

Rosetta Gray

A Verbatim Transcription of an Oral Interview

1201 West Park Street
Urbana, Illinois
August 11, 1983

Interviewed by
Melinda Roundtree
Patrick Tyler

Champaign County Historical Archives
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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Rosetta Gray, the director and founder of the Peter Pan Day Care Center, 1201 W. Park St., Urbana, Illinois. Mrs. Gray was born in 1933 in Danville, Illinois. She is the wife of Howard O. Gray, who was born in Champaign. (Mr. Gray died after this interview on Aug. 19, 1983).

The interview was conducted on Aug. 11, 1983, at the daycare center. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives.

Rosetta Gray, Oral Interview

Patrick Tyler: O.K., Mrs. Gray, could you tell us your date and place of birth?

Rosetta Gray: O.K. I was born in Danville, Illinois, and February the 12th, 1933.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us some of your childhood experiences growing up in Danville?

Rosetta Gray: It was a small community compared to some places. I went to . . . I attended Arthur School and then I went to high school - Danville High School. You got me kind of stumped there.

Patrick Tyler: How was life when you were growing up as a child?

Rosetta Gray: It was enjoyable as, you know, growing up. In my neighborhood there was quite a few children to play with. And we had our little chores to do in the mornings, and then we'd always play in the afternoons. That was basically the way that we were brought up, that we had chores to do in the morning, then we could go to the park in the afternoons. And then in the evenings it was home for dinner, and then play in the neighborhood, and then to bed. That's the way, you know, it went for us. Everyday.

Patrick Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit about your family background?

Rosetta Gray: I come from . . . There are seven in my family. So I came from a pretty large family. And then we had, it was four girls and three boys. And my father worked and my mother was home with us for a little while then she went to work. So we all had to take care of the house and we all took care of ourselves while my mother worked. We had an average family life. Let's see, what else did we? We went to church. Sunday was always all day in church. You know back home that's the way I grew up. We went to church a lot.

Patrick Tyler: What year did you come to Champaign?

Rosetta Gray: Let's see. I been here twenty-two years. So that's about 1964 when I came to Champaign.

Patrick Tyler: Why did you come?

Rosetta Gray: O.K. I married a fella from Champaign, so this was his home and I came over here. It's just a matter of 35 miles that I came from Danville and I been here about 22 years.

Patrick Tyler: What's your husband's name?

Rosetta Gray: Howard. Howard O. Gray.

Patrick Tyler: So, after your arrival here, how was life in Champaign-Urbana?

Rosetta Gray: Well, it was pretty good. It's not too much different than Danville, still a rather small community. When I first came here I didn't work. I had one child, and she was 6 years old and she started in school. So, I totally had nothing to do. And it seemed like all the women in this town worked, and I did not work. So it was kind of boring around. Especially the neighborhood because everybody went to work and seemed like I was the only one there in the neighborhood for a while.

Patrick Tyler: Did you stay at the same place you stay now?

Rosetta Gray: Yes.

Melinda Roundtree: O.K. You came during the sixties. Do you remember the gangs that they had in the late sixties in Douglass Park? The gangs . . .

Rosetta Gray: The gang fights, and things. The wars. The gang wars, yes.

Melinda Roundtree: How about during the Civil Rights Movement? How did you feel or how did it affect you when Martin Luther King died, you know, during that time?

Rosetta Gray: Well, it was kind of a serious problem, because even in this town I felt that they still were discriminating, you know. There was still a lot of that going on, but it's gotten better. But back in the sixties, you had problems. The gang wars . . . I don't know whether that helped any or not, but it did make people very aware that things were not right. Probably handled it the wrong way, but who knows what to do in a situation like that? But I think it did give the blacks . . . It was our first big opportunity to get ahead, and it started back in the sixties when we started seeing that there was a problem. And then blacks started getting better jobs and schools were . . . I think the schools were slightly segregated then, but now they're all, you know, integrated but they were . . . I think they were segregated back in the sixties.

Melinda Roundtree: So, would you say things opened up more? Back then at that time.

Rosetta Gray: After, yes, it did. It really did. Things had really opened up for us. There were more jobs, better jobs and it seem like . . . I think black people got a start getting better opportunity in jobs and education and all the basis.

Melinda Roundtree: When did you start working?

Rosetta Gray: The Day Care Center?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes.

Rosetta Gray: Oh, let's see. It's been 18 years ago that I started the day care center. The reason why I started it was that it was back in the black movement and I had went home to Danville to visit. I went to church with my mother and we had went to what they call, it's an all-choir day and a minister who was talking to us about the situation and he asked all of us, whatever we could do to help the situation that all the communities were in. He said that we as leaders should, you know, go back to where we lived and try to do something to, you know, better our community. So, I thought about that when he was just talking, you know, and I wasn't doing anything. My life was just kind of dull. I wasn't, you know, really working. And a friend of mine had a little boy and she wanted, she needed a baby-sitter and so we were just talking, and she was really having problems with a baby-sitter. And so I asked her why didn't she use day care center.

At the time, there wasn't a black day care center in this community, and so I asked her why didn't she put her child into, you know, daycare. And she said that she felt a little unsure of the white day cares because she didn't want her child in a sea full of, you know, white children and no black ones. So we went to Children and Family Services to just to talk about it, and to find out why there wasn't one, and the details on how to get one started. So at the time Mrs. Price, she was the area licensing, and we met with her and she was very impressed about our concern. They had this I guess it's like the city map - and they had it pinned wherever there was a daycare center.

And they had these little pins, you know, pointing out the areas that the daycares were in and there wasn't a daycare in the North End at all. And there wasn't

a black daycare and there wasn't a daycare in the North End, period. So they were very interested in our concern, in fact, overly interested. Well, we were just there to find out, you know, what was going on. And by the time I left there, they did everything but give me the daycare center, because they really helped me and they really encouraged me because they wanted to see a daycare in the North End and they were very interested in having a black daycare. So, I got full cooperation, you know, from them, guidance through all the, through the whole thing, you know. They were very supportive to it.

So we decided to open up one. But at the time that I was getting the nursery school, well, we had a basement. My mother-in-law had this basement, so we decided to put one in her basement. It took us two years to clean out the basement, so in the meantime - cleaning out the basement, getting materials and supplies and things set up for day care - I became pregnant. And which this wasn't planned, but then I decided to go ahead and have the baby and have the daycare, too. I wasn't going to let either one interfere with my life, so I went ahead with the plans of getting the daycare started. In the meantime, I had the baby and I got a baby-sitter to watch her while I opened the nursery school. So I serviced a lot of kids in this community, you know, over the 18 years.

Patrick Tyler: I'm interested to know how has children changed from when you first started the daycare up to now?

Rosetta Gray: Well, I find they're more outgoing. They are . . . To me the parents of children today are very different than parents of yesterday. Because it shows from their children, because comparing with years ago in daycare and today, I find that the kids they're a lot smarter. They are . . . It used to be that kids were seen but not heard, but now they are heard and they're seen and they let you know it, you know. And they are . . . I think they're a lot smarter, I really do, because children start at two years old going to daycare and they have a lot of responsibility. Lot more than they had at two years then and they seem to handle it quite well.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of activities do you have for the children?

Rosetta Gray: At the daycare center?

Melinda Roundtree: Or what things do you do during the day when they're here?

Rosetta Gray: Well, we have music, they have free time, arts and crafts. I work with the ABC's and the numbers, colors, shapes, and we do a lot of visual activities, and we do a lot of things that children could get exposed to doing. In other words, I believe that children should be a participator and not just sitting and looking at things. I like for them to get involved and I open the school to children from the ages of two to six. So if they are two years old, I don't say they are two and they can't do this, and they can't do that. I expose them to everything, like the two-year-old will paint as well as the six-year-old. They may not paint as well, but they're exposed to it. They're exposed to

pencils. They're exposed to scissors. They're exposed to everything and then what they, how much they accomplish is up to them, but they know exactly what to do.

For instance, I'll give them crayons and they will not write on the wall with them because I give them a piece of paper. Then I encourage them, you know, to express their feelings on the paper, and they do it and they enjoy it. So they learn through play and their playing is a symbol of their learning, and they do learn. Surprisingly, they learn. They come everyday and everyday we do something different. In the summertime, I would start to curtail their activities because we're outdoors a lot, and we go on a lot of field trips, and we do a lot of outdoor activities. Not that much inside because the weather is nice and they want to get out.

In the winter time we're stuck in so we do most of our school-type work. So usually starting in September I go into structured whatever because I have kids from September, the whole year. And parents really appreciate that we do different, our different activities and things. You know, summertime, because they're going to be coming all summer, too, and it's kind of nice to let them have their freedom of being outdoors. We go to different parks, we go on picnics, and we go swimming and we do things like that.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering has there been more parents bringing their children here now than in the past? You know, have the number of children, has there been an increase?

Rosetta Gray: Well, I think it's an increase because today more parents, there's more single parents who have children who need, you know, the service and there are more, just couples that are both working members of the family, and they need the service, too. So, up until, I would say, well, two years ago, there's been a great need for daycare and there still is a need for daycare, but the only problem is that the job situation now poses kind of a problem. Because someone just don't have a job to go to, but if there was a job, they would go. Daycare would be what they would need, but because the job market is down, I would say that this is a strong influence on daycare not getting the children. But there's still a need for it, and think it will always be a need for it, because there's a lot of single parents who have to provide a living for their children and they're going to have to put them in daycare.

Melinda Roundtree: What do you like most about the daycare and what they have done for children?

Rosetta Gray: I like the idea about being my own boss, that's one reward, and I love the children. I love to work with children. I like to mold, mold them because they are just like clay, you know, and they're very young and I like to see the results of them. I like to, you know, try to increase their IQ's so that when they leave kindergarten, I mean daycare, they're ready for kindergarten. And most of my kids are ready. They're ready to handle kindergarten without any problems. They can leave here and go right into daycare, I mean go into kindergarten, and they won't have a problem at all. They could handle anything a kindergarten teacher has for them.

In fact, some of them are ready for first grade. They're ready to learn, because they know their ABC's, they begin to write a bit, and they're really ready for reading. They know the small letters of the alphabet, they can write their names, and can form letters with a pencil, because they learn to use a pencil pretty early in daycare. And this is something that they want to do and they just . . . They can do it. Because I work with them with, like puzzles, using their finger, fingers, and it's very easy to stick a pencil in because they have very good structure from . . . Their small motor skills are developed and they can really do quite well.

Melinda Roundtree: Are you involved in any organizations or anything outside the daycare?

Rosetta Gray: No, not at the present time.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you attend church here in Champaign-Urbana?

Rosetta Gray: The Bethel.

Patrick Tyler: What part do you feel that the daycare has played in the community now?

Rosetta Gray: Well, I feel that it's provided a place for parents to bring their children while they're working, and that is a very important, you know, job. Because the parent

cannot work if they don't have a place for their children to go to. So I think that it's very important that . . . Daycare is very important for a parent.

Patrick Tyler: That's all the questions that we have, so we would like to thank you for your time that you have given us.