I first started. That's when I was what you call, when I went from detention worker, counselor, I went to a court service worker, and then I went to Department of Juveniles just and became the manager of probation.

Speaker 5 [\(27:31\)](#):

But



Speaker 4 ([27:31](#)):

Even in probation, because anytime a worker that I supervise, a probation officer didn't show up for court, that mean I have to show up for

Speaker 5 ([27:42](#)):

Court.

Speaker 4 ([27:43](#)):

In fact, one of your judges over here now, judge Adams,

Speaker 1 ([27:48](#)):

Judge Adams,

Speaker 4 ([27:48](#)):

He used to be the chief justice over there. So

Speaker 1 ([27:51](#)):

We've interviewed him. We've interviewed him as part of this series. So we had him recorded too. Yeah, small world.

Speaker 4 ([27:59](#)):

It's a small world. So I used to do placement and stuff like that. But what I was saying is that you had to, cause I likely showing up in court because the court made you prepared, you had to be prepared in order to present what you wanted for the kid and what the community could offer, what the resources were and what you had your workers or you were dedicated to do to get the kid in a better position. But oftentimes you have the big dreams and the big ideas. Sometimes it don't work. I used to say I used to take a kid to Augusta to place him in a group home. As I'm riding along the street. Now, this never happened, but I used to tell this story all the time. I say, when I be riding on the street, I see that same kid running behind me beside me because he running away. And we did have a lot of kids run away from group songs and stuff like that.

Speaker 1 ([28:58](#)):

Is there a success story that stands out to you in terms of

Speaker 4 ([29:01](#)):

Yeah, there was plenty of success

Speaker 1 ([29:03](#)):

Stories,

Speaker 4 ([29:04](#)):

But one of 'em was, I had kid that went to, we had a program, it was like a military program. I can't think of the name of it, but it was in South Georgia. And we used to send kids to that program. And a lot of those kids, kids that hadn't finished high school and they graduated from high school and that program,

some got a GED, some got skill degree and certificate and stuff like that, and plumbing and stuff like that. And that was used about a two year program. They wasn't a plumber itself, but they was classified as a helper, a technician, a prominent technician or something. But we saw that a whole lot. And then a lot of kids did come home, even though some of 'em had difficult environment, some of 'em did do okay. In fact, I met a couple of kids that went to Georgia State later on and after they had got out of detention, every kid that came into detention initially just had made that one mistake. And some of 'em, they went on better their lives. So yeah, that was a lot of success stories. But what I was telling you about the earlier part, the depressing part, which depressing weighs on you. Heavier than the good stories of Yeah, of

Speaker 1 ([30:26](#)):

Course. So Stephanie mentioned that you met in Lithonia. Talk about how you guys met. Okay, we'll tell the big story if you like. Okay. If you feel like it's appropriate to tell,

Speaker 4 ([30:46](#)):

It is appropriate. So we met... both of us, we used to work out at the gym, what's the name? Holiday Inn?

Speaker 2 ([30:55](#)):

No, Bally's

Speaker 4 ([30:57](#)):

Bally's. And what happened was I observed this beautiful young lady working out and stuff like that. And so I said, I need to go and talk to this lady, see what she's all about. So I did. And what she told me later, which broke my heart, she said she couldn't understand nothing I was saying. And see, I'm from Alabama and she's from Guyana, and the language could not understand

Speaker 5 ([31:41](#)):

It because

Speaker 4 ([31:41](#)):

I was speaking to Alabama lingo. So

Speaker 2 ([31:44](#)):

You just wasn't connected. I would smile and say, hi, yeah, how are you? And keep going along by this.

Speaker 4 ([31:57](#)):

So eventually I think she called me one evening,

Speaker 2 ([32:04](#)):

No, one day. One day actually, I was telling my coworkers about this guy that I saw in the gym who keeps trying to talk to me. I said, but I don't understand what he's saying. So one of my coworkers who later became a very good friend, and she's actually Monica's godmother, she said, why don't you stop and talk to him? So one day I decided, okay, I'm going to talk to him. And we ended up not working out

that day. We stood there and talked for a good long time, and I realized that if I really listened, I could kind of translate into my mind what I was hearing. So yeah, that was the beginning of it all. And then he invited me to breakfast. Thank God it wasn't a Waffle House. Oh, nice. Because that would've been the end of it. He invited me to breakfast and we continued the conversation and the rest is history. That's lovely.

Speaker 1 ([33:23](#)):

And you lived in Lithonia for 15 years or so? 14. 14 years

Speaker 2 ([33:30](#)):

From 1990 to 2004.

Speaker 1 ([33:32](#)):

And you went to did school there? Until

Speaker 2 ([33:37](#)):

Fourth grade?

Speaker 1 ([33:37](#)):

Until fourth grade,

Speaker 2 ([33:38](#)):

Okay. Elementary school. She went to pre-K and elementary.

Speaker 1 ([33:43](#)):

Were you happy with the schools? Did you have a good experience in Lithonia? Talk about your living there and school and community. What was it like for

Speaker 2 ([33:51](#)):

Y'all? So the community was wonderful. I loved it. pre-K was fantastic, but when Monica got to elementary school, there was a new school that was started. And because it was a theme school, I thought that this would be fantastic for her. So I got her enrolled in that school, and those were from, she went second grade, third grade, fourth grade. And one day I remember her coming home from school and it stuck with me all these years. (This section has been edited out, due to its sensitive nature). So we decided we did not want to continue there. So that's when we packed up shop and went to Rockdale.

Speaker 5 ([35:22](#)):

And

Speaker 2 ([35:26](#)):

There she is.

Speaker 1 ([35:26](#)):

We've also talked in the office about your experience in school and how segregation has happened again in that the kids that you were with, you really didn't go to school with white kids until much later, right? That's right, yes. Is that your experience?

Speaker 2 ([35:45](#)):

When she got to fifth grade? When we moved to Rockdale, that's when she encountered white kids. I think when she was in first grade, there was one white kid she was in class with, and I cannot remember her name, and one Hispanic kid. And then when we moved to the theme school, that was literally 100% African-American.

Speaker 6 ([36:20](#)):

Then

Speaker 2 ([36:21](#)):

When we went to Rockdale, it was a mixture of kids, so she just blended seamlessly into

Speaker 1 ([36:32](#)):

It. Mr. El-Amin, I know that you have a BA in history. Is there a particular area of history that was very interesting to you then

Speaker 4 ([36:43](#)):

Or in rural history? World history, the time I was dealing with European history

Speaker 1 ([36:46](#)):

At that time. And do you have a BA in history as well?

Speaker 4 ([36:50](#)):

Yes.

Speaker 1 ([36:51](#)):

Do you have a particular area that you're interested most interested in or you studied in particular?

Speaker 3 ([36:56](#)):

My main area of interest is world history, but I'm also very fascinated with the history of pop culture.

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

Okay, very cool.

Speaker 2 ([37:06](#)):

She has a master's degree in public history.

Speaker 1 ([37:12](#)):

Very cool. Do you have any questions for your folks?

Speaker 3 ([37:17](#)):

Let's see. I do have a question. Mom. When you first came to Lithonia, you said that you went to Redan United Methodist Church. Could you speak on that experience that you had attending the church?

Speaker 2 ([37:37](#)):

That was a very interesting experience for me because prior to coming to Georgia, I was very aware, very conscious of racism that they spoke about that existed in the south. And I heard later I came and read about the Ku Klux Klan and all that sort of stuff. So I was searching for a church home and I decided to visit several churches in the area. And one of the first churches I went to was Redan United Methodist Church. And when I walked in the door, I just let my eyes scan the room and I realized I was the only person of color in that building. I was scared. So I found the seat as close to the back of the church as I could because I didn't want to just make a U-turn and leave. So I sat in the back and the preacher was very good, but as soon as they said amen, I shot out to that church like I was leaving a cannon. And then I went to about three other churches and the preaching at Redan United Methodist Church spoke to me. And so I hesitantly returned, but then I had my modus worked out. I would sit in the very last pew

Speaker 5 ([39:50](#)):

Right

Speaker 2 ([39:50](#)):

By the exit, and as soon as the service was over, I shot out of the church. I wouldn't stay, I wouldn't socialize, I wouldn't do it. I just wanted to hear the sermon.

([40:05](#)):

So one day, the pastor who was Jay Hodges at the time, his Dr. Judson B Hodges, but he liked everybody to call him Jay. So he always stood at the front of the church to give the benediction, but he came down to the back of the church standing by the door, the exit to give his benediction. So that was a conundrum because I needed to be able to get out of this church. So he reached his hand out and I reached back and we shook hands and he was like, it's so nice to see you in church. And gradually over time, we developed a friendship. And he asked me one day, because he came by my home and he said, why do black people not stay in the church? He said, you are the only one who stayed. I said, I said, the only reason I stayed is because of the way you preach. I was able to be spiritually fed from what you were saying. I said, but if you remember, I used to run out of the church every Sunday. I said, because I was scared. I didn't see anybody else in the church that looked like me. And all the stories you had from the south, be it good or bad, is what things that happened to black folks that were not very nice. So I said I kept going, and eventually there was another family that came and they stayed, but a lot of them came once and left.

([42:15](#)):

But eventually the congregation started changing. Very slowly. Other people of color started coming, and actually I encouraged my husband to come join me there. Very good.

Speaker 1 ([42:30](#)):

How long did you attend the church?

Speaker 2 ([42:34](#)):

Until I left Lithonia. I know even after I left, I would still drive back there until Monica, one of her friends invited her to United Methodist Church in Rockdale. We went there.

Speaker 1 ([42:52](#)):

So was Dr. Hodges there the whole 14 years?

Speaker 2 ([42:55](#)):

No, actually he spent four years. The Methodist, United Methodist body has this weird thing where they changed pastors every four years. So fortunately he was there. He married us and he baptized Monica. Lovely. And that was his last baptism before he left, they transferred him to another church. So yeah.

Speaker 1 ([43:28](#)):

Amazing. Any other questions you want to ask?

Speaker 3 ([43:33](#)):

Yes, dad, I have a question for you. I remember you telling me that you came to Atlanta during the 1970s, and it wasn't until you married mom that you moved over to Lithonia, but you lived in Avondale for a while. Could you talk about just what was it like coming to Atlanta but then just moving into those metro areas like Avondale and Lithonia?

Speaker 4 ([43:58](#)):

Okay. Well, coming to Atlanta was an experience for me, especially poor boy from the South, coming from a small neighborhood and Atlanta. I mean, it was something that I reckon, I would say, that you would see on TV is almost unbelievable. The chances, because I grew up in a segregated community and we didn't have a lot of things and we wasn't offered a lot of things. You had segregated theater, if you could go to one (inaudible). We had segregated water fountains and stuff like that. And when I grew up, when you walk the streets, you used have to bow down if a white woman passed, you bow, you had to drop your head and stuff like that in. But I came to Atlanta after I left college and things were changing. That's when the civil rights movement was coming in.

([45:01](#)):

Things were changing, people was becoming able to vote and stuff like that. And when I came to this city, they was just elected. They had just elected a black vice mayor here, and that was Maynard Jackson. Eventually Maynard Jackson became the mayor, and then eventually Andrew Young became a congressman, and then whole Atlanta downtown area had changed. And there was a lot of things that you could do. The parks was integrated. Atlanta was a clean town when I first came here, because before I came here, I had been to Cleveland, I had been to Boston, New York, Detroit, places like that. And those were nasty cities to me. Atlanta was clean, very clean to me.

([45:50](#)):

And I saw a lot of young people that was coming into Atlanta right out of college and places like East Point and College Park because a lot of people was getting involved with the airport and a lot of people were flying, black people were flying and stuff like that. When I came to Atlanta, I came from Boston at one time and I was riding the bus and we stopped at the Atlanta station and I had a chance to walk and look at places in Atlanta, and I was impressed. I said, man, this is a beautiful city. That's what I said. I said, this is the place that I want to be because of the opportunity. I remember when I first got a job

with Atlanta Life, the supervisor there, he took me to a restaurant. I had mostly been to segregated restaurant, a hole in the wall type restaurant, the hole in the wall type restaurant. The place wasn't that nice decor or anything, but the food was good. But when I came here, you took me to a restaurant called Piccadilly Restaurant,

[\(47:04\)](#):

And I thought that was the best restaurant in heaven. I thought that was the restaurant that I would've went to if I had went to New York somewhere, you just a Piccadilly restaurant and you could pick your own food and stuff. And I thought that was the most enjoyable place that I had ever been. I just really thanked my manager for taking me there and not knowing that this is the lower end scale of the restaurant, I thought, but I was just so happy to be happy enjoying the food and stuff and people treating your nice stuff like that. But that was one of my best experiences in Atlanta. Then when I came here, I didn't have a car. Now you could ride in Marta for 25 cents

[\(47:55\)](#):

During that time, and that was my transportation. I thought that was so convenient. And then all the parks, just like they used to have Piedmont Park, they used to have big concerts out there and you didn't have to pay anything. And they would have big bands sometime some of the big national bands would be out there, Piedmont Park, you can go there and just enjoy yourself and they would give you free food. I'm not going anywhere. I got, and then all the educational institution that was here too involved. So you can go to school, because I had started, I went back to Georgia State. I started working on a master's there at one time, but then I quit to stop because it was just too much for me at the time. But what I was saying is that everything that I pretty much enjoyed in life to me was here in Atlanta. I was just amazed with Atlanta. And then when I did move out to the suburbs, I was getting older then. I got tired of the crowds in the north. So that's when I moved into Avondale. So when I moved into Avondale, this place called Avondale Estates, and the place was so nice, but what I found out there that was nothing but senior citizens out there. That's what I was so nice.

[\(49:22\)](#):

But I loved it. I stayed there until I moved to Lithonia. So that was my experience pretty much. But did I answer everything or did I miss something? Because what

Speaker 3 [\(49:34\)](#):

I was waiting for you to talk about, let Lithonia,

Speaker 4 [\(49:38\)](#):

Lithonia was like Lithonia was nice, but my first impression of Lithonia, because I had been in the city so long and the bright lights and everything, the

Speaker 2 [\(49:47\)](#):

Boondocks. He told me it was The boondocks.

Speaker 4 [\(49:50\)](#):

I couldn't see. I came out there one night and I couldn't see anything. I said no, because I was going to take Stephanie I out or something. I started to turn around and come back. I'm not coming out here again. I said, no, it was the boondocks. That's what you told me. And to me it just, there's nothing out here I can't go back to let yet. And one time I had a homeboy that was living out here in Lithonia. He

called me one time at two o'clock in the morning and he wanted me to come out there because he knew I had a counseling background and him and his wife were having difficulties. And I told him, no, I can't come out there to Lithonia, not at two o'clock in the morning. I said he had to wait till another time.

[\(50:55\)](#):

Y'all had to work this through the night and tell, because coming to Lithonia at this time of night, I could not do it. But that was my experience. But after a while I began to like Lithonia. I went downtown. I forget what it was. It was some type of government thing that they were having downtown Lithonia. And when I got into the place, Lithonia, like Decatur Square or whatever you call it around here, and I reached a place where I wanted to go and that was the sheriff over here. And this was a little clerk for something over here. I don't know it was taxes or whatever, but it reminded me, the first thing I thought about, and Andy Griffin, Mayberry, that's what reminds me of it, Mayberry. But it was nice. Everything was quiet and peaceful. Nothing was going on. People just sitting around doing nothing. I said, so this what we pay these people for just to sit around all did drink coke and drank coke. But they were nice and friendly and nothing was happening.

Speaker 1 [\(52:07\)](#):

So in the 14 years you were there, Stonecrest Mall was built.

Speaker 4 [\(52:10\)](#):

Yeah.

Speaker 1 [\(52:11\)](#):

So you saw some development going on as you lived, as you stayed there, it sort of became more suburban

Speaker 2 [\(52:18\)](#):

I development. Oh, a lot of development. Where we used to live that street became like a thoroughfare, the main street, South Deshon Road. And we left just before they constructed an elementary school because they had so many housing developments around us that I remember one day I got to the entrance of the subdivision and I couldn't get out because there was so much traffic back and forth. And that was another reason why I am like, no, I like peace and quiet. I came from a little village and everybody knew everybody. And you walk to where you want to go or you ride, you just got on your bike, you rode to wherever you wanted to go. And that's why Lithonia appealed to me because I liked that kind of rural setting. And I absolutely loved it. And if it weren't for the school situation, I don't think we would've left when we did. So

Speaker 3 [\(53:40\)](#):

Very cool. Anything else? I'm trying to think of something else. I guess what I can say from my experience is that something really neat about Lithonia is that we lived so close to pretty much everything. So you go on I-20, you could go to Atlanta, you could drive to Stonecrest Mall, you could drive a little bit further. And we were still within proximity of Redan United Methodist Church and even Stone Mountain

[\(54:10\)](#):



Because one of my earliest memories is as a child, and both of my parents can also speak to this, is that I went to the Montessori school. We had to do a Christmas Carol concert and it was downtown in Stone Mountain. And my mom says every time she sang during rehearsal, but she just did not want to sing. You got so tight. Yes. That's so cute, Monica. And something else that I'm thinking about too is that all of my activities that I did as a child in Lithonia, it was all, well just in DeKalb in general. It was all close to each other because we even went to Tucker Recreational Center, my dad and I, we even went roller

Speaker 5 ([54:54](#)):

Skating

Speaker 3 ([54:56](#)):

At the All-American skating rink on Saturdays. Everything was just within proximity. And so I grew up with a very enriching experience because even though my school life wasn't particularly great with the bullying, at least at home and in the community, I still felt wanted and valued. And that meant a lot. That's wonderful.

Speaker 4 ([55:16](#)):

Don't forget Bransby Park.

Speaker 2 ([55:19](#)):

Oh my gosh, yes. We all love Bransby Park. I love this particular because I would pick Monica up from that park at the end of the day. I bathed her and fed her dinner and she would fall asleep eating dinner. I picked her up, I put her in the bed. I had the rest of the evening for, that's a good part. I have a lot of good space. It was outdoors, so they had them hiking and canoeing and she did horseback riding and played tennis and archery. They did archery and swimming. I mean it was everything they had out there. There wasn't a day she came home where she wasn't excited about going back the next day. Yes,

Speaker 1 ([56:14](#)):

Excited and exhausted.

Speaker 2 ([56:15](#)):

Yes. I love the exhausted

Speaker 3 ([56:17](#)):

Part. Yeah, that's good. And to speak on that as well, something that I told you about earlier that when I went to that camp at Bransby, a lot of those kids from North DeKalb came to that summer camp. So they bussed those kids to the camp. So us black kids, we get to see all the white kids, Asian kids, Latino kids. And that's how I got that very diverse experience outside of school is when I was in school. It was just, I saw myself just in various people. But going to summer camp, I got to meet different types of people, interact with them, and I got to learn how to speak to different people from different backgrounds. And it's influenced why I'm able to do the work that I do today.

Speaker 1 ([57:00](#)):

Absolutely.

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Speaker 3 ([57:02](#)):

Alright, well

Speaker 1 ([57:02](#)):

I think we should end on that note. Thank you both so much. Thanks everybody.

Transcribed by REV AI

Edited by human J Blomqvist, archivist, DeKalb History Center, January 2025

The El-Amins were interviewed in March 2024. Monica is the African American Coordinator at DeKalb History Center.