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Janella Coleman

Denise Wattie

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Oral History of Janella Coleman, interviewed by Denise Wattie on 07/17/2018 in Huntington, West Virginia.

Denise Wattie: Okay, it's recording. So will you say your name?

Janella Coleman: My name is Janella Coleman.

Denise Wattie: And how old are you?

Janella Coleman: Denise, I am 83 the 26th of June. I was 83, and I'm healthy and I'm fine.

Denise Wattie: Will you say the year that you moved to Huntington, West Virginia?

Janella Coleman: The year I came to Huntington was 19 and 56, 1956. My mother and them had just moved to Christiansburg, Virginia, because I had graduated in 1953 and the coal mines had gone kerplunk. So my dad and mother and them moved to Christiansburg in '53, so I've been here since 1956. I came and lived with my sister, Katherine Batts.

Denise Wattie: Okay. Where were you born?

Janella Coleman: I was born in a little town – it's not even on the map, okay? [Laughter] It's called Faraday, West Virginia. I'll tell you what the closest town it's to – maybe most people if they know McDowell County – it's called Welch, West Virginia. It's about twenty miles from Welch.

Denise Wattie: Okay. Did you like it there?

Janella Coleman: Well, since I didn't know no other place but there, I had to like it because that was what I was born in. That was, that was home.

Denise Wattie: What's your fondest memory of living there?

Janella Coleman: Oh, God. Denise, there's so many things to – now that I'm older and I think back on my childhood, back on fond memories, things that kids don't even do today. We used to play softball in the back yard. We didn't have no little league field to go to. Your back yard was your baseball field. Playin' marbles, playin' hopscotch, and we played school. I mean, you stood on your front steps and you played school, so those are fond memories I had of my childhood growin' up in West Virginia.

Denise Wattie: Describe the neighborhood you lived in.

Janella Coleman: Oh, wow. Let's see, Denise. The only thing I can tell you that – it was a little hollow. It wasn't like a narrow pathway, no, we had – they called it the hollow, okay, and it was, I think, probably in our little community, it was probably about 100 families. Most or all of them worked in the coal mines. So, on a coal mining

camp, you know what it's like around dusk? The train comin' by with loaded coal. You could see it from my house, what the community was like.

Janella Coleman: But that was the work part of it. But what it was like to live in the community, is I think now, it was awesome and I would not trade it for anything because we grew up learnin' how – what it was to really respect each other, to love each other, and to share each other. And everybody was your mother in that community. You did a naughty thing, you got it from them and then you got it from your mom when you got home. So you had two naughty payments coming, okay?

Denise Wattie: What did you parents do when you were growing up?

Janella Coleman: My dad was a coal miner. He worked in the coal mines. He left home about 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning and then he got home around 4:00 in the afternoon. My mom was a stay home mom 'cause there was really nothing else to do. But she was a stay home mom and she was the best stay home mom ever.

Denise Wattie: That's good. Definitely, that's cool. How was religion observed in your home?

Janella Coleman: Okay, on Sundays – after I got, maybe about 10, I was able to – we had a junior choir in our church. I belonged to the junior choir. Later on, you went to Sunday school on Sunday. Sunday mornings you dressed for Sunday school. You went to church. That's what it was like, religion wise, growing up there.

Janella Coleman: And then on Wednesday night sometimes, we had prayer meetin' on Wednesday nights. Mom didn't always make it mandatory that we go, but we did go, 'cause it wasn't too much to do other than church. So church was really a great outlet to go somewhere. And church was awesome. I loved the pastor growin' up. I can remember that. It was just nice things in our church, we did lovely things in our church school. We had Bible school the same way. Kids came and we just had fun. It's a different kind of fun what they do today, different kind of way they teach things today, but I'm not knockin' what they do today by no means. It was just different. And I'm grateful for the way it was taught to me then 'cause I found myself passin' it on to my grandbabies like that now.

Denise Wattie: That's good. Will you describe some of your siblings?

Janella Coleman: Oh, God. Let's see, I'm the seventh of 10 children, okay?

Denise Wattie: How many brothers and how many sisters?

Janella Coleman: I had – it's eight girls and two boys. My mother had four girls, two boys, then four more girls.

Denise Wattie: Wow.

Janella Coleman: So, but we all got along well. One thing you couldn't do and get away with it at our house: you couldn't fight, okay? She ended it for you or Daddy. My daddy was not – my mom was more of the disciplinarian in the house than Dad was, but his was the disciplinarian with a quiet spirit. All he had to do was to look at you. That was enough to change the whole outlook of what was goin' on in that room right then in that you knew that was it. And he wasn't a screamer, he wasn't a fusser.

Denise Wattie: That's how my mom is. She'll just give you a look and you know when to stop.

Janella Coleman: Yeah, my dad could look at us and we knew right then and there: put yourself in check or you're gonna get checked, okay? [Laughter] 'Cause you know he didn't have a whole lot of dos and don'ts. You knew the dos and the don'ts in that way. So, part of that way was like we knew what was expected of us, and I'm not sayin' we didn't try to get away with things – we did that too. But if you can't, guess what? The consequence was yours, okay?

Denise Wattie: I just had a question in my head and it just went away. Did you have to grow up fast? Or did you have a good childhood and everything went smoothly? Or did you have to grow up fast?

Janella Coleman: No, I didn't have – no. We didn't have to grow up fast because livin' in the mining community the way we did, my school was right there in the community – one room school. And right down from us was a white school where, beautiful, but then segregation was truly a big thing. So right there, our school was right there in the community with five grades in one room, but it was not that many children at one time and we had one teacher. But honestly, Denise, it was fantastic because when you went to high school, you were ready. You were ready. You were taught. You knew.

Janella Coleman: I can remember, God, and I've always been like this, okay, we would have our – you know like kids – okay in this one room school, well you got five different grade levels. You got first, second, third. We had first, second, third, fourth, and fifth. That's what we had, 'cause sixth grade we went to the elementary school in Berwind, West Virginia.

Janella Coleman: But when the teacher was teachin' math, if you was in the first grade, you knew how to act. You weren't loud. You were quiet because she was workin' there. You have work to do, too. Denise, what was so neat about that, you learned from the upper grades. They did – when first graders was workin', you could see her on the board doin' third grade work. Guess what you're doin'? You're doin' and next time you're finnin' to answer for – . She said, "This is not your class." But you learned so fast because you were observin' all the other things goin' on in that classroom at the time.

Janella Coleman: And today, I think about it and I think when we sang. Children back then had such a hard time, I don't – it was different, but I don't know that it was so hard. Sometimes I think it was an advantage, I really do.

Denise Wattie: That's good.

Janella Coleman: I take it as an advantage today because sometimes I think children need to be able to observe other things. We don't give 'em no chance to observe as much as I think they should. And I say if we did, I think – and we don't talk to them as much as we should.

Denise Wattie: Yeah, I really don't think we do at all.

Janella Coleman: I don't. And I, and I don't – that's the reason why I'm very conscious about pointin' fingers at them, be sayin' when they actin' all [inaudible 00:10:50]. Sometimes today, it's not because of them, it's because of us. We have failed them sometimes I think because we don't speak up. We'll say, "Well you can't do those things to parents." So what?

Janella Coleman: "They'll come say somethin' back to you." Well what can they say back to you that you have not already heard? Nothin'. All you got to do is come to 'em, "Come here and let me talk to you." Never had one to refuse me. Sometimes I think I'm gonna get in trouble doing some things, though, but. [Laughter]

Denise Wattie: How did you deal with segregation growing up?

Janella Coleman: It wasn't a big thing for us because my mom and dad never allowed us to use it as a thing that we felt less than who we were. My dad and mother always said, "Yes, there's segregation. No, you can't go to that school because it's an all white school, but I want you to know that they are no better than you are and you are no better than they are. So guess what? You do the best you can where you are and that's what you do." But they never allowed us in all my life, all 10 of us, never allowed us – Mom and Dad never allowed us to use segregation as a thing about like, "I don't like somebody because your skin's different."

Janella Coleman: No, they wouldn't do that because you want to know the truth? Denise, what is funny – and I asked my mom about this after I got grown, I couldn't do it till after I got grown. My dad was very, very fair. My mama was a pretty chocolate, and I said to Mom one day, I said, "Mom" – now I'm grown, I had kids of my own. I said, "Mom, how did that white lookin' man ever choose you, dark as you were?" See now, see you're grown and here's segregation and all this color barriers has infiltrated your mind. She said, "He loved me for who I was. He didn't love me for the color that I was." Shut me up, didn't it! [Laughter] And he – and it was awesome 'cause we used to laugh, and she called –

Janella Coleman: This is what she called her family. She said, "My family is really" – see, people would come to our home sometimes to visit and there was "fair, vanilla colors."

People wanna call you all kinds of color and they said, "Miss [inaudible 00:13:47], who is that?" She said, "They are my children, that's who they are." She said, "I have a melting pot. I have all colors." [Laughter] So that's the way we grew up. Segregation was never a thing that Mom and Dad allowed to affect us in a negative way.

Janella Coleman: We know negative things happen, yeah, they did happen. But they would always tell us, "That's gonna be life wherever you go." But they didn't allow us to use color as a, as a tool.

Denise Wattie: That's good. So you looked at it in a good way instead of a bad way?

Janella Coleman: Yeah, it was really a great way because even today, color doesn't bother me one way or the other.

Denise Wattie: And I think we're getting better, like the world and stuff's getting better with the racism and stuff. But it still is bad.

Janella Coleman: It's some toned down. It's racism and people hide behind that now but they still do mean things and that's the color they are, but guess what? When you know who you are and you've been raised to know that you have value somewhere deep down inside of you, it irritates you because they're so [inaudible 00:15:13] – they're so dumb to think that the color of my skin will cause us not to be as intelligent, or as ready to do a job as well as you can because that, that's kinda, now that's the kind of stuff that's irritating today to me, 'cause you see some of our kids being hindered by it. And some of, you know, I noticed, and it is for real, but I just tell my kids, I say, "Guess what? You have to prove yourself, who you are as a character."

Janella Coleman: And my mother used to always say to us, she said, "You know what? People can be cruel in many ways," and she said, "Well I'm not telling you not to be aware of that because it does happen," she said, "but remember that whatever you give out, one day is coming back to you. Your cruelty will come back to you. You may not see it now but you will see it later." And she always used to tell me to be kind to people 'cause she said, "You know what? The ladder that you went up on, you may have to come back the same way. You may have to pass some people, okay?" She said, "So be careful that you – when you do dumb stuff."

Janella Coleman: We were always cautious. They always tried to make things real to us about stuff like that, and so it was – to me, I would not change. Now, to go back now, the communities are all gone. Listen, nobody – you know, we know the coal industry has just gone down to nothin' so there's very few and it's little. But then, I would not – as I look back now, I wouldn't want to change it for anything.

Denise Wattie: That's good.

Janella Coleman: I think it's because of Mom and Dad that I really do.

Denise Wattie: That's good.

Denise Wattie: What do you remember about your grandparents?

Janella Coleman: All my grandparents were dead before I was born. My mom's dad died two years before I was born and I never knew my daddy's mother and dad – they were dead. But we had a – and I don't like the word “step-grandparents.” Oh God, that's like, I don't like the word “stepchildren.” They're just my children. But my grandmother on my dad's side, it was not his real mother, but she was precious.

Janella Coleman: We would go up – Grandma Dora would come and we would, you know – they lived in Rocky Mount, Virginia. Sometimes they would come to West Virginia and that would be just a delight because she was delightful, and she was funny! And we had a good time when she would come to visit, but that's the only – and we didn't get to see them very often but that's them all about my mother's daddy. My mother's mom died when she was eight years old and my dad's mother died when they were just young kids, too, so. But their fathers, both of their fathers lived a long time, but my dad's father was deceased before I was born and mom's dad and mother both were, too.

Janella Coleman: So I really didn't have the advantage of runnin' to grandma's. “Grandma, Mom did somethin' to me, you need to tell her!” But see I didn't have that privilege like mine do.

Denise Wattie: When you moved to Huntington, what was it like when you first got here?

Janella Coleman: Let's see, when I came to Huntington, I think I told you it was 1956 and I lived with my sister Katherine and I got a job, and I worked. They had a shop downtown called Lerner's Shop. It was a dress shop and I got a job there. And I worked there – they called it window trimming, where you would dress the mannequins in whatever new clothes came in from New York. And we would change them periodically when she came in.

Janella Coleman: But Denise, this is an incident that happened. The lady from New York was Jewish, very high class, okay? And very, because – there was a job to see that all the stores that was in her jurisdiction, I guess. Well one day she came in to the Huntington store and it was my day off and I wasn't there. So when I went back the next morning, she was still in town. When she came into town, they stayed at the Frederick Hotel then. When I came into work that morning, she says, “Janella?” I say, “Yes?” She said, “You can't have any more time off.”

Janella Coleman: I said, “What do you mean, I don't have any more time off, my days off?” She said, “Well we need you here at the store.” Okay, Denise, this is what happened. I remember it as if it had happened to me today because I said – I came home and I thought about that thing all evenin'. I went back into the store. I went to work the next day and she was still there. And her name was Mrs. Arinoff. I'll

never forget her. And I said, "Mrs. Arinoff, I'm gonna be as good to you as you were to me. May I use your pencil?" She said, "Yes, you may." She said, "What?" I said, "I'm finnin' to write my time in. You gave me this job. I'm givin' it back." And I came home. I had no job. I came home.

Janella Coleman: They called me from the store and said, "Janella, can you come in in the mornin'? Mrs. Arinoff wants to speak to you a minute." I went in. I wasn't rude or anything like that. And she said, "You know what?" She said, "You're a brave little person, you hear me?" Then I didn't weigh but about 98 pounds, I think. I weighed about – no I wasn't – I weighed 106. She said, "You're brave." I said, "How is that?" She said, "Who else would walk in this store and tell me they gonna be as good to me as I was to you and take my pencil and write your time in, and leave?"

Janella Coleman: I said, "What else was I supposed to do?" She said, "Would you like to go to New York and be with me, and work with me?" I said, "No." She said, "I would take you 'cause you're bold and you're brave." I said, "Thank you." And she said, "But we worked out a schedule, you will have your time off. On your day off, we will work here for – ." I wanted to say, "You can have this job, 'cause I'm not." Everybody had time off, what do you know? How was it I was not gonna have time off? But that's the way that worked out.

Janella Coleman: So, and we had church here. I went to church here. My first church here was Calvary and then for a long time, I went Calvary. And then I met Joe and that's a long story.

Denise Wattie: How old were you when you met Joe?

Janella Coleman: Let's see, I was – Joe and I got married – I was 22 when I got married. So I met Joe probably, I was about 21. I was 21.

Denise Wattie: Would you say some things about him? What's your greatest memory with him?

Janella Coleman: That he loved me dearly. Nothin' that he'd hold back from me or the kids. And we were married for 57 years when he died.

Denise Wattie: Wow.

Janella Coleman: And how I met him – Dr. Wright was a dentist here, down on 8th Avenue. It was right down below, I'll tell you, you know where AutoZone is?

Denise Wattie: Yeah.

Janella Coleman: 8th Avenue, and then they have that Prester home? Well, he had the dentist shop there and he used to do my teeth. And his home was in Roanoke, Virginia and he said – I was in there one day and he said, "Janella, where's your home?" I said, "Roanoke, Virginia." He said, "You know what? I'm gonna ride by your

mom's house this weekend." I said, "Oh yeah?" And I was just gettin' ready to go on vacation.

Janella Coleman: And he said, "If you wanna ride with me, you can ride with me, and you can go right by your mom's house." Well, when he came to pick me up here – well, at my sister's house, not at this house – Joe was in the car with him and I was wondering, who is this young man in here with him? And my nephew, Lorenzo Batts (Mitzi's dad) was in the car with us. And I wanted to take – If I only had a tomato that day, I would've put it in Lorenzo's mouth. [Laughter]

Janella Coleman: Joe kept askin' me questions and I didn't wanna answer him. And we called him Junior then. Junior, he would answer. I kept [inaudible 00:25:28] to him sayin', "Stop." And he would look at me. You think that he stopped? No he did not. Joke, all the way down and when we came back, I came back home, he asked for my phone number. I didn't give it to him, but you know little blabber mouth did. Junior Batts gave it to him.

Janella Coleman: So he called me. We began to talk. We met, okay, this is the crazy part of our – we met, it was probably June. July, August, September, October. We know each other four months and we were married in October.

Denise Wattie: Wow.

Janella Coleman: And we were together for 57 years.

Denise Wattie: That's crazy.

Janella Coleman: Yeah, real crazy, wasn't it? Know somebody for four months and can stay with. But Denise, the only thing I can say about him was his respect. He always, and he was an only – he was an adopted child, so he really, he didn't have sisters or brothers of any kind. And he always said when the kids were born, he said, "You all are all I have and I will cherish you forever." And he did. That's just the way he was.

Janella Coleman: He'd discipline his children, but he wasn't no – now you think one goin' around poppin' 'em upside the head – no. He didn't do that, he didn't like that. Whenever they would do somethin' that he didn't like, his way of disciplining them, he would put them in the car. Wherever they went or whatever they talked about, they would not tell me when they came back. But that's how, very seldom, I think I can – if he ever spanked them, honey, it was rare. Don't ask me how many times I did it. They used to tell me I was the mean one.

Janella Coleman: I said, "Yeah, of course. He'd leave you here with me all the time while he's gone," 'cause he was busy a lot. He was really, really busy a lot.

Denise Wattie: What's your best memory of him?

Janella Coleman: Seein' him diligent in whatever he went to do. You know, he started, he had the Mutt & Jeff's TV. He was the first black business right here on 16th Street. Well, you know where Stephen Gunn, Dr. Gunn's dentist office is? His little house was right there, his shop was right there then. Now, there, that's all different.

Janella Coleman: But he had Mutt & Jeff's TV and had it for years and years. But first, he worked at Inco and then he quit it. He said, "I don't wanna work for somebody the rest of my life." He started his own business. It was tough sometimes but it taught both of us how to be – you may make a lot of money today and tomorrow when you're self employed. You may not make none tomorrow, so you learn how to be frugal and to take care of what you had. But that's my fondest memory, watchin' him work, watchin' him be diligent in what he did and knowin' that I never had to worry about would he take care, would he bring his pay, would he bring money home to take care of us? No, that was never nothin' like that.

Janella Coleman: He was always Johnny on the spot with whatever, whatever he had. He said, "Take this, keep it." He said, "You don't know when you might need it." And, that's just the way he was.

Denise Wattie: That's nice. Makes me a little sad. What year did you start teaching?

Janella Coleman: Oh, it was 19 and 78. And the way I started was, you know Miss Cockerton, from Spring Hill. Her mom which was my best friend and Ruth Fort was my best friend. All of them, Ruth didn't work – Ruth worked. Miss Smith? You remember Miss Smith who used to teach school? Well, all them worked.

Janella Coleman: So Roberta says to me one day, "Janella, how dare you think you can sit at home with all us workin' and you sittin' there." I said, "I don't have to work." Denise, the reason why I didn't work after Marsheila was born, Joe was workin', I mean workin' two jobs hit and miss, 'cause he was still goin' to Marshall. He was studyin' to be an engineer what he was really going. He was – Joe was as gifted in many ways in doin' things.

Janella Coleman: But anyway, when he came home, then Miss Barnes, the lady that was keepin' her – now babies cry. Marsheila just cryin' her little heart out. When I came home that evenin' from work, he said, "Janella, call them people and tell 'em you're not comin' back." I said, "Now what do you mean I'm not goin'?" I said, "We need the job."

Janella Coleman: He said, "No." He said, "I'll make it up some kind of way." He said, "But this baby's cryin'. I came by and that baby was cryin' her little heart out." He said, "I can't stand it." From that day on, I never worked. Marsheila was the baby then. Joe Jr. was born two years later. I never worked.

Janella Coleman: Then eight years later, Julian was born. It's eight years difference between Joe and Julian. I went to work after Julian went to kindergarten and that's when

Roberta said, "You need a job." I said, "I don't need no job. At this late date in my life, I don't need no job."

Janella Coleman: But I am so grateful. Grateful in the sense that I made, I met so many people that I fell in love with – teachers and young people. And the first job I had was at Cammack and this is – okay, now, I hope this is not taken out of context the way I'm tellin' this to you, okay. The girl I worked with, she was fantastic. She was Polish, okay? Cammack had never had special education where you had handicapped kids. Very few kids, black kids, went to Cammack and that was the old school in '78, '79, because the first year I worked part time.

Janella Coleman: So Debbie said, "Janella" – this was so funny. She said, "This is crazy isn't it?" I said, "What, Debbie?" She said, "Here's a Polack down here, handicapped kids here, and black kids here. And guess what? They have never had none of this in this school!" Both of us laughed 'cause it was funny, 'cause she was secure in herself. But they would call our Polish friend, that's the Polack. Handicapped kids, they looked down on them. Here was a black, we sure enough know they looked down on us sometimes.

Janella Coleman: But when you're okay with yourself, you know you're okay. Both of us laughed about it. But it worked wonderful. And had that young – her husband worked for Firestone. Had she lived and stayed here, 'cause she told me one day, she says, "Janella, you do this job too well to be a teacher's aide. You need to go back to school." I said, "I don't wanna go to school and study that."

Janella Coleman: She said, "I'm tellin' you, it won't take you no time." But she moved away. Had not, I know she was so persistent and had we stayed together, I know I probably would've went on back 'cause she was – but other than that, that was – . And while I was at Cammack, Denise, in my heart, this is how I feel about that. I learned so many things from bein' in that physically handicapped program. You learn compassion. You learn what it feels like when you know that baby has to come home to you every evenin'. You have to do everything for them.

Janella Coleman: People look at – they don't know what it's like. When you work with them, you know what it's like by what you have to do for them. And I say every person that teaches school, it almost needs to be mandatory that you work some way with a physically handicapped child. When you startin' out to learn, 'cause if you don't get compassion from them, you don't need to be in no classroom. That's my opinion, okay?

Janella Coleman: I always said and I told God, I said, "God, I am so grateful for these kids. I love them and they love me." And I had one experience, I don't know – this little girl, her name was Vicky and we went to the bus stop. I went to the bus to pick her up one morning. I can't even imagine, Denise, what was on my mind or what I must've been thinkin' about. But when she got off the bus to let the lift down, and we was finnin' to go in the building, and she turned around and she looked at me and she said, "Miss Coleman, what's wrong with you?" I said, "Nothin'

Vicky, why?" She said, "Yes it is. Your face doesn't look right today. You're not smiling."

Janella Coleman: From that day on, when I went to that bus, I put Janella in check. They have hard enough times. To let them feel that you have pain – she could feel my pain. And I couldn't imagine what it was. I thought, oh what in the world could I have been thinkin' about? I said, "But Vicky, I'm fine." But the day went on fine. It made me put myself – when you go to pick them up, they need a smile in the mornin'. They do not – they already got enough goin' on in their little lives. Now why would you on your face, there's like somethin' goin' on in yours, they got to deal with you. But I make myself never again will I do that, go to a bus.

Janella Coleman: That's right, when I went in school, when I see my kids come in the mornin', "Good morning. How are you?" I always said you should have a professional greeter at the bus stop. Some children never know what it is to say good morning. I said they need to have one of these turn gates and before – you know how you go into these turn gates, you know it's almost like the doors at the hospital, but these are like turn gates?

Janella Coleman: The gate won't move. You can't get out of the gate until you say good morning. 'Cause kids don't know how to say good morning. But it's not their little faults. I said the last time, at my door, if I'd be at the door, I'd say, "Where are you going?" They'd say, "Um-hmm, um." I'd say, "What do we do?" "Oh, good morning!" I'd say, "Good morning to you. Let's have a good day today, okay?"

Janella Coleman: I really think we need just to go back, change some things. [inaudible 00:38:04]

Denise Wattie: What's your favorite memory from Spring Hill?

Janella Coleman: Oh my God. I think in the classroom. My favorite memory would be in my own classroom. This room, we had a child that was struggling to get a concept and we were tryin' to teach it if it was no more than learnin' how to know your letter sounds and once they accomplish that, and some of them knew the days of the week when they come in. Some of 'em come in knowin' how to write their names, but a lot of 'em did not. To see them accomplish that, oh, that was a big deal for me! That was like, hey sugar!

Janella Coleman: And I used to have this habit of sayin', "Ah shucks, sugar!" And when they would get somethin' sometime and they knew, they'd say, "Ah shucks, sugar, I got it!"

Denise Wattie: [Laughter] That's cute.

Janella Coleman: It was a joy to see them accomplish that. To see, you know, when they were strugglin' with it, and once they got it – oh God! – and you had to celebrate them. We don't know how to celebrate each other. We don't know how to. When somebody does something well, to say, "Hey dude, hey girl, that was cool! You did it, you did it!" I loved it when we had that time in that room! From

the time I started, I was always – it was like they were my own kids. When they do something good, “Oh that was nice.” And if it was messy? “Oh, that's messy and we'll do this over.”

Janella Coleman: If I knew you could do better, I didn't allow you to hand me sloppy stuff. Don't bring it to my desk if it's ugly. And they used to tell me – oh God! – one little boy, Shane, last year before I stopped, I loved this little boy. He would come to my desk. He did not have – he was very, very smart but his motor skills to hold a pencil, to grip it like it should be, was difficult for him. So I bought him one of those grippers that you put on the pen; that helped a lot.

Janella Coleman: One day, he got it. When he wrote his name, and it was legible and I could read it, and he brought it to me, and I said, "Oh God," I mean it was Shane, so, but then the next day, a note was on my desk. He had wrote, “I love you.” I said, "Shane, quit messin' with my heart here." And I saw him not too long ago. I had gone to visit with one of Julian's friends who had – and I saw Shane. Julian stopped the car for me. I said, "Julian, stop the car, there's Shane." He run out and gave me the biggest hug.

Janella Coleman: And when he went to first grade last year after I left, he had a difficult time in the beginning because he did not want to accept the teacher, and I knew that's what it was. And I'd heard about it, so I went up to school. At first, I asked about what had happened. The next day I went back. And I asked the teacher and I said, "Could you please call him into the office?" And they called him to the office and I was sittin' behind the door. He didn't see me.

Janella Coleman: When he saw me, the biggest smile went on his face. And I loved him. And then I told him what he had done was wrong, how he had acted. I said, "No, she is not me but she is as sweet as I am, okay? If you let her be, she will be as sweet to you as I was. That thing that you did the other day never happens again, do you hear me?" He said, "I promise." And he never did.

Janella Coleman: So far, and I saw her and I was talkin' to her. I said, "How's he doin'?" She said, "He's doin' wonderful." So he'll go into second grade this year. She had him all last year 'cause I was – . And I know what it is. You know how you love someone and all of a sudden they're gone from your life? And you could always depend on them to help you through a tough time, 'cause it was some times and he would share things with me that I really didn't want him to share with me 'cause it was a home thing. And I would tell him, I said, "I don't want you to talk about this to anybody," I said, “okay? ‘Cause that's between you and mom and dad, okay?”

Janella Coleman: I just didn't like that 'cause I always used to tell my kids, whatever went on in this house stayed here. If it's your business, you can tell it. But if it belongs to all of us and we didn't give you permission, you couldn't do it. So that's the way it was with him but he would share it and I understood what it was. And when I left him, I knew the pain. I knew he would feel it, but he's doing wonderful now though.

Denise Wattie: That's good.

Denise Wattie: Can you tell me about the race in Huntington when you first moved here and how it improved or didn't improve?

Janella Coleman: Race?

Denise Wattie: Yeah.

Janella Coleman: I hope it's improved. That was a – how was it here when I first come here, 'cause, to work? There was still segregation. There was segregation downtown. There were places you could eat, places was for blacks and places for white. It was a place there called the White Pantry where you could not – blacks did not eat there. I'm almost sure they didn't have lunch at the White Pantry for blacks, stuff like that.

Janella Coleman: And when you were talkin' about race, that reminds me of one time, because Joe was very fair, my husband. He had a friend. You know the Figgs, Leon Figgs, Dr. Wright's bud. They were three, they were real great friends. Okay, downtown, when I first came here, it was called the Orpheum Theater, and then they had the Keith Albee. But they had a place for blacks and a place for whites where you could go.

Janella Coleman: Well, Joe was real fair and they were ornery. They were three ornery friends that loved to do things they knew was questionable, okay? They went to the movies. Okay. Wendell and Figgs had to go upstairs to sit 'cause they were brown skinned, freely brown. Joe was as fair as any white person probably downtown, okay? They said, "Okay, Joe, we're goin' upstairs. You're goin' downstairs," okay? They did it. He went in. They let Joe go in downstairs. Joe is black but his complexion is really, really fair. Figgs' and Wendell's complexion is really, really pretty tan and brown.

Janella Coleman: Well, when they did it, this is how what they did. They hollered, they say, "Hey Joe, how does it feel to sit down there?" [Laughter] "How does it feel to sit down there?" I said, "Sugar, what did you do?" He said, "I acted like I didn't even hear 'em talkin'," he said, "cause I went on to watch the movie." And I screamed! [Laughter] They all watched the movie but they let him know, "Hey Joe, how does it feel to sit down there, you sittin' with all those white people. Here we are here with this black and you black too, but you know what, you got in!"

Janella Coleman: That's the reason why I'm sayin' the complexion of your skin has nothin' to do with your character. Nothin'. Character is beyond skin. It's a deep within thing and that's the way we always used to – I always have said that. It's not the color of my skin that would take me places, if people are fair. It's my character, how I carry myself. That's what takes me places.

Janella Coleman: But back then, they had that segregation, had so many places downtown that was segregated like that. Certain things like Camden Park. I never will forget at Camden Park. Now Joe Jr. was my baby. That was – Joe Jr. must've been about six. On the one day out of a year could blacks go to Camden Park. I never have liked Camden Park, I'll be frank with you, okay? Never have. I think I've been there maybe twice in my life the whole time I've ever been here.

Janella Coleman: We were in the car – Joe used to always on Sunday afternoon, this was our outing. He would always get in the car. We would always go for a ride. He would always take us out somewhere. And that's when he used to work with his TV shop. He said, "I saw a beautiful house today. I want to show you all these beautiful places." He would see a beautiful place then he would take us out on Sunday afternoon to see them.

Janella Coleman: Joe Jr. was in the car and this is what he said. And this thing has always been in me. He looked at his arm and he said – we was goin' by Camden Park – and he said, "Mama, I'm not black. Why can't I go?" You know how that cut – what that does to you? That thing cramped me so, and I said, "Joe Jr., they judge you by the color of your skin, not by your character. That's why you can't go in there." I said, "They have only one day a week – one day a year – that blacks could go," and that was when Inco used to be up there. They would call it "colored day," too. That's what it was called, "colored day," that you could go to Camden Park.

Denise Wattie: Wow.

Janella Coleman: And when he said that to me – to have your baby look at his arm and I know he's as worthy as anyone inside that park today, but you could not just pull up there and go in because it wasn't "colored day." And that's what it was called, "colored day." That's how bad segregation was. And they've changed a lot here. Shouldn't a' never been in the beginnin' I'm gonna tell you the truth 'cause God said, "I don't want bad, I made all people." So if He took one blood and made all of us, how you gonna be any different? But it was a difference.

Janella Coleman: But that's the part I think we as adults now – how do I make a change? What can I do to change things? It didn't say you have to get up – and I don't carry banners, either, I'm gonna tell you that now. I like to be a walkin' banner. I can't all night, goin' round with these [inaudible 00:51:51], I ain't goin' – don't ask me if you don't want nothin' on camera, okay?

Janella Coleman: I'll tell you what I gotta say and I know that's just me, okay? Oh God, this thing is goin' on, oh you're filmin' to use this some more, so oh God.

Denise Wattie: It's okay. You're being honest and I like it. You're doing good.

Janella Coleman: But that's what it is. I like bein' tough and I don't – and I'm not intimidated to tell you how I feel. 'Cause like my mom always said, I was on a panel, let me tell

you – oh, this is not on your [inaudible 00:52:29]. That's not – oh, go ahead on. This is not on your list.

Denise Wattie: Okay. What would you say is the difference from today than it was before?

Janella Coleman: I think some things have changed by law. They have changed. Some of it has changed because we refused to allow people to make us feel less than, and you learn to speak up. It didn't always mean that they're opening doors to you, but you are open. You are free. I'm free. You might not want to think I'm free, but I am. And that's the way it is today. I think, by law a lot of things had to change; segregation, think places change. You can no longer segregate public places and all that kinda stuff.

Janella Coleman: But then I think some people were strong enough and brave enough to say, "I'm free. I'm no longer – I don't feel second class. I'm not what you would call second class. I am just as important as you are in whatever. If I'm just a housewife, if I'm a maid, whatever it is, I'm just as important as you are and I'm okay with me." But I think we have to feel that about ourselves. Nobody else can do that for you. I think that's something that you have to learn. I am somebody. I am special. And I'm okay. I'm okay with me. I'm okay with me, I really am, Denise.

Denise Wattie: That's good. Do you think today we're doing good or do you wish it would be like older days when you first got here? Do you think we're improving in like fighting back and stuff and sticking up for ourselves? Do you think we're doing better at that?

Janella Coleman: I think people speak up more about things than they did a long time ago. I think sometimes we have been hurt so badly till we do it in a confrontational way, which I don't think – sometimes it's necessary but sometimes we've been hurt so long, it comes up so quick. You don't have time to put yourself in check the way you wanna say it 'cause I have done it, okay?

Janella Coleman: Not that they hurt me so bad, but I've seen other people hurt so bad. I'm thinkin', "How dare you?" And I catch my – "Janella, put yourself in check a moment." Don't let your emotions override your wisdom, because I'm tellin' you the truth that that's what is happenin' a lot. That's why sometimes our young people today get in so much trouble here. They have not been treated with respect – yeah, they have been wrong. I'm not saying that they have not been wrong with some of the – but they don't give 'em a chance. You're gonna back 'em up against a wall. You're gonna not talk to – talk to me. But they don't.

Janella Coleman: And that's when I look at young men today walk these streets. My heart and God knows, my heart hurts for them here for that reason because yes, they may have broken the law. They may have done wrong things but there's a way to treat them, too. And they have not always been given that opportunity.

Janella Coleman: And yes, we have consequences to pay when we break the rule, and I believe in that. But I also believe in give me a chance to speak. Let me see both sides, but that has not always. I think it may be better here some ways today than in the past, but until the day comes when it can get better, all of us suffer from it. And not just one family. All of our families suffer. When I hurt, I hope you hurt too because I think that's the way it's supposed to be.

Janella Coleman: We oughta be able to feel another one's pain when they hurt. You see an infraction out there and you know, well he got popped with that. Why? Shouldn't be that way. And we know it happens, but I think it has improved some but we got a long ways to go, a long ways to go.

Denise Wattie: That's a hard topic to talk about. What was my next question? This is like a random question that I wanna ask.

Janella Coleman: Okay.

Denise Wattie: Do you believe things happen for a reason?

Janella Coleman: In my life, I would say yes for me. And the reason why I say yes, Denise, things happen for a reason sometimes because I really, really do love the Lord. Not sayin' I'm perfect – I mess up big time – but I'm gonna tell you one thing for sure, I don't run from Him, I run to Him! I say, "Ooh I just made the biggest boo boo ever and I am sorry." I know I'm forgiven the moment I say I'm sorry.

Janella Coleman: You may not forgive me for it but He does. And things in my life sometimes I think have happened – sometimes – I always said when some things happen, I say, "Lord, is this a test of my faith to trust you?" When it seems like everything is goin' crazy right now and I don't know the answer, I don't know what to do – because I had something happen, and I say, "God, I don't know what to do."

Janella Coleman: He'd say, "Good." I heard this from Him about His spirit. I heard him say, " Good. Now, let me do it for you." But that means you have to have patience to wait because faith has a voice and faith speaks if you allow it, but sometimes it says faith come in by hearin' and hearin' by the Word. You have to wait on it sometimes, Denise. Things don't change overnight. You would love for it to, and that's why I know some things happen.

Janella Coleman: And I'll be sayin', "Oh God, please. I'm sick of this one." And I know He hears me. And I believe God has a sense of humor. He can laugh at us when we do dumb little stuff. But we come back in and say, "You know what, Lord? I just messed up big time." He'll say, "Yeah, you did." And laugh. Because if he could go with them crazy disciples – 'cause they were messed up, some of 'em. They would do crazy stuff but He forgave them. We don't know how to forgive one another, even in our families when our kids mess up, and they're gonna mess up.

Janella Coleman: We messed up. Not at the degree where these kids whose – these kids and young people are faced with so much craziness out here. Back when I was growin' it wasn't as bad. But now our young people are faced with the ultimate of crazy.

Denise Wattie: Yeah. It's scary.

Janella Coleman: It is scary and the only thing I know to do is to say, "Okay Lord, show me what to do. Tell me what to do." And I do that. But yes, I think some things happen 'cause it will make you grow to be a better – it will either make you better or make you bitter. It will be one or the other.

Janella Coleman: I sure hope it's makin' me better 'cause I don't wanna be bitter. Bitter, you drive and die. Bitter raises bitter. Nah! Better. I like better.

Denise Wattie: Me, too. Do you have any advice for teenagers now?

Janella Coleman: Oh! I do have advice for them but you have to be bold enough to do it, okay? You have to be bold enough to speak to them. You see them out here in the street actin' real crazy and a lot of times, you have known them. You have been in – a lot of times they have been in the classroom where I was or they've been in the school building that I'm in, but I know them. You got to be bold enough that they're here actin' crazy, you sittin' on your porch. You're gonna continue to let them crazy without you speakin' a word, right? That's dumb, real dumb.

Janella Coleman: No. I say, "Hey!" Because I, I say, "Come here. How dare you act like that out here! Not in front of my house, don't be." But [inaudible 01:03:45] act like this in front of no one else's house. "Miss Janella, I'm sorry." But I think as adults, my advice to teenagers, for them, is for us number one. I think it's for us first. You got to be bold enough to speak to them. You see them out of order. What's wrong with you walkin' up and sayin', "Hey, dude." But there's a way to do it. You can't go with them in a – they get enough of that from the people downtown. Police come at you real crazy.

Janella Coleman: Walk up to them. "Hey. You know that's not the way to act. You know you know better. So why are you doin' that?" But I think it has to begin with us first and then you can give them advice 'cause they will hear you. They don't hear you when you're comin' at them screamin' 'cause don't come at me screamin', 'cause I don't wanna hear you either.

Janella Coleman: And I think that's the – I think first it has to start with us to want to, knowin' how do I reach them? You reach them with love. You don't reach them. You can end up – what is that saying? I can catch more flies with honey than I can with vinegar. You can get more of them with honey. "Sweetie, come here. You know you're actin' naughty, don't you? Sure ain't likin' that one on you. Come on."

Janella Coleman: I have a Bible school the other week down at the Boys Club. It was so funny. I didn't even know the young girl, but it was funny. You know how you-all get this light attitude?

Denise Wattie: Yeah. We do.

Janella Coleman: So she came in, well she had one. Then at first I thought, oh [inaudible 01:05:44]. And I didn't know her either, I didn't know. So finally I just walked up to her, I said, "I'm gonna be your best friend today, okay?" [Laughter] She says, "Okay." After that she was jacked.

Janella Coleman: I said, "I'm your best friend." It went really great. It really did! [Laughter] I'm telling you, you just – we have to work on us first. I'm tellin' you. Start with us. Before you can go out and give them advice, you better give yourself some: What do I do? I have to give it with love, I have to give it with understanding. Where you comin' from? Why? 'Cause sometimes you don't know what they've been through. Some of 'em are goin' through a livin' hell in their homes, on the street, on their little jobs they have – they're goin' through a whole lot. And then you see them walkin' down the street, talkin' loud and actin' crazy. You think they're really nutty. No they're not. Sometimes they just need someone to say, "Come here a minute."

Janella Coleman: You know, it don't have to be like this always, okay? You can change it today. I'm gonna tell you about the other day – now this is not on your program, but I'm gonna tell you what happened to me the other mornin'. I'm sittin' on my deck and three young men was goin' down the street. I mean they looked like their 20s, their late 20s or something. I didn't know any of 'em, okay? Well, I'm sittin' there and when they passed by me, I said – I got up – I was drinkin' a cup of coffee. I got up, I said, "How dare you walk by my deck and not say good morning to me!" They turned around, they said, "Oh, we was in such a conversation, we didn't – we are so sorry." I said, "'Cause I was finnin' to come out there and shake all three of you." [Laughter]

Janella Coleman: All three of 'em just began to laugh. One of 'em – I said, "I probably couldn't shake one of you. Y'all could tear me to pieces." The young man said, "No ma'am. We will protect you." Julian says to me, my son, says all the time, "Mom, you make me nervous doin' that." But it's just somethin', Denise, I love them so much. Till you just want to just – I want them to know that somebody loves you today. So that's what it is.

Denise Wattie: Is there anything you wanna ask me?

Janella Coleman: I just want to – I don't wanna ask you anything, but I wanna tell you somethin'. I am beyond proud of you.

Denise Wattie: Thank you.

Janella Coleman: And for you to want to come in and interview me, see 'cause I remember the classroom. I know, no, Denise ain't wanna ever interview me, I said no. And when you said [inaudible 01:09:10] Denise? Done gonna come here, even though we had a good time in that classroom. But you so quiet. Denise would never opt to do this. And when you said that you wanted to interview me, I thought, oh my God, I wasn't so bad after all, was I? That she still think – she can still come and talk to me.

Janella Coleman: Denise, I appreciate that. I appreciate you and I just want to see you – whatever your heart's desire is. I want to tell you one thing. I know God will grant it, but don't give up on it if it don't come as quick as you want it, okay?

Denise Wattie: Okay.

Janella Coleman: Don't give up. Just keep pressin', 'cause it will come. It will come to pass. 'Cause some things in my life here, there've been times I wanted to throw in the towel, say, "I give it up." [inaudible 01:10:09], "How dare you?" So how dare you Denise ever let it be said that I gave up. Never. Whatever it is you wanna do, see yourself there. Whatever kind of picture you got in your head, if it's a [inaudible 01:10:28], delete today. Delete it. See yourself goin' where you wanna go and knowin', "I will arrive there in due season." And you will. I love you.

Denise Wattie: I love you, too.

Janella Coleman: Oh, God! Take this thing back to me after, oh –