

Marilynn Poole-Webb Interview Transcript

I'm born and raised. Born in Brackenridge Hospital. Marilyn Poole-Webb.

My parents, Ira Poole. My mother, Waldron Wray Hill Plicque. But I'm born and raised in Austin.

My family has been associated with Ebenezer Baptist Church since a year before my Aunt Irene was born. So over a hundred years. And I still attend Ebenezer. My parents were both schoolteachers. My mother eventually wound up in administration with the school district. And so when I came back, she's kind of a rock star because after integration, there was concern about teachers keeping jobs and hiring new teachers in AISD, and she contributed to that immensely, apparently.

There a lot of people were very grateful to her. My father, this incredible teacher, when I was younger. He was very creative and did plays and so he's pretty well known for more reasons than simply the fact that he has the Statue of Liberty in his front yard.

But you'll hear about him later. I attended, of course, Busy Bee nursery and then Blackshear Elementary under Mr. Rice, and then University Junior High, and then Reagan. I was at Reagan during the state championships. And I like to say that we were such good cheerleaders they won three state championships in the four years we were there.

My father built his home here after him and my mother divorced. My Aunt Irene built this house. My best friends live both next door and across the street. When I attended University Junior High on UT campus, we would walk here every day after school.

My formative years were spent in this neighborhood. My mother is a single mother. My aunt would help her quite a bit and would pick up my sister and bring her here. After I went to college and law school, my aunt and I were very good friends, and we did a lot of entertaining here. And she and I would sit in and plan things to happen at the church and in the community.

A lot of my teachers lived in this neighborhood, and so these were people that you would see in grocery stores and not just in school, but it was a community. You would attend church with them. You'll find a lot of Ebenezer Baptist Church members right in the neighborhood. And so that's my connection, and that continues to be my connection.

When the house came in jeopardy of being lost, I know in Irene's last stages when they recommended palliative care and that sort of thing, she was not going to do anything that was going to jeopardize this house.

And so when my cousin took it over and she was in some difficulty, I immediately came in to help her because this family's a very important part, this house, it's a very important part of my memory, it's a very important part of our family. It's also very important to the community. And so that's how I wound up here.

When she changed the flooring on the front porch, I'm hearing, "Irene, I don't like that." But we were very close. And that tree in the backyard, I helped plant. Told you I cried when she took out the mimosa. She said it was a junk tree, but she put in a magnolia.

If anyone knew my secrets, it was her. She was the type who, even though she lived alone most of her life, her husband died in 1961. And she never remarried. She still laid every meal with a full place sitting. I'm talking multiple forks and just a full place sitting.

My mother was a young mother, and we were raised beautifully as a young mother would, but my aunt for all of us, she's the one who introduced us to at least some social graces. She always said "it was better to know how things are to be done and then when you're doing it wrong, you know you're choosing that then to go out into the world and you didn't know."

And so, she sounds stuffy, but she wasn't.

My son, I remember bringing my son here. He's three years old to have breakfast, and she sat him at a table with all of the full place setting

And he looked at me and he says, "what am I supposed to do with all this stuff?"

That's just the way Irene was. And she told a story about running into Elspeth Rostow. You won't know who this is, but anyone connected with the University of Texas would. Elspeth whispered to her, "your fur is real. Mine's a fake."

I feel very fortunate to have been raised by a community of women who cared about me and, and could introduce me to things. Betty Washington next door, grew up calling her Aunt Betty. Or Mrs. Kirk next door, Ron's mother.

I was with her when she bought things. And they would come home and share those things with me or even John Chase's wife. Drucie and I were friends, and I would come home from college, and if I was in Houston, I always visited her. And they were my heroes at a time when women were really striving for professional positions and professional lives.

I always wanted to live like them. And I've been blessed to have been able to. I would like to see this house become a part of that heritage. I think the University of Texas and Huston Tillotson College equally have a claim to the heritage of this house because of Oscar's connections. And my aunt Irene.

And so when they bring in students, especially minority students, for recruitment, my goal was that they would come to this house and they will learn about the early integration at UT, as well as the legacy, degrees from HBCUs and how Oscar, as he struggled for a position at UT, he was still welcomed at Huston Tillotson and on its staff, but that's my goal for this house.

After the Brown v. Board of Education case that forced integration, UT began to admit African-American students. And my aunt's husband, Oscar, was one of them, and John Chase was one in the school of architecture. And he and Oscar apparently became good friends. And my understanding from my aunt is that this house was Chase's first residential design, after he was licensed.

And he designed it for Oscar and Irene. Like I said, the plan was to build it next to her best friend, but Oscar died and Irene and her daughter, her young daughter would have been about 9 or 10 years old at the time, left to build this house, and Irene was afraid she wouldn't be able to afford it.

And so the original design for the house was a three bedroom, two bath. And then Chase redesigned it for two bedrooms and two baths to accommodate Irene. Their letters we've found. I found a series of letters, that correspondence between Chase and the contractor building the house and arguing over materials. And Irene wanted nice materials that she could afford.

But it's special, this is the mahogany veneer. There are a lot of things in this house that were modern for the time. Newer homes is now starting to put in some of the features, but most homes at that time just didn't have those features.

That's John Chase, the open design, that's John Chase. The quality of the furnishings. That's Irene, and perhaps John Chase.

These are the original colors in the house. Pink and green. Irene was a very, very devoted Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority member, and was an active member for over 50 years. And so the exterior of the house and even the interior, was basically pink and green. We're trying to maintain some of that, the original colors. All of the appliances in the kitchen originally were that turquoise color as well.

And then after a while, they needed to be replaced. She couldn't find things in that color. but you'll see the cooktop is still that turquoise color, as is the sink. I'll try to keep those as much as possible. They're also some letters where Chase wanted the house as energy efficient as the time would allow. And he was asking for certain solar upgrades to the house. The letters are exchanges with the contractor.

The contractors are arguing, "why do you need this? This is just going to run up the cost." And Chase was holding firm.

I think right now he would love an opportunity for a solar roof or something to that effect. And if I can afford it, we'd like to stay true to a lot of his original planning and designs for this house.

At a Christmas party, there was this tray of cookies, and they were so good. And I remember going back to my aunt and saying, "have you tried these cookies? They're so good."

And she said, those were Lillian. She said, "Lillian baked those cookies." Well, I didn't know Lillian at the time, but I said, "introduce me to her."

And I met Lillian and Lillian, I don't know, I would guess she was almost 80 years old. I'm in my young 20s, and so she seemed old to me. But I asked her for the recipe and she told me no. And, I couldn't believe it. But every time I came home from college, I would call Lillian and visit with her and then ask for the recipe for the cookies.

And she told me no. And I remember finally, once I called her when I came back and she said, "you still want that recipe?" And I said yes. And she gave it to me. And I called my aunt and I said I got the recipe, and we just celebrated. This is a terrible story.

But, Lillian died very shortly after giving me that recipe. And I remember thinking, sure glad I got that recipe. Isn't that terrible?

Irene worked under the principal and superintendent, remember, we're talking segregation at LC Anderson High School. And she knew every family in East Austin because of that position. And, she was in a good position to help, she was in a good position to – she just did a lot for this community. She was the only certified executive assistant in all of Austin.

So when there was integration, she went there as singularly the only certified executive assistant, educational executive assistant, in the school district.

And that created a problem because integration was not smooth. And people wonder why she gets more income than all the rest of the secretaries. There was a lash back for that. She wound up moving out of the secretarial position. She was secretary at Ebenezer for many, many years after retirement from the school district.

Like I said, it was a community, and she contributed well. She stayed financial, but not active. If there was ever going to be a social gathering, she had the silver, she had the tablecloths she had and she just always was available to the community for that.

I remember Mrs. Kirk getting mad at her husband and going and buying her first fur. And I was sitting there when it came home. I remember when she and Irene discovered Tuesday morning and they bought matching china so that when they entertained, they could put it together and have larger group servings.

I remember Jody Beverly Thompson on the next street and Mrs. Cook and all these teachers, who were just part of my life growing up in this neighborhood. My mother, a single mother, was not really active socially. The Jack and Jill and all of those organizations. But I tell people now that I was always a part of it because I really made sure that I was included with her daughter in those things.

When I first came back to Austin in about 2014, I was living with my father on the corner, and I became active in the neighborhood association. East Austin – it was changing. The demographics were changing rapidly and the news was full of protests and cries of gentrification and all of that.

And as a neighborhood, we decided that a lot of the change was inevitable, and we embraced it by sharing with our new neighbors our memories of this neighborhood. A lot of what we considered landmarks of East Austin were being taken away. Definitely the schools and the names of the schools. I know my thinking was it's hard, though, to honor and respect something if you don't know that history.

And so rather than getting angry at someone throwing away something they just didn't know, you don't know the value of something until you know – we would share with our new neighbors.

“Oh, you're moving into this house? Well, you know who used to own that house?”

And we would tell them histories and tell them about the families.

And we noticed they got a sense of pride because they think they just bought a house in a nice neighborhood. And then all of a sudden, you realize that your home was owned by, the first black elected mayor, city councilperson. And so when we started seeing these homes being torn down and started trying to do things to maintain the neighborhood, they readily joined in because it became their neighborhood too.

So the answer is yes. You will find this is still a very warm neighborhood. And we know each other and we invite each other over for breakfast and for lunch, and we attend meetings and we discuss changes in the neighborhood. And we've kept that spirit, that neighborly spirit. So I'm very proud of what we're doing here in this neighborhood.

It took us five years almost to get that done, but it also gave us a chance to meet some of the new neighbors. Unfortunately, the law has changed, making it more difficult for neighborhoods to do what we were able to accomplish.

But we all work together, and I love seeing a new demographic telling our story because it's become part of their story. And I like it. My neighbor two doors down just had a baby, and we're celebrating that, get babies back in the neighborhood.

I would like to see more young black Americans move into the neighborhood, but I understand I had those same choices living in the Houston suburbs. You can get more house for the money outside of the city. You can get that. But there's a huge appreciation for living inside the city. I can see why this area is valued. Because it's easy access to everything else.

It's easy access to the freeways. If you want to get out of Austin. Legacy trees. I hate to see developers come in and just change it completely. and I love when someone can come in and actually appreciate what was here and give it, financial love and maintenance. They might not have had before to make it into something beautiful.

Most of these homes were built for generations to enjoy. Part of it in the early days, and I'm not talking about this neighborhood because we have the credit union, but I know over in College Heights, most of those homes were redlined. They were financed, they might have been privately financed, but it was under something called a contract for deed.

A contract for deeds gave you a loan, probably at an interest rate that was higher than what others were paying. But it also said that if you were late in the payment, there was an option to start it all over again. So if you had a 30 year loan on your house and you're in the 20th year and you lose the job and you can't make your payments and you miss payments, they get started all over again.

So anyone East who still has a house that they acquired in the 1920s and '30s and '40s. That may well be the greatest asset and the only asset that that family owns. But what the law states and the taxes will get fixed when you reach age 65, but what the law states is when those owners die, there's an upgrade in tax, the tax has changed to meet the current.

And it doesn't matter that the change is simply because mom died, and I might have been living in mom's house and taking care of mom and dad. And I also am over 65. All of a sudden, with the new valuation in these homes, your taxes are going to jump from 2,000 where they're fixed to maybe 15,000. That's hard for a family. And they have to come up with the money in a very short period of time.

So that's the reason you're seeing some of the changes. It's the new values. It's the taxes, it's the state law that doesn't recognize the history that allows the family to still have its family home in 2020.

When we were first going after the historical designation, even in our 60s, we bought the Kool-Aid, and we were calling this the Holy Cross neighborhood. And when we approached my dad to give approval, he wouldn't approve it. He said, "we're not the Holy Cross neighborhood where the Rogers Washington Holy Cross."

It forced us to do some historical research ourselves and realize that originally we were Rogers Washington. Doctor Washington, I've told you about, and then Rogers, whom we think had a

home on just one street over, actually subdivided the neighborhood, and then Holy Cross who had the hospital and supported the district.

And so I think I'd like for it to be remembered as being a neighborhood – not self reliance because God definitely has a hand in all things. But this was a neighborhood envisioned by African Americans. And Nash Phillips Copus developed the craft homes. Better that they are the ranch homes. But, you'll notice that there are a lot more. In fact, everything in here is probably in some ways the custom, but actual exterior custom designs, these two streets.

I'd like for it to be known that a segregated black community was a lot more than how TV depicts it, or even how you're reading. That this was a community that was supportive and it was a community of people who built special and lived special and really served to build the greater East Austin community educators, business people.

And had ties not only with our historical agencies of churches and HBCU, but ties even to the University of Texas at large, people who were just striving to be a part of Austin and the state. And a community of leaders.