Loretha Harmon

A Transcription of an Oral Interview

1105 North Busey Avenue
Urbana, Illinois
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Interviewed by
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Patrick Tyler

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Introduction

This interview is with Mrs. Loretha Harmon, who at the time was serving as Assistant Program Director at the Afro-American Cultural Center at the University of Illinois campus.

Mrs. Harmon came to Champaign in the early fifties with her mother from her hometown in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She attended Lawhead and Willard Schools, and she graduated from high school in Peoria, Illinois. She also graduated from Bradley University in Peoria.

Her first job upon arrival in Champaign was with the Champaign County Urban League, where she became the first secretary.

The interview was conducted July 25, 1983, at her home, 1105 North Busey Ave., Urbana. The interviewers are Melinda Roundtree and Patrick Tyler representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, first of all, Mrs. Harmon, could you tell us a little about your early childhood? Where you were born, and the things that you did while you were growing up?

Loretha Harmon: I was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. We . . . well, I was from a family of two brothers and one other sister. We were all born in Mississippi. I guess growing up, I think my family was pretty, _____. I guess I'd say secure, more than anything else. They didn't have very much money but both of my parents lived with us.

My father worked two jobs as long as I could remember. As a small child my mother was home, but after I got up to where I started going to school then she worked. By being born in the South and living there when I was eight, I don't really remember that much about the South. I remember some of the incidents of not being able to do certain things, but I really don't remember that as much as I remember our parents being very careful. More than being afraid they just kind of kept us away from certain things. You really didn't know too much about what segregation was or anything like that. We just knew, we kind of stayed around home, stayed around people that we knew.

Childhood experiences . . . I don't remember too many adverse experiences, and I don't remember any tragedies or anything like that. It was a pretty normal childhood, I guess, nothing really happened that I would say was terrible. I can't think of anything really like that.

Melinda Roundtree: Could you tell us a little bit about your schooling?

Loretha Harmon: I remember school. I remember going to school really before I was old enough. _____ My sister was in school, and I used to go to school with her before I was _____. And I remember the teachers, especially in the South. I remember that they had the attitude of, "You're going to learn, and I'm going to help you." I can remember that very well I remember a caring kind of an attitude. Also remember the children having respect for the teachers. You know, everybody called them by their last names, and there didn't seem to be that much of a discipline problem.

And then, after we actually came here I can remember . . . The first real memory I have is of starting to go to a school that was right across the street. And because we lived in one _____. I remember that as a child. As far as places to live and that kind of thing, when we first came to Champaign-Urbana - we came here because of my grandmother; she was living here. We were on our way to California. We were going to the bright lights. And I had a grandmother here and some other relatives. We stopped here so that my mother could see her mother, _____ and somehow we just ended up staying here. My father got a job, and we ended up staying here.

Melinda Roundtree: What year was that?

Loretha Harmon: I think we came here like in the early fifties. I remember also that we came by bus. And I remember getting off the bus, and I remember thinking and telling my mother that it was different than Mississippi. Because I can remember in the South where everything was clean - you know, the streets were clean, people swept the yards, and that kind of thing. And I remember coming here, and I thought, "Ooh, it's trash," you know, things in the street. And I was really amazed at that because I'm thinking I'm coming to a big city, you know. Leaving the South and leaving a little town, and I was very disappointed in that. Because I just couldn't understand - how could things be dirty? (Laughs.) And I was only about eight years old.

Melinda Roundtree: How were the people when you came here?

Loretha Harmon: We didn't really have that much contact with white people. We had contact with relatives and other friends of our family, and the people really were very nice. People were open to us. Shortly after we lived with our grandmother when we first came here, but shortly after we came here we rented a house, and I remember the people that we rented it from were really very friendly. They were nice. But I also remember there was a lady who lived there . . . there was a couple _____, which was shocking to me, because we had never really experienced anything like that before. But that was kind of a shock. But, as far as the children and the parents, everybody was really very friendly.

There was somewhat of an overall attitude of uncertainty or some kind of fear . . . something that, you know, that as an eight-year-old child I didn't really understand

what it was, but I had this feeling that . . . almost like you weren't completely in control of everything. An uneasy kind of feeling. And, of course, I'd hear adults talking, you know, but they didn't really talk to the children, so we didn't really understand what was going on. But I had that kind of feeling, like things weren't quite right.

Melinda Roundtree: Did you continue school here?

Loretha Harmon: Yes. I went to grade school here, and I went to a little grade school and upper primary school.

Melinda Roundtree: What schools?

Loretha Harmon: I went to Lawhead. I remember going to Willard . . . I think that's it.

Melinda Roundtree: How about employment? The first employment that you had.

Loretha Harmon: That I had? The first job that I had here, I actually worked with my mother. She cleaned office buildings, you know, like dentist offices, and doctor's offices, and I worked with her helping her to clean the buildings. Because I would do most of the cleaning up on the walls, and that kind of stuff. And I remember washing windows. I remember being outside of these buildings. While I would be out washing the outside, she would be on the inside. And I think a lot of the people that I knew had

jobs similar to that. There were some people that had jobs like a restaurant on campus, or they had jobs up on campus, cooking, and that kind of thing.

My father, I think at that time, I think he was working on the railroad. I'm pretty sure. And he also worked at the radio station WDWS.

Melinda Roundtree: What other jobs did you have?

Loretha Harmon: Here in Champaign-Urbana, let's see, I worked at Burnham, because my sister worked there, and I worked there, helping her. Other than that . . . After I was grown, we came back here I had other jobs, but up to that time, because we left when I was in, prior to high school. We left and went to Peoria, and then I came back here. Now you want to know about the jobs I've had ever since then?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes.

Loretha Harmon: Okay, after I came back here. I graduated from high school in Peoria. I went to grade school here, and then I went to high school in Peoria, and I went to Bradley in Peoria.

When I came back to Champaign I worked here at the Urban League, and I was the first secretary of the League. And I worked there, oh, for about three years. And then I went to the University and I took the civil service test. I started out working in a computer lab. And I worked as a tutor. And then I heard about a job in the cultural center, and I went over and I talked to the woman that was the director. She was the

first director, her name was [Valerie Woods?]. And she told me that she wanted me to start working there.

So, I quit the computer lab, transferred to the Cultural Center, and I've worked there ever since. And that was some interesting job because that was just the beginning of that program. There were all kinds of problems with students. There were, weeks did not pass where you were taking up collections to help get students out of trouble - where somebody had been accused of stealing a bicycle, or thrown out of their apartment, or any number of things that were going on, because that was during the early sixties, so there were all kinds of things going on. Kids could get into all kinds of things or either be accused of doing a lot of things that they didn't even do, but some of the time they were involved there, too. That was a trying time.

As far as the University was concerned, and the department was concerned, it was a learning time. We learned a lot about how to handle the program, how to administer the program, how to handle the budget, how to spend the money, what you could do, what you couldn't do. So, it was really a learning time. It was a learning time for me, because I was the only person in there that had a lot of things to learn about budgets, and handling money, and all kinds of things. So it was really an interesting time.

It was a frightening time because there were a lot of things going on. Right after then it was during the times when the, you know, riots were going on where we lived at on Fifth Street, there was a gang that hung around Burch Village. We had . . . We got to sit out on our porch and watch them marching down the streets. There was a time when they were shooting. Like I said, we never had any problems personally. But, I

can remember them shooting, and people getting hurt, and just all kinds of things that they did.

Melinda Roundtree: How about during the Civil Rights movement? How did the people act?

Loretha Harmon: In Champaign, act? The young people were really involved. There were meetings, protest meetings; there were marches. There were marches in downtown Champaign so that people, you know, black people, could be hired in the stores. Even the churches were involved to the extent that there were meetings in the churches, and there were times when people would come in, and there would be collections, you know, you'd take up for somebody that was in trouble or had a problem or whatever. There was a lot more community involvement, there was a lot more awareness of what was going on, too. There seems to be a lot more apathy now.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of organizations or clubs have you been a member of, or are a member now?

Loretha Harmon: I have been a member of the Urban League, OIC, Urbana Park District Advisory Committee, Northeast Urbana Development Committee, Girl Scouts Board, PTAs. I been in all kinds of things. At present what am I a member of? At present I guess the biggest thing that I'm really concerned about, of course, is rearing

our two children. So, most of the things that I'm involved in have either to do with the school, or with the children. Other than that I'm not involved in a whole lot of things. I think I'm tired. (Laughs).

Melinda Roundtree: Okay, you said like the church involvement in the early sixties was pretty close with the community . . .

Loretha Harmon: Yes, there was a lot more of the churches being involved in what was actually going on in the community. If I understand, if I remember right, I even think that a lot of the protests in downtown Champaign, I think that that actually started with one or two of the churches. So, that the people that were involved in the protest actually came out of the local black churches.

Melinda Roundtree: Would you say that the interaction has slowed down now or do you think it's . . . ?

Loretha Harmon: I think that the focus seems to have changed. There doesn't seem to be quite as much community involvement as it was. But then that also seems to be true as far as the University and students are concerned. It doesn't seem to be as much actual movement. There are still problems, but there just doesn't seem to be quite as much movement, quite as much that you can actually see done. I think some of that has to do with the type of people . . . more people you know have jobs, and I

think people kind of like thought, "So, well, I'm all right so then everything must be all right," whether it is or not.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember the Illinois Times? The paper? Did you ever read it?

Loretha Harmon: Vaguely. Vaguely, but I don't really remember it.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember any other kinds of newspapers or little pamphlets that blacks had that they use . . . ?

Loretha Harmon: I remember a newspaper, and I'm trying to remember what the name was. I remember one person that wrote an article . . . I can't think of her name, was. _____ or something like that and I can't remember what the name of the paper was. No, I can't really remember. I can remember her being involved in writing for it. I think her name was Mary something. And she wrote for it, and somebody else that I don't remember their name. Oh, I know what it was. I just thought about it - The Plain Truth.

Melinda Roundtree: The Plain Truth.

Loretha Harmon: Right.

Melinda Roundtree: What kind of things did it have in it? Articles or?

Loretha Harmon: There were articles; at times there were really some interesting articles. Sometimes the language was pretty black and I remember that. But there were some articles about the things that were going on in the community.

Melinda Roundtree: How about the newspaper, the local newspapers during the sixties? How? What kinds of things did it have in it? Did it focus on blacks? Did it have more blacks in it?

Loretha Harmon: I don't . . . There weren't that many blacks. There weren't blacks writing for it, that's for sure. But there was a lot of news about what was going on. I think that a lot of it was slander, you know, was not favorable. I don't remember there being any articles about positive things.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you remember, well, you probably were a little bit too young, but okay, like the theaters when they were segregated?

Loretha Harmon: I don't remember that.

Patrick Tyler: I was curious to know about your grandmother. You said you came . . .

Loretha Harmon: We were on our way to California, and we came through here because my grandmother lived here.

Patrick Tyler: How long did your grandmother live here?

Loretha Harmon: Oh, my grandmother lived here, oh, I guess she came here probably about, at least, probably ten years before we did.

Patrick Tyler: You know anything about your grandmother?

Loretha Harmon: Not about her you know, how she got along here. I know that she worked. I know she cleaned houses. I remember that, because I used to spend nights with her off and on. But other than that, wash and clean, you know, I'm sure she came here because she thought you could make more money than she could working in the field in Mississippi, I'm sure about that. And that the opportunities were better for the children, because when she came here she still had two children, I think, that would have still been at home. _____

Patrick Tyler: What address did she stay at?

Loretha Harmon: Seems to me that it was on Eureka Street.

Patrick Tyler: In Urbana or Champaign?

Loretha Harmon: I think it was Eureka in Urbana, in Champaign, if I remember right.

Melinda Roundtree: Do you think the young blacks now in Champaign-Urbana are being motivated to go on to higher education?

Loretha Harmon: Not in Champaign-Urbana. No, I think that I mean there are some of them, of course, but not the majority of them. There seems to be a . . . First of all, there is a lack of respect for themselves, and I think that's the basic thing. And then there also seems to be a sense of not being able to accomplish very much, or not even knowing that there are things that you can do. I don't see that much of pride, and the idea that you can really go out and get whatever you want, to work hard enough and achieve it. I don't see that kind of an attitude.

Patrick Tyler: What's the problem?

Loretha Harmon: I don't know if it's, I guess I tend to look at things from a personal perspective even more so than a national or international perspective.

First of all, we're Christians. Okay, so we believe in Christ, we believe in striving to get where you want to get. I feel that there . . . because of the problems that black people have had I think that young black people of my age tend to give their children too many things. And I think that when you give somebody something all the time, then they don't have any concept of how you get it. I think that's one of the problems.

I also think that there is a lack of training as far as respecting yourself. When I said that when we first got off the bus, and I came here and I saw dirt and trash in the street. I mean, it was a shock to me, because we had always been taught, "You don't make a mess. You don't leave paper in the yard." When I came here and saw children when you walk up and down the streets, eating on the streets, you drop the paper on the ground I mean that was different to me. That's not the way that I was raised. I tell my children, "You don't throw your trash on the ground." You know, just simple, basic kinds of things like that.

Almost one of the things that I'm seeing more and more of now my sister owns different property that they rent people tear up things. You know, we were brought up with the idea that you lived in it whether it belonged to you or not it was a reflection on you. And it was very hard for me to understand why people would say, "It's not mine." But, you live there. How do you let things just go and you don't even try to keep it up? And you live there.

So I think that whole basic thing about self-respect is something that has caused a lot of problems for our young people. We have a tendency to feel like I can always go buy something new, rather than to take care of what you have. But, that's what we try to teach our children.

Melinda Roundtree: What improvements would you like to see in the community in the future?

Loretha Harmon: In this particular community?

Melinda Roundtree: Yes.

Loretha Harmon: One of the things that we've talked about, even in this Northeast Urbana Development, things that I was involved in, was seeing as you go around, I'm sure as you've traveled around and talked to different people. You see where there is a need for moving of rubbish, and trash, and that kind of thing. What I would like to see is young people, and also the number of black businessmen that we've had, most of them have at their access trucks. It would seem to me that it would be a good idea to have young people to haul, you know to carry trash, carry debris to help keep the neighborhoods clean. That would seem like something that they could do. I think that because the businessmen have at their access these trucks, that they could either rent them, or they could borrow them, or whatever it takes in order to get debris moved. I think people would pay a certain amount to have trash and stuff hauled away from their home. But they're not going to pay $11 or $12, you know, to move one thing, because it costs so much to dump things. But I think there should be a way to be able to work it out so the, especially older people, so they won't have to have all the junk and trash around their yards. I think that would be something to be done, since young people need jobs, and there're jobs to be done.

But, I also think that there has to be a basic understanding that hard work is not beneath you. You know, there's nothing wrong with that. We need to get back to some of those ideas that are really basic, that hard work is not going to harm you. You

learn. And you have to start down here in order to learn. You don't start out as president of the company. You know, you start at the bottom.

And then, also I think it would be helpful because it would help to do something about the place where you live. I think one of the things that has caused a lot of problems in Champaign-Urbana is that when we came here most of the black people, of course, lived in one area during the seventies, early seventies, late sixties. But, a lot of people were moved by urban renewal to improve things. But I think what happened during that removal, also a lot of people that really had pride in their property, they went somewhere else. So that that kind of pride - the people left, and the people that came in, a lot of them did not own the property and they didn't have that kind of an attitude. And I think that has been_____. Now I think most black people move where they want to, but I think it has been detrimental to a sense of community.

Melinda Roundtree: I was wondering about the crime during the late sixties or you know, the early sixties. Was the crime rate lower?

Loretha Harmon: There were, I don't know about actual crime, there were incidents with the gangs, you know that kind of thing. And I've heard other people, older people in particular talk about how they had been preyed upon, you know, by people coming into the houses and taking things, and they were afraid to go out at night and that kind of thing. We didn't really have a whole lot of crime then, but it did exist.

But as far as crime is concerned, there is a lot of crime now. We've never had anybody break into our house until last year, you know, so it's not really a racial thing.

I think it was robbery. I do feel that it probably is escalated because there are very few jobs, and when they aren't any jobs then people do all kinds of things.

Melinda Roundtree: Well, we thank you for letting us interview you.

Loretha Harmon: Oh, you're quite welcome. I hope that it helped. I hope you get some information that you can use.