

Cynthia Mays Interview Transcript

Okay. I'm Cynthia Hurst Mays. And I am an Austinite, born here and also delivered at Holy Cross Hospital. And I am now 70 years old.

Currently, I am employed at the African American Youth Harvest Foundation here in Austin, Texas, which provides resources for underprivileged or those that are in need of help. They have all the resources needed to help someone. And we have a mentoring program that I also work with.

I'll start with my father and mother. They purchased the house. They purchased the home in 1959. I was six years old and excited about moving into a new home. My dad at that time was in the Air Force and also attending Huston Tillotson University. He was in the local artist, which had paintings throughout the churches in different places in Austin and he also was a sculptor because he was an artist. At that time, he was sculpturing a bust of – JJ Pickle was a congressman. So then he had one that was placed in his office.

My mother was a homemaker. She volunteered at the schools from elementary to junior high, to high school. She was always present and active in PTA and volunteering. And in later years, she became the first African American to be employed at the Sperry and Hutchinson Company, which at that time was the Green Stamp Company, where you purchased groceries and you would acquire these stamps for these books and that you'd put these stamps in and then you would redeem them at the store.

And so it was a national company.

Well, at that time, they were a young married couple. And being African American, they just wanted to have a home for the kids to grow up in. So then that was the neighborhood that was chosen. And at that time, it was really an area that was up and coming and designated for us.

They wanted to make sure that we had that family stability. And we thought it was really exciting. And it was because it wasn't a newly built house. So then it was exciting and we were still around people that we were accustomed being around.

Everybody was neighborly and everybody became friends and family. And I was the neighborhood babysitter.

Matter of fact, one of them still lives in the neighborhood. Kerry. She and her sister, they were one. And then we had Ms. Lorraine Phillips.

She was a teacher that became one of the first black principals at the elementary school. Maplewood. And her children, babysit them. We had other families, couples that came in that I would babysit for – Doctor Warfield, his children. So I was just the babysitter.

We were there for 62 years until my mother became ill. And she had to go to a rehabilitation center. However, the property is still owned by a family member, which is my nephew. Her grandson. So it's still there, and it's still a part of the family.

Oh, yes. It will always be. Here's hoping, because we never know how things might change. But then that is where we see it always being a house that we can come to. It's currently being renovated. So then once that's over. But in the meantime, it's still a part of the family. And there was about five generations that had been a part in that house, because at one time, another we've all lived there in different times.

Well that was really fun because it was where the neighbors, Ms. Brenda Malik now, Mims at the time, we all went to the same schools, and we had this friendship. We were like brothers and sisters.

And it was where different age groups had different siblings there, but everybody had a family member that had a friend that was in the same age. So it was like there was no fear in the neighborhood. We go outside, we ride bicycles. It was more or less going outside and we didn't stay in the house a lot – I did because I was a reader. So I just wanted to stay in the house and do those kind of things.

But for the most part, my siblings loved being outside riding bicycles and it was just community, families that were like relatives.

At that time we had Safeway as a grocery store, and it was right down the street, on the corner of 11th and 35. My mother didn't drive right away. She was a late bloomer when it came to driving. And then when she did, then, of course, on Saturdays, that was the day.

And at the same time we shop down on Sixth Street also, because that was where we shopped. And there were not malls. And it was where everybody supported everybody. Football games, track meet. The YMCA was right across the street from here and that was a regular thing too, because that's where I learned ballet, tap dancing, twirling and those types of things.

So we kind of had just this, I don't know, it was just full of joy all the time, really. That's not to say they were not times that it was stressful, maybe for the parents, but the kids didn't know that. In that day and time, it was where children were children and they enjoyed life, just being children.

And Sunday dinners were always at the house in our family members once we became older and had our own families and things. We still go back to 2504 Weber Avenue. On Sundays after church, we gather for holidays, Christmas and New Year's and Easter and Juneteenth,

especially Juneteenth.

Oh, this was a big deal. My mother was part of the revitalization of Juneteenth. At one time, they did not celebrate it. There was a period in which it wasn't celebrated. And then my mother and several of us decided it needed to be celebrated. So they actually started it again. We stayed up putting flowers and banners on trucks and cars. It was in the early '70s that this was a big deal.

And it's always been a big deal in my family because when we were growing up as little children, we had relatives that lived in Georgetown and Taylor, so we would even go there.

And that's when you got to ride the horses and hang out at the little streams of water where you got to swim. So Juneteenth has always been a big holiday in my family. We celebrate it.

Let's see when we were teenagers. What was special about it? Oh, the talent show. Brenda and myself and I can't remember who else was involved. Who was it? Kathy Austin. Vickie McBride. And Angela Poole. We decided we wanted to give a talent show for our mothers on Mother's Day. So we were all dancers, cheerleaders, and that type of thing.

So then we performed and had a talent show for our mothers on Mother's Day. That was really exciting. And it was a big deal, but it was really fun. Then there was another time that it was something going on, and we would just gather on that street.

It was a dead end street. So therefore there would be times that we just be outside the different families, chitchatting and "hey, everybody."

Oh, yeah. It was just normal. And then if there was ever a sickness or hospitalization, it would be where – we had one neighbor, Miss Jennings, that was by herself, where she wasn't really about herself. Because I remember there was this night, there was snow, and we didn't get snow very often growing up. I can remember it snowing in Austin maybe three times.

And this particular time, it was snowing and it was heavy. And most of the times we have ice before we have snow. And so, Mrs. Jennings was sick and she called my mother and my mother, and this was like 2 or 3:00 in the morning, and they had to take her to the hospital because she was by her senior and by herself.

My mother rode to the hospital with her. And so that was just a normal thing. It's just, you know, if anybody needed anybody, we were always there for each other.

Being a part of a community that we hope stays a community, because we still have those ties with everybody in the community. We go to church together, although it might be different churches within the city. We have one neighbor, Brenda, who goes to Saint James, where my oldest sister and her husband live, and that's their church.

We have members, they go to Ebenezer, and we all see each other and we have others that go to different churches. But if there's something going on that they're involved in, we're there to support them any way. So we're still getting together and we're still a family.

We're still a community. Our children – it's now going down to the next generations. My children, Brenda's children, and grandchildren, they all know each other because that family dynamic is still there within that community. And that goes not only for Brenda, but then you also have Cathy, her mother was across the street.

You have Ms. Jackson and her granddaughters. And matter of fact, she just had Easter with us. We still have a family.

Sunday was a tradition and it still is because although we separated, we still do that after church on Sunday, we gather to eat together and then Juneteenth is always we're going to be together.

But other traditions that we might have, other than the holiday spending together, my mind sometimes goes blank on me when you ask questions.

And I'm sure that they're still some traditions that we may still have that I might not come up with. Sharing recipes is one, because we were just talking to one of the granddaughters of one of the neighbors. She has a recipe for macaroni and cheese that's out of sight. So she had to bring us something this fancy.

So then we still sharing recipes. And now we have Marilyn Poole – she has recipes, she makes banana nut bread. It's really good.

So then those are the kind of things that those recipes are still around.

My name is Cynthia. And although I later found that had a distant relative that had the name, it was also a nurse at the hospital that my grandmother, she and my grandmother would talk and they came up with the Cynthia name.

So then that's where I got my name from was the nurse and my grandmother, and it was our little Holy Cross hospital. And there were occasions that it was really simple. I had a sister that, my youngest sister at an early age, had to have surgery up there. And so then it was so convenient because we didn't have to drive to go visit anybody in the hospital.

And then we had Ms. Snails, which was nurse at the hospital. So she was one of the neighbors. And so then that was exciting because we were talking about in a day and time, you didn't have a lot of black nurses. And so for us to see her, by the way, she was very attractive.

And then, for her to be one of our nurses when we had to go to the hospital. And that was a good thing.

We all went to Kealing except for somebody in '70 when they changed – Stuart King, I think he went to another school. UJH is what we called it. But then that didn't stop. At that time, I forgot about Ronald Kirk. They went to different junior high schools and high schools. However, the majority of us went to Kealing Junior High and Anderson High School.

However, when desegregation came along, my younger siblings Doug and Tracy, Tracy was the first African-American cheerleader at Lamar Junior High School. Now they call it a middle school, but they were junior high schools then. And then you had, so they went there and, they went to high school at McCallum. Because that was what was, the school when they change those in the district so then they had to attend that school.

But for the majority of the older group, we all attended Anderson, because those were the schools that Kealing and Anderson was our choices.

The Yellowjackets. So then it was exciting, you know, because it was us. It was our school [LC Anderson]. We had teachers of our own race that taught us. But then it was not where you were going to slip. For one, my mother was at the school volunteering. Okay? She was PTA president, so nothing was going to slip by her.

And then she was going to share it. If she caught one of the neighbor's children, it was going to be shared. So then you kind of had to watch yourself. But then the teachers, I felt that the teachers were teachers where it wasn't a failure. It was where you were going to work hard to get what you needed to get, to learn what you needed to learn.

It wasn't where we were allowed to say, well, "he's not teachable." That didn't happen. You know, everybody was going to be taught. So then I think that doing that, that era, we miss out on it now because of the fact that, that determination to make sure that we made the grade, made a difference.

And my mother was one of those that when they started the Head Start program here in Austin, she was the one that helped implement that plan (she and I can't remember who it was that she worked with) at Campbell Elementary. And they actually started the first Head Start program in the city of Austin.

So that was part of her career. And also, I can remember growing up when they open, and during the summer, we take trips to Dallas and to New Orleans, Louisiana, because my dad was originally from Louisiana, and we were going to a trip at Astroworld in Houston, and we stopped.

I can't remember, I think it was in Giddings. And we stopped to use the restroom at a gas station where my father was getting gas in. They told us that it was not working, and so my dad wasn't pleased with that. And my mother wasn't because it was a convoy of us. Matter of fact, it was the neighborhood. They were taking all the children to Astroworld, and when we stopped, they told us it wasn't working.

However, we were paying to get their gas. Then it ended up. My dad watched and we went across the street because he wasn't going to buy gas if we couldn't use the restroom because he felt like there was discrimination. And so we went across the street and they had the restroom and everything, but my dad stood and watched the service station for a while, and they let people of other color use the restroom, and they actually filed a civil rights suit against that service station.

And they won it because they shut the service station down for a while. And they had a fine and everything, but I can't remember whether it was Lagrange. I think it was Giddings because I think it was 290 way. And so then, that was something to know that I had parents did not just settle down. They fought for their rights.

And so then they closed the service station. And after, I guess about five years, they tried to reopen it. And now, the last time we went through Houston, it was where that area they built something else because it finally just didn't work for them anymore. So those experiences growing up, because my mother was an advocate for ...

We had a creek that was on the side of the house, and they fought. And it took them over ten years to finally get that taken care of and where they closed it off. Because we actually used to play down there and, you know, to spawn. And so then, they finally closed it, but they had to go fight for it.

They had to go before the planning commission. They had to go before the city council. And my mother was the one that was usually chosen for spokesperson. And she served as president of the Rogers Washington Neighborhood Association twice. And, there was also an incident in the '60s that the University of Texas wanted to purchase land in Blackland, which the next part of our area.

And so she my mother, Mrs. Scales – another neighbor whose son was a Tuskegee Airman, Kirk, and Katherine Poole, they had to go before the city council and fight for them not to be able to purchase up land from – because this areas were designated for African Americans.

So that was in the late '60s. However, now those things have changed and they finally were able to purchase up land that came close to where we are talking about, Rogers Washington, neighborhood.

And so those changes are different, but my mother was that kind of person, one that was called upon when desegregation and they had to go to McCallum. And there was actually guys waiting for them, my siblings, when they got off the bus for it to be a violent occurrence.

And so the superintendent of schools then called upon my mother to come in and try to to help with controlling where there wouldn't be a riot.

So then she was always one that was always in the midst of what was going on in the city. She had accolades from different organizations and here within the city. She was an advocate for children and for seniors.

She was a member of the NAACP, she was a member of the WH Passon Historical Society, one of the founding members, along with Ms. Ada Anderson and Ms. Adriene Craig. That hurdle house is up the street from here, on 12th Street, where they held all of their meetings and information.

She was also a member of the Douglass Club, for quite some time, which is another civic organization that helps with scholarships for children and graduating from high school. A member of the Grand Lodge. There were so many, and to think that I had some of this written down, but I left it at the house and I forgot it because I couldn't find it right away.

But there's much more that I could come up with. Back in the '60s, there used to be a festival that came here every year, and it was called Aqua Festival. Had boats and floats that were on Town Lake. And they would have entertainment down there every year.

And there was one special night set aside on Thursdays, set aside for African Americans. And they had what they call captains and admirals and that kind of thing. Positions as to the people that were running and overseeing what was going on. And she was a part of that being one of the first women that they chose to be captain.

So yeah, she was really outgoing. A community person for sure. And that kind of kept us always involved. We had one of our neighbors - the Jackson's. He was a coach at Kealing, later moved to Michigan, but then they moved back after retiring. He was who taught us how to swim. Everybody in the neighborhood went to Gibbons Park, and that's where they managed the park.

She managed the one part, and he was the coach for swimming. So that's where we learned to swim. However, I never passed the Swan.

I just never wanted to dive off the diving board, so they couldn't make me do that. But then my brother became an avid swimmer. My sister, my younger sister. The oldest too. We didn't do too well. But that's all right. We won't drown. We can float. on topic, but were you ever around?

When I was growing up, sixth street was where you shop on. And then you had, I can remember on Saturdays when my great grandmother stayed, turn it on right outside on this. OThis building is across the street that my mother worked there. After she retired from Sperry, they closed Sperry and Hutchinson down. Then she became employed right over here at the African-American Youth Harvest Foundation.

This is East Austin economic development. And she managed the senior housing for the church over there. So then across the street where the apartments are, my great grandmother resided there, and we actually walked from there down to Sixth Street on Saturdays because he was just going down the hill, really.

And the police station wasn't where it is. You had, who was it? It was a chicken place there where you go over year to get your chickens, because that's where they had real chickens to where they slaughtered them and everything.

And I can remember that part, but I can give you details because I was a little girl then. But I do know that that was a fun thing Saturday. And I can remember when there was a poll tax for you to vote, and my grandmothers and my great grandmothers, they would actually get dressed to go vote, but they paid because they were proud to be able to go and vote.

So I can remember those types of things. Also, it was a big deal. And to think that they're trying to suppress some of that now with the rules that they're making, the changes that they're making. But I'm going off subject.

Yeah, we played in the creek, and it was a tunnel, and I was kind of scared at the time. But then my siblings, they didn't have a problem with it. And it actually was fun, except for when it rained and then you saw the water rising, getting closer to your doors, because there was an instance where there was a flood, but then it didn't come into the house because we kind of set up.

But, you know, and it was just a matter of time that it would wash down all of the dirt on the side of the houses. And so then that's why I was so important for them to continue the fight, because it was like, it has to be done. Or after a while we're not gonna have any houses here.

So they finally made the decision in that Barton Creek runs quite a ways away from that subdivision.

When we moved there, the streets were paved.

That was in certain parts of the city. Yeah, it still occurred. But in that neighborhood when we moved there, it was already paved. However, we couldn't rent an apartment that was just two blocks away, on the main road side. African-Americans couldn't soon stay there, but we had a subdivision. Subdivision that we could live in, and I'd actually be homeowners.

You had Mr. Lee Kirk. He was the first black postman that they had.

You had Ankie Kirk, the library down on Springdale is named after her. Sometimes I get street names mixed up. I know where they are. But in that case. Yeah. And then you had Lavan Marshall and Doctor Marshall, which he has a junior high school named after him.

And then you had, Mr. and Mrs. Mims, Brenda's parents, both were educators. We had quite a few educators there in the school because you had the Scales' and you had Mr. Scales that was an original Tuskegee Airman, and she was an educator.

Also you had Mrs. Washington, she was a librarian.

And then you had Doctor King, who was President of the Huston Tillotson College, but now University, and also owner of the King Teachers Mortuary. And you had Mr. and Mrs. Calhoun. He was a principal and she was education also. But they also did some big things.

You also had Mr. and Mrs. Mays, they were educators. And like I mentioned before, Ms. Lorraine Phillips being the first black principal at Maplewood. Matter of fact, she was one in the Senate. In the city she was one of the first and she was at Maplewood because that was a predominantly white school at that time.

So changes have been made.

When we were growing up, it was just Holy Cross. But then there were older people that knew Rogers Washington. I remember hearing it, but for most of the times we say Holy Cross.

You had Chase, which was the first African American architect to graduate from University of Texas. He designed quite a few. He did the architecture. The builders, now I do know that William Carrington was one of the builders.

But at the same time, the builders at that time were Mr. Oliver Street and Mr. Arthur – I can't think of his name. They were black builders, because these were guys that were the contractors at that time.

If you've ever been in any of [the homes], they were kind of different. You might have had two of them that had something that was kind of alike, but then for the most part, most of them were really different.

Oh, I can't say which is a favorite. Other than Ms. Phillips' house that was on the corner – that was different to have an elevator in their house, so that was different, and her being of the neighborhood. That was a big deal, because she could go from her garage up to her house.

We know where Mr. Poole is, where the Statue of Liberty is across the street from him. That was Miss Phillips' house. And then you had the one next to that one. It's an open field, and it's the next one, the Washington's. I always liked that floorplan because when you walk in the door, there's a step down to the living area this way and then a step up to go to our dining area.

But then I also like the the house that Marilyn Poole lives in because of the step down, but that one is really above its time. There was a visionary right there because you think those houses now, you talking about back in the '60s, early 60s, late '50s when you didn't have islands and kitchens. Back in that day, you had an island in the kitchen and that was, that was different.

And then you have the Kings' house that you thought you had everything right here when you walk in the door, but then you go up here and there's a bedroom, you go to here, and you go down there. And so they just were different. All of them were different. And then across this street, the Jackson's, you walk in her front door and it was her dining room, but you could walk through another door and there was bedrooms.

And so then they just had different designs, but they were all unique. And like you say, most likely they were the characteristics or the personalities of the people that lived in them.