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Oral History of Shirley Williams, interviewed by Markayla Moore on 07/22/2018 in Huntington, West Virginia.

Markayla Moore: Okay, it started. What stories did you hear about your early ancestors whom you never knew?

Shirley Williams: What?

Markayla Moore: What stories did you hear about your early ancestors whom you never knew?

Shirley Williams: Oh, let's see. Like a grandfather and grandmother lived in Millersburg, Kentucky and they had a farm. Raised chickens, and pigs, and vegetables. And they didn't have any type of schooling, so one day they were cooking on their coal stove and the house burnt down. And so they rebuilt a house that had dirt flooring.

Markayla Moore: How long did that take?

Shirley Williams: What?

Markayla Moore: To rebuild all of it.

Shirley Williams: Took about a year or so. Yeah. And let's see. There's really nothing else that I can remember.

Markayla Moore: Okay. What was school like for you?

Shirley Williams: Well, when I was going to school at the all black Booker T. Washington, in Ashland, Kentucky – that's where I grew up. I lived on 30th Street, and a block up was an all white school, but by then it wasn't integrated. So we had to walk 30 blocks to Booker T. Washington School.

Markayla Moore: That makes us young kids seem so lazy.

Shirley Williams: Huh?

Markayla Moore: That makes us young kids seem so lazy when we don't like to walk places.

Shirley Williams: What?

Markayla Moore: Us kids, how we don't like to walk places.

Shirley Williams: Oh, I know.

Markayla Moore: That makes us seem really lazy.

Shirley Williams: Well, you know, walking was nothin' – nothin' to it. You know, we never thought anything of it, and we had excellent black teachers at Booker T.

Washington. So when school was finally integrated, let's see, I was in the eighth grade. Yeah. And my mother died when she was 34 and left eight of us.

Markayla Moore:

Wow.

Shirley Williams:

So my dad and other siblings moved to Huntington, and I was wanting to finish my school year out. So my mother's cousin kept me until the school year ended, and then I went on to Huntington to Douglass High School. Excellent teachers there. I've learned so much from the black teachers. And in a way I wish it was still like that.

Markayla Moore:

Yeah, I don't see many black teachers now.

Shirley Williams:

I know.

Markayla Moore:

There's a couple at Huntington Middle and Meadows. Well, no. When I was there, there was no black teachers in Meadows.

Shirley Williams:

Well, they made sure you were active in everything.

Markayla Moore:

That's how I am now.

Shirley Williams:

I just loved it. I just loved it.

Markayla Moore:

What was the best advice a family member have given you while you were in the house?

Shirley Williams:

While I'm in what?

Markayla Moore:

What is the best advice a family member gave you when you were living in the house?

Shirley Williams:

Let's see. Not to talk bad about anyone. Always be courteous. Never curse [laughter], and try to achieve what you can. Yeah.

Markayla Moore:

What did you do on Christmas, Thanksgiving, or birthdays?

Shirley Williams:

Well, on Thanksgivings we always went up to my husband's mother's house, but she's deceased. But we still – I organize everything, call everyone, have them bring a certain dish. And then at Christmas, I'll have something here at my house. And birthdays, you know, we celebrate everybody's birthday. My husband, our kids, our grandkids. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore:

Where did you work?

Shirley Williams:

Back in 1963, when I moved to Huntington – well, let me go back. After I spent a year at Booker T. Washington, then we moved back to Huntington, and I

graduated in 1963 from Paul Blazer High School after everything was integrated. Then I moved to Huntington in '63. I worked at Maidenform (it was the bra factory) for 10 years, then I took some time off and had children. And then when they were in school, I worked at the Huntington Dress Factory, where the police station is now, and I worked there for 10 years. Then I decided to go to Marshall to get a degree; I did that in information technology. It was a two year associate degree and I was offered a job, but my husband wanted me to stay home so I could travel with him and do whatever. So that's the way it's been ever since. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: Do you still make traditional family foods?

Shirley Williams: Oh, of course. Turkey, dressing, green beans, you name it. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: Then I have some backup questions.

Shirley Williams: I just love the holidays.

Markayla Moore: Me too.

Shirley Williams: In a way it's sad because most of our loved ones have deceased, but the generation goes on.

Markayla Moore: Yeah. Can you tell me about race in Huntington? Was it segregated?

Shirley Williams: Race in what?

Markayla Moore: About race in Huntington.

Shirley Williams: Race in Huntington. Well, you know I have no problem. I haven't run into anything that would hurt me. I haven't been called any names or anything, but a lot of people – black people – do start trouble instead of walkin' away. Yeah. They just want to start trouble. And the same with whites. Same way.

Markayla Moore: What did people do for fun?

Shirley Williams: Well, my husband and I play golf and go to the casino in Cross Lanes, and we have gatherings at church, and we used to go skating but that was years ago. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: I go skating, too.

Shirley Williams: We go to parties. Yeah.

Markayla Moore: Do you remember when times were tight? I mean, do you remember when money was tight?

Shirley Williams: Um-hmm. When I was growin' up, my father was laid off, so he would get commodities. You know – butter, dry milk, and peanut butter. Stuff like that, which really helped when he was laid off. Yeah.

Markayla Moore: What's one of your fondest memories living here in 1950s? How was it different from the '70s or '80s?

Shirley Williams: 1950. Let me – let's see. Well, at that time there were a lot of places where blacks couldn't go, but now it's changed a lot. Now Phil Carter, who teaches at Marshall, is an example where they picketed the White Pantry and other restaurants back then.

Markayla Moore: Tell me about your parents or your family's background.

Shirley Williams: My dad was from Millersburg, Kentucky. He didn't go to college. He went as far as the eighth grade, and my mother was adopted and never found her biological parents. We even drove down to either Lexington or Louisville to see if they had any record, but they said back then they didn't keep records of black children who were there without knowin' who their parents were. So we didn't have any luck. And my mother even tried to find her biological parents, but never could. But like I say, she was adopted and loved. And she met my father in 1942, then they got married, and then I was the first one born.

Markayla Moore: What street did you – oh, you told me that. What did your – oh, you told me that too. [Laughter] Where were your parents originally from?

Shirley Williams: Well, like I said, we never did find out where my mom was originally from. She was adopted, like I said, but my dad grew up in Millersburg, Kentucky. So that's all I know about that.

Markayla Moore: What was your favorite place to eat?

Shirley Williams: Home. [Laughter] You mean back then?

Markayla Moore: Yeah.

Shirley Williams: Yeah, home. Well, like I said, you know, blacks weren't allowed in restaurants.

Markayla Moore: What other relative did you have contact with growing up?

Shirley Williams: My aunts, and I met my biological father in '63, and I met my half brother in '63. And we stay in contact. My biological father had passed, but I've met my half brother again after, gosh, 30 years. He lives in St. Louis, and I have a half sister I've never met, so I plan on going back to St. Louis and visit my half brother and meet my half sister.

Markayla Moore: What is your favorite place to shop? Where was your favorite place to shop?

Shirley Williams: At the time it was Smart Shop downtown. Oh, they had fabulous clothing. Fabulous. But like I said, everything has changed. A lot of the stores either closed down or they moved to the mall.

Markayla Moore: Yeah. And the mall's not even in Huntington.

Shirley Williams: I know. You know they tried –

Markayla Moore: And it's called Huntington Mall.

Shirley Williams: They tried to get it in Huntington, but a lot of the people didn't want it in Huntington. That would've helped the economy greatly. I don't know what was wrong with them, what they were thinkin' about. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: What is your fondest memory of living here?

Shirley Williams: Let's see. Going to church, goin' to parties and just minglin' with people. You know, when my husband was mayor we had to attend a lot of functions. And most of the time, he and I were the only two blacks at the functions. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: Yeah. What were your duties around the house as a child? What were the other children's duties? How did the duties break down by gender?

Shirley Williams: Okay, my brothers helped my dad with the lawn care, and my sisters and I, we cleaned the entire house, and washed clothes, dry 'em, fold 'em, and I would cook a lot because my dad would work from three to 11. So as soon as I got in from school, I had to start cookin'. Yeah. Like I said, I was the oldest of eight. Four boys, four girls. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: What did people do for fun? Did you go on dates?

Shirley Williams: Now what?

Markayla Moore: What did people do for fun? Where did you go on dates?

Shirley Williams: Oh, we would go to the drive-in, and to the movies, and we would go skating, and go to the park, have picnics. Yeah.

Markayla Moore: Describe a time when you felt most proud of someone in your family, self, community.

Shirley Williams: Oh, my husband. He's the wind beneath my wings. He has lifted me up so many times.

Markayla Moore: Describe the house you grew up in. Describe your room.

Shirley Williams: Now what?

Markayla Moore: Describe the house you grew up in. Describe your room.

Shirley Williams: Oh, my room was huge. It was – my room was right where I could look out the window at the front yard and everything. And we had a porch that went all the way around. I loved that.

Markayla Moore: Describe what your siblings were like. Who were you closest too?

Shirley Williams: Well, I'm closest to my sister Barb, and what was the other question?

Markayla Moore: Who were you closest to?

Shirley Williams: Yeah, my sister Barbara.

Markayla Moore: Yeah, that's all that I said. I said describe what they were like.

Shirley Williams: Oh, they were fun. We'd do a lot of things together.

Markayla Moore: When did you learn to cook? Who taught you?

Shirley Williams: Well, my mother did. I'd watch her cook and clean, and things like that. So that's where I got that from.

Markayla Moore: Were there any special family foods or recipes?

Shirley Williams: No.

Markayla Moore: I just about asked you all these question. So there's no more questions. There isn't any more questions that I see.

Shirley Williams: Okay. You know, I love doin' history. That's my passion. And I've got a collage here that I take when we have our reunion every year – every other year in Columbus. Our next one is the first week in August next month. And we always take a group picture, and this is the most people who have come.

Markayla Moore: Wow. That's a lot.

Shirley Williams: [Laughter] Oh yeah. You know, my brother died in '72, and he had a little girl. She was about three years old. Her name was Alice. And we kept tryin' to find her. I kept puttin' ads – they lived in Youngstown, Ohio. I kept putting ads in the paper tryin' to find Alice, so I hired a detective and he found her. About eight years ago. So, my husband and I went to Youngstown to meet her and her family. And that's her right down there. Right here with her kids and husband. See, I was lookin' for Alice Johnson, but I didn't know she had married; but she's Alice Shepherd, but still the detective found her anyway and she came to the reunion one year. And we all just cried. We didn't think we'd ever find her. I didn't think I'd ever find her. So, that's my dad. And I put a family photo album

together, which is down here. It's all kind of pictures of family members, and you know I did a bio on my biological father's side and my other dad's side. Yeah.

Shirley Williams: And that's my stepmother. She died in 2016. And this is my brother who died in 1972. You know, so that's her dad. Yeah. And then I have another brother who died in 2014. So, our first reunion was in Ashland, Kentucky where we're from, and we would go have a reunion at the Dawson Park, so that's a picture of one of the reunions. But like I said, I just love doin' albums.

Markayla Moore: Yeah. That's a cool –

Shirley Williams: In fact, I'm in the process of doing a historical album now. You know, about the lynchings back then, and football players, basketball players back in the '20s and '30s, and – . I just love – that's my passion. And that's why I wanted to get with Mr. What's-His-Name when he was over there at Marie Redd Center. I want to get with him and see what kind of information he has. And this is my husband, and his brothers and sisters. That's Jimmy, and that's Joe, Johnny, Eddie. Eddie's wife Deanna, Johnny's wife Karen. That's me. Rita, Jimmy's wife, and Sandra, and Joyce, and Fred. These two are Joe's sisters. And Sandra has never been married. Yeah. So, back then, my husband and I and our committee had started a golf tournament called the Ebony Golf Classic, and it lasted for about 17 years.

Shirley Williams: I don't know if you're familiar with any of the black golfers.

Markayla Moore: No.

Shirley Williams: We had Chi Chi Rodriguez, Jim Dent, Lee Elder, and Marty Thompson (but he wasn't black) and Tammie Green, who was white. So back in May of this year, we were inducted to the African American Golfers Hall of Fame in Florida.

Markayla Moore: Wow.

Shirley Williams: So, we're a part of that.

Markayla Moore: Where did you and your husband meet?

Shirley Williams: Have a seat. [Laughter] Okay. When I worked at Maidenform, I had to ride a bus downtown, then ride another bus to Maidenform, and the same thing goin' back home. I'd have to catch a bus from Maidenform to downtown, and then from downtown to where I lived. One day, I saw this handsome guy walkin' down Fourth Avenue. One day I was on the bus, and somethin' said, "Woman, get off this bus and see where he's goin'." [Laughter] So, like you say, I was a stalker but I wasn't. I followed him into Kresge's – it was a dime store back then. And then, the blacks would always have a social at Marshall's, and he was there, and I was there with some of my girlfriends. And one of the male guys I was friends with was friends with Joe. I said, "Well, Porky, introduce me to him."

Shirley Williams: So he did, and then I said, "Why don't you come to my girlfriend's house party next week?" So he brought him, and he introduced me again, and Joe bowed to kiss my hand. I liked to – everybody in the room liked to have fainted. So after that, we were married a year later. Yeah. And two and a half years later we had our twin daughters, then the year after that we had our other daughter, then the year after that we had our son. [Laughter]

Markayla Moore: So how long have you-all been married?

Shirley Williams: Goin' on 54 years.

Markayla Moore: Wow.

Shirley Williams: Yeah, we had our 50th wedding and celebration back in May of 1950 – I mean 1950, but 2015. I get the things mixed up. So, I had invited 600 people. 500 came. We had it down at the hotel, Pullman Plaza, but they changed the name to somethin' else. So we really had a good time.

Markayla Moore: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to tell me about anything?

Shirley Williams: I love my grandkids and my great-grandkids. We have 17 grandkids, and five great, and four foster. [Laughter] And most of our grandkids and great-grandkids are biracial. It doesn't mean a thing to me. I don't care what color you are, I still love you. And I'm happy with my husband, and we travel. Play a lot of golf. So, he had his reunion in Tappahannock, Virginia a couple of weekends ago. And that was enjoyable. See, they have theirs every year, but on my side, we have ours every other year in Columbus. But his, we've had it in Florida, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland – I could go on and on. So I just love his family like I love my own. Yep.

Other Speaker: Hey, young lady.

Markayla Moore: Hey.

Other Speaker: How you doin'?

Markayla Moore: Good. Thank you.