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Gina Johnson

Shyah Johnson

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Oral History of Gina Johnson, interviewed by Shylah Johnson on 07/22/2018 in Huntington, West Virginia.

Shylah Johnson: Hello, how you doing today?

Gina Johnson: I'm doing just fine.

Shylah Johnson: Okay. Were you born in Huntington?

Gina Johnson: Yes.

Shylah Johnson: What street did you grow up on?

Gina Johnson: Artisan Avenue.

Shylah Johnson: I should probably ask you what your name is first, too.

Gina Johnson: Gina Johnson.

Shylah Johnson: What's your fondest memory living here in Huntington?

Gina Johnson: Probably my elementary years, in elementary school.

Shylah Johnson: Describe the neighborhood. How was it when you were young?

Gina Johnson: It was really, really great. Everybody played with everybody. We had the Scott Center that lived – was out in back of us. They had a swimming pool. You kept your doors open. People slept with windows and doors open. You could leave all your stuff outside. You didn't have to worry about nobody stealin' or anything. It was really, really great.

Shylah Johnson: When you were younger, growing up back then, where was your favorite place to eat?

Gina Johnson: Home. [Laughter] My mama cooked real well. We didn't make it a habit of going out.

Shylah Johnson: What about your favorite place to shop?

Gina Johnson: Hills.

Shylah Johnson: Tell me about your parents, family background.

Gina Johnson: I really can't tell you too much about my father. He passed away when I was like nine months old. My mother has always been a good Christian woman. We went to church all the time. She worked all the time. Really good family

environment, not a lot of arguing, or confusion, or dysfunction all goin' on. It was really great.

Shylah Johnson: What was your church like?

Gina Johnson: Old-fashioned, down-home, little country church. One piano, one preacher, and probably 20 members.

Shylah Johnson: Where was your family originally from?

Gina Johnson: Huntington, West Virginia. My mother. Not my father now – he was from Logan.

Shylah Johnson: What did your mother do for a living?

Gina Johnson: She worked at the Social Security office.

Shylah Johnson: What other relatives did you have contact with growing up?

Gina Johnson: My cousins and my grandparents on my mother's side.

Shylah Johnson: What do you remember about your grandparents?

Gina Johnson: They were really nice. I lived with my grandmother for a while. She was really an awesome, understanding person. I could talk to her about anything. She never got excited. And my grandfather was hard on us, and he [inaudible 00:02:54] schoolwork, but I was his favorite, so anything I wanted I got. So to me, it was great.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] How many children were in the family, and where were you in the lineup?

Gina Johnson: There was three girls, and I was the baby.

Shylah Johnson: What were your siblings like? And who were you closest to?

Gina Johnson: I was closest to my oldest sister Denise. Sherry was a tattletale so we didn't do much with her. She told everything.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] Describe the house you grew up in, possibly what your room was like.

Gina Johnson: Well, I really can't – the house that we grew up in was like, they called it the projects. When I was 11 years old, we moved to a house on Doulton Avenue, and it was a really big house, to us especially. You know, four bedrooms, one and a half baths, and life of luxury. We loved it. I mean it was awesome. Again, you know, my mama was one of these really super, super clean, neat freaks that loved to decorate, so, it was alright.

Shylah Johnson: What was it like in the projects?

Gina Johnson: The projects was just about the same as far as housekeeping and everything goes, but we loved the projects because there was always somebody around, somebody close, somebody to play with, somebody else's house to go to. It was just always something to do.

Shylah Johnson: What were your family's economic circumstances like back then?

Gina Johnson: We were considered middle class.

Shylah Johnson: Do you ever remember having to do without things you wanted or needed?

Gina Johnson: Nope, not ever! I was spoiled rotten!

Shylah Johnson: What were either your duties, or some of the other duties as a child around the house?

Gina Johnson: Oh, we had a whole bunch of housework. We had to iron, sweep the floors, vacuum, scrub carpets, whatever was required. Clean windows, you know? My mother was, like I said, a stickler for things bein' nice and clean and neat. So nothin' was ever out of place at our house.

Shylah Johnson: When did you learn how to cook, and who taught you?

Gina Johnson: I really learned from my grandmother. I watched my mom cook a lot when we were coming up, but to actually get in the kitchen with one-on-one skills, it came from my granny.

Shylah Johnson: Oh, were there any special foods that you and your granny used to make together or something?

Gina Johnson: Well, my grandmother could really, really fry chicken really good. And she used to make the best stuffing in the world. Now, I think I got the chicken part down pat, but I can't touch her stuffing. [Laughter] I wish she was here to make me some.

Shylah Johnson: Do you still make any traditional family foods or anything like that?

Gina Johnson: Nope.

Shylah Johnson: What did you do on holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving, and things like that?

Gina Johnson: Eat. [Laughter] We got together as a family. We were always together as a family, 99.9% of the time at my grandmother's house. It was just something we did on holiday.

Shylah Johnson: How – oh, wow – what was it like growing up in the – well how was it like in the '70s and the '80s, compared to now?

Gina Johnson: Well first of all, the economy was a lot better. Second of all, like I said, you didn't have to worry about too much. You could let your kids go outside and play, and sometimes we'd be outside 11:00, 12:00 at night, and your parents didn't worry about you, 'cause we always had neighbors that watched us then. We didn't have to worry about nobody comin' by kidnapping kids, and breakin' in your house and stealing your stuff. You know, nowadays, you gotta be on alert for everything. Everything.

Shylah Johnson: What was going to school like when you were young?

Gina Johnson: Elementary was okay. Middle school got a little harder. High school I had a blast. My growin' up years was really in high school. I got a little disobedient in high school, but it worked out.

Shylah Johnson: Do you think that teachers now are a little more lenient than teachers back then?

Gina Johnson: I think teachers now don't care. I think they're in there just for the paycheck. When we were comin' up, teachers cared. You got the work. You did not leave without getting it. If you didn't understand it, they took their personal time to make you understand it. We learned how to write in cursive. We still had prayer in the schools. It was a lot more structural then than it is now. I think it's terrible now. The teachers don't wanna deal with the kids, then you got kids who are just straight rude, and their parents back 'em up. You know, when you have a child that says, "You can't tell me what to do," what do you do with 'em? Back then, they got them wooden paddles out with them holes in it. You didn't say it but one time.

Shylah Johnson: When going anywhere, like a trip or leaving the house or something, what was the best advice you can remember maybe a family member or somebody giving you?

Gina Johnson: That I better mind my manners and behave myself, and my mama better not heard nothin' about it.

Shylah Johnson: As you got older, where did you work – like what was your first job that you worked at?

Gina Johnson: Who work? [Laughter] I didn't work till I moved out of my house! I told you I was spoiled – I didn't have no job!

Shylah Johnson: What was your first job?

Gina Johnson: At Coca-Cola Bottling. I was 18 years old, and I was their public accountant.

Shylah Johnson: Describe a time when you felt most proud of someone in your family, or yourself, or the community.

Gina Johnson: Now, or as then?

Shylah Johnson: Then.

Gina Johnson: I probably would have to say my grandfather. He was the very first black police officer to ever be on the force here in Huntington. Not only that, he retired from the police force, and he went on to be the area supervisor for the post office. So he always excelled at everything he did, and I was very proud that he was my granddaddy.

Shylah Johnson: Can you tell me anything about race in Huntington? Was it like segregated or anything like that?

Gina Johnson: No, not when I was growin' up. We weren't really segregated, but the prejudice was still there. But it wasn't even as known then as it is now, you know. I guess basically what we're going to say is that most of us learned our place. We learned how to not cause confusion and stir up a ruckus that was totally unnecessary, 'cause even stirred up, we wasn't going to accomplish anything. So back then, it was better that we just went along with the program as long as nobody was hurt mentally or physically.

Shylah Johnson: Can you ever remember a time where something racial did happen?

Gina Johnson: To me, yes. The first time I ever experienced it was I was working at Captain D's – oh god, I was about 21 somethin' then – and the lady came in and didn't want me to wait on her or touch her because she said I was a nigger. And she didn't want a nigger touchin' her money or waitin' on her. And I laughed 'cause I had never had anything like that happen to me before, you know, but and it let me know how serious prejudice still was.

Shylah Johnson: What did people do for fun back then?

Gina Johnson: Everything. [Laughter] We had block parties, slumber parties, pool parties. At least once a week, they would shut down the avenues, and all the parents and everybody would get together, and we called it a block party. And it would start like 6:00 in the evening until it got really, really dark, and we would have a blast. Dancin', water balloons, pin the tail on the donkey – I mean, just playin' games, havin' fun.

Shylah Johnson: Do you have any stories you would like to add, if you would like anyone to know of? Maybe about yourself or your family, or anything like that?

Gina Johnson: Nope. Are you tryin' to find somethin', Miss [inaudible 00:12:20]?

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] I don't think I have any other questions, actually.

Gina Johnson: Alrighty. Well, let me ask you one.

Shylah Johnson: Okay.

Gina Johnson: What is actually the purpose of this?

Shylah Johnson: The purpose of this is because the older generation, a lot of them today are dying off without telling their story. Like we have history books and things like that, but it's always better to hear from a person who grew up in that time, like a first person point of view.

Gina Johnson: Okay.

Shylah Johnson: And so we would like to have these stories and events and things like that on record for future generations to hear about, and for them to use.

Gina Johnson: Oh, okay. Well I hope it was helpful.

Shylah Johnson: It was. Thank you.

Gina Johnson: You have a nice day.

[Interview re-recorded on different day]

Shylah Johnson: How are you doing today?

Gina Johnson: Fine.

Shylah Johnson: What is your name?

Gina Johnson: Gina Johnson.

Shylah Johnson: How has your week been?

Gina Johnson: Oo-ee! I've had better weeks.

Shylah Johnson: Okay, so my name is Shylah Johnson and this interview is for the Fairfield Oral History Project. This project is being conducted to basically collect history. We've noticed that our older generation is dying quicker than we are receiving their stories about their life before, like before what we know. I mean we have textbooks but nothing is like an authentic point of view of what life was like back then. So we wanna collect the stories of lives from what is left of our older generation to share with the generations to come and to keep the history alive. So, is it okay if we begin?

Gina Johnson: Sure.

Shylah Johnson: Were you born in Huntington, West Virginia?

Gina Johnson: Yes, I was.

Shylah Johnson: Living here, what is your fondest memory?

Gina Johnson: As far as what goes?

Shylah Johnson: It could be maybe a childhood memory, a young adult memory, or just anything, maybe with your friends, other family.

Gina Johnson: I guess my fondest memory would have to be how we spent holidays at my grandmother's house.

Shylah Johnson: Can you describe your neighborhood when you were young?

Gina Johnson: Describe it how? What are you wanting to know?

Shylah Johnson: What was it like? Like the people around you, the environment?

Gina Johnson: Everybody cared about everybody, we all played together, we were like a little community, you know? We didn't have a lot to worry about. You didn't have to worry about being kidnapped or somebody breakin' in your house or, you know. Whatever we had, if the other person didn't have it and they needed it, it was given, you know, without being asked. We just took care of everybody.

Shylah Johnson: Where was your favorite place to eat or shop or things like that?

Gina Johnson: Hills Department Store. I just remember Hills, I remember us going, and I also remember Heck's. There used to be a store out on the plaza called Heck's and Heck's was like a Walmart. Only thing is they didn't sell food. But you could get everything else in there.

Shylah Johnson: Were there any other places that were really popular back then that aren't really here now?

Gina Johnson: Yep, for real we had an action center, [inaudible 00:16:00] and it was the Action Community Center and it was on the corner of 8th Avenue and 16th Street. And we would go there – I mean it was just where you went and they had a room where you shot pool, you played basketball, they had a little tent thing that served food and, you know, we would hang out, chill out, hang with each other, yeah. Action was it then.

Shylah Johnson: These days we have a lot of technology and things similar to that. Did you have any technology when you were younger?

Gina Johnson: The most technology I had when I was younger was I had a tape recorder when tape recorders first came out – the kind that had the reels and the tape to it. I also had a record player, I also had a Atari, and that was the very first like Nintendo that came out. Whatever was new, I had. So, you know, the Atari, the tape player, and the record player – I was in there.

Shylah Johnson: What did people do for fun back then?

Gina Johnson: As far as who? Children, adults, or what?

Shylah Johnson: Children, adults, both.

Gina Johnson: We played, we hung out, we went swimmin', basketball, bike ridin', skate boarding. I was a tomboy, so I was always doing whatever the fellas did.

Shylah Johnson: What was it like growing up in the '60s, I'm assuming?

Gina Johnson: I don't remember much of the first part of the '60s because I was young, but I can remember maybe 1964-65 when I first went to school. Our first year in school was first grade. Wasn't no kindergarten, pre-K, none of that, you know. You waited until you got six, you went to the first grade, and in my first grade – I forgot this – I went to Barnett and we were segregated, it was an all black school. There were no whites, not even teachers. But, you know, at the time, we didn't really pay attention to it or look at it. All we knew was we was in school to learn.

Shylah Johnson: Was it different going into like the '70s and '80s?

Gina Johnson: Yes. It was a lot different because once we hit the '70s they integrated the schools, and I can remember they had the two black schools, which was Simms and Barnett at the time, and they closed down Barnett and we all went to Simms. There may have been like two white families that went there, and they gave them kind of a hard time, but I kind of befriended this girl named Kim. I don't know, I just liked her and until this day we are still friends. You know, I kind of took up for her and nobody really bothered her. They would bother me before they'd bother her. But that was okay with me because I just didn't want her to be bothered.

Shylah Johnson: Was it like a strange thing to see different races, I guess, be friends as kids, like back then?

Gina Johnson: Yes it was really strange because not only were we integrated as children, it also went with the teachers. And we ended up with maybe like five white teachers and I really don't think they knew how to approach us or teach us, you know. We had Mr. Thomas who was horrid: his way, no way, you got paddled if he didn't like what you said or did. You know, and then there were a few others

that we probably intimidated them. You know, but the majority of the teachers still remained black.

Shylah Johnson: Can you recall a time that you faced racism or things like that?

Gina Johnson: Like I said, the first time I really ever faced racism was when I was working at Captain D's. And when I say face it, I'm saying me being involved in it – was I was at the counter to wait on this elderly white lady and she just boldly looked me in my face and said, "I don't want a nigger waiting on me. I don't want a nigger to touch my money." I thought it was funny, actually. You know, my boss was a little upset with it, but we let it go on and they, you know, took their money and everything. And I went around, 'cause I was like a hostess also, and I had to serve drinks and I remember her poppin' her fingers telling me she needed some more tea. So I went and got the tea and poured it for her and I remember asking her, "How was the tea?" And she said, "Well, that's the best thing in here," and I remember saying, "Good, I made it." And the look on her face – she was done. I was tickled.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] While you were in school, were there some rules or the way things were run back then that are different kind of like from now?

Gina Johnson: Yes, we had prayer. We said the pledge of allegiance. You got paddled if you acted up, your parents got called. Wasn't no too many chances, we didn't sass our teachers, we didn't talk back. Why? Because we knew better. Because we knew that if we acted up in school they would call our parents and it was done when we got home. I disagree with the way the system is today because they're basically allowing that generation to come up and be the way that they want to be without the respect and without the manners and without the prayer, you know? Back then we learned to respect our elders at all costs. Nowadays, these kids is terrible. I wouldn't be a teacher for nothin'. I'd be in jail.

Shylah Johnson: Could you tell me about your parents?

Gina Johnson: I can tell you about my mother. I can't tell you much about my father. He passed away when I was nine months old. I didn't really have much doings with that side of the family, but my mother was there. She was a great provider. She's always been a Christian woman. You know, there came a time when me and her had our differences and I went to live with my grandmother for a while, but we okay now.

Shylah Johnson: Where was your mother from?

Gina Johnson: Here in Huntington.

Shylah Johnson: You said your mother was a Christian woman. What was it like living in a Christian household back then?

Gina Johnson: Oh, wow, it was tough. We went to church twice on Sundays, once on Mondays, Wednesday night service, and Thursday was youth meeting. And this was the way it went every week. We weren't allowed to go to movies, we weren't allowed to spend the night at people's houses, and the only time us girls wore pants was when it was snowin' outside and really cold. Because my mother and them really believed in the Old Testament that women didn't wear clothes that pertained to a man. So, there was no jewelry, there was no nail polishes, we couldn't even have a deck of cards in the house. It was rough because all our other friends had these things and got to do 'em. So, we snuck and did 'em.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] Was the neighborhood back then like predominantly Christian or was it different religions, or what was it like?

Gina Johnson: I'm gonna say predominantly Christian. You know, churches was more full than they are now. And again, it all boils down to, you know, how we're taught and raised. And again, like I say, back then you were taught to respect elders, you were taught to pray, you were taught to be thankful and grateful for all things.

Shylah Johnson: What did your mother do for a living?

Gina Johnson: She worked at the Social Security office.

Shylah Johnson: Did you have any siblings?

Gina Johnson: I had two older sisters and I have a sister that's the same age as me by my father.

Shylah Johnson: Where were you in the lineup of siblings?

Gina Johnson: I was the baby.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] What were your siblings like?

Gina Johnson: My oldest sister, I loved her to death. She would've done anything for me, she was my knight in shining armor. My sister Sherry was a snitch and we didn't get along. [Laughter] And my sister Lovey – we knew about each other, we would speak to each other, have conversation, but we were never tight until like high school.

Shylah Johnson: Did your mother or anybody, I guess an adult or whatever in your family have any political beliefs that you can remember that were like really strong I guess?

Gina Johnson: Yeah, we was all Democrat.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] Do you have like a favorite activity or thing you can remember you did with either your mother or your siblings?

Gina Johnson: Yeah, I played football with the boys. [Laughter] It was fun getting tackled and tore up my clothes, and – I enjoyed being, I don't know, I guess I'm just gonna say like, you know, one of the fellas, just like cool with everybody. You know a lot of girls was like primp and everything, but I noticed they were – like the fellas they was kind of standoffish or whatever but you know with me it was always, “Where's Gina? Tell her to come on, bring her football!” Or, “Bring the skateboard!” or it was, you know, they included me and I actually had more fun with the boys than I did the girls.

Shylah Johnson: What other relatives did you have contact with growing up?

Gina Johnson: My cousins, my aunts, uncles.

Shylah Johnson: Can you tell me about your grandparents?

Gina Johnson: From the time I can remember, my grandmother had remarried and she was divorced from my biological grandfather, but they always kept a relationship. I would always see granddaddy over there and he would go by and he would check and he was always in the business – even though they didn't make it as a couple, they stayed together when it came to raisin' their kids, grandkids, and whoever. At first I never understood it, but I do now.

Shylah Johnson: Do you know how to cook?

Gina Johnson: Yeah! I can throw down!

Shylah Johnson: When did you learn how to cook and who taught you?

Gina Johnson: From the time I can remember, I used to watch my mother in the kitchen and I did take in a lot, but actual on-hand experience came from my grandmother. My grandmother put me in the kitchen and would tell me – I can remember her sitting in the living room telling me step by step what to do in the kitchen and the one thing I can still hear her tell me all the time is you can always add to it but you can't take away. So if you're unsure about the spices, put a pinch here and a pinch there, then taste it. You can add, but you can't take away. And that still stays with me today.

Shylah Johnson: Are there any special foods that you cooked with your grandmother then that stood out?

Gina Johnson: Yeah, we just fry up some chicken! [Laughter] Woo-wee, we would fry chicken and she could make the best stuffing and I watched her over and over again and I could never get it, and I don't got it still today, and I'm never gonna have it. She's passed on but I wish I knew how to make that stuffing. We used to fight over it on Thanksgiving. [Laughter] She would, she'd make a big pan and I'd go in there with the knife and cut my section and take my little nasty finger [laughter]

and I'd be like, "I licked this." I'd be in trouble but all that piece of cornbread stuffing was mine.

Shylah Johnson: Were there any activities that your family I guess did all together or was it more like a, I guess, kids did what they did?

Gina Johnson: Are you talking about Mom and the house, whatever?

Shylah Johnson: I guess so.

Gina Johnson: The only thing that I can ever recall us doing as one is a couple of things. Every Easter we went to the movies and watched the Ten Commandments. And, we went to church camp every summer. Every summer there was a church camp and we would go as a family. And I hated it.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] What was church camp like?

Gina Johnson: Boring. Boring, boring, boring! I don't know what else to tell you. It's a bunch of old people sittin' around sayin' Jesus is love. [Laughter] And we had to wear dresses all the time, and these little patent leather shoes – oh god I hated 'em! And I'd get in trouble because I would sneak another dress and put the dress on and walk out like I was supposed to, and I can see my mom now, "Ma'am" – I remember that finger – "come here."

Shylah Johnson: Did you ever have kids?

Gina Johnson: Yes.

Shylah Johnson: How many did you have?

Gina Johnson: I had four.

Shylah Johnson: How old were you when you first had children?

Gina Johnson: Two girls, two boys. My first son was born at the age of 18.

Shylah Johnson: What was it like raising kids I guess back then at such a young age?

Gina Johnson: Actually, I didn't raise him for the first year or two. My mom and my sister had him a lot. A whole lot. And I allowed it because I really wasn't ready, but then when I got pregnant with the second one, they said, uh, um-um, this is your wagon, you go pull it. So once my daughter came along, a whole lot changed. I had to grow up fast and learn how to take care of my kids and work and two babies and budget, and the whole budget stuff, so, you know, I had to.

Shylah Johnson: Were you, I guess I wanna say judged because you had kids at such a young age?

Gina Johnson: No, really back then, no. You know, it was almost like it was the thing to do because my girlfriends had babies and everybody we knew was around havin' babies. I don't know if we thought it was cool, okay, or what, but it's just somethin' that happened.

Shylah Johnson: When did you get your first job?

Gina Johnson: When I was 17 years old at Coca-Cola Bottling. I was their accountant. And I went in without the knowledge of accounting and they was teaching me how to keep records because back then there wasn't no computers or none of that. Everything was done by a book and the book was like as wide as this and you would flip it open and you had to make it balance. But in the meantime I started going to school for accounting, so, and me being in school and learning on-hand was really great, you know. They gave me a chance, believing in me, believing that I was smart enough to handle that.

Shylah Johnson: Can you recall a time where you felt most proud of yourself or a family member or maybe even your community as a whole?

Gina Johnson: Not off the top of my head.

Shylah Johnson: Is there any other stories or things you would like people to know I guess about that time period or any big events that happened?

Gina Johnson: I guess, you know, I remember we had block parties for the neighborhood, like somethin' for the kids to do so they wasn't bored and they weren't out here doin' things they wasn't supposed to, whatever. You know, and I can remember once a week we would have these block parties and they would shut off 16th Street to 20th Street and Artisan Avenue or 9th Avenue, and the mothers and vendors and everybody would just get together, you know, with all kind of things goin' on: dance contests, water balloon fights, food eating, anything you wanted to eat was there. And it was free and it was for us and that was something that they did for us. The community got together, they cared as a whole, which you don't see now. Nowadays everybody is, "Oh, that's not my business." "Oh, I ain't got nothin' to do with that, um-um." You know? Now all of a sudden everything is nobody's business, but we don't understand how our kids are ending up the way they're ending up when there's nobody there to correct 'em, support 'em, or lead 'em in the right direction. Once you try to do that, you know, all of a sudden spanking is child abuse. But it says in the Bible, "Spare the rod, spoil the child." You know, we were more behaved because we knew we was gonna get it. Now I don't know how y'all think it works but you take kids nowadays, I've heard – I've heard little kids say to teachers, "You can't put your hands on me. I'm 'a tell my mama!" I've heard kids say, "I'm 'a call the CPS on you!" You know if we'd've said that when we was comin' up I promise you, we'd've needed plastic surgery. Not – it's just called respect. Respect your elders, you know?

Shylah Johnson: Were there any like childhood, I guess, TV shows or things like that, that –

Gina Johnson: No –

Shylah Johnson: -- were “in” then that aren't now, that I guess were your favorites?

Gina Johnson: Popeye, the Addams Family, Dark Shadows. Dark Shadows was the stuff!
[Laughter] We would run home every day at 3:00 to watch Dark Shadows and it was about these vampires that – it was a vampire soap opera, that's all I can tell you. And there was Barnabas and he was the main vampire. I'll never forget him.

Shylah Johnson: [Laughter] Okay, well I have no further questions. Thank you for speaking with me today Ms. Johnson and it was a pleasure to get to know you and your stories.

Gina Johnson: Aw, and it was a pleasure helping you too, baby.