

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA MORRISON RODRIGUEZ

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with Dr. Barbara Morrison Rodriguez. The interview is taking place on October 18, 2015 in Lutz, Florida. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Could you say when and where you were born?

Barbara Morrison Rodriguez: Okay. I was born in 1947 in Washington, DC.

MG: Did you grow up there?

BMR: I did. I did not leave until I went to Douglass. I was there my entire life, except for summer trips that we spent with my grandmother who lived in Virginia, which was only like a thirty, forty-minute ride. It seemed, as a kid, like a long ways away. I had a pretty tight knit family around Washington, Alexandria, Maryland. That whole DC, Maryland, Virginia area was where my father's family was from.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your family history, starting on your father's side.

BMR: My father's from several generations in Virginia. Poor people for the most part, who probably didn't feel very poor. He lived in an area called Bailey's Crossroads. Anybody from DC would now know it as sort of a yuppie, townhouses, but where there those people live is where we played as children. There were several black enclaves down there. All the people on the street were related. They were either brothers, sisters, first or second cousins. That's kind of the environment I grew up in, which is very typical for the south. Let's see. His mother's people were half Native American and half from Bermuda. Then his father's people--I'm not sure exactly where the Jones side of the family [is from]. That's the Jones side of the family. They were wonderful grandparents and lots of love from the family. My mother is from Massachusetts. She was born in Brockton, which is right outside of Boston. Her upbringing was the total opposite of my dad's. His was Southern, sort of insular. My mother lived in a community where she had friends who were Irish, Italian, Jewish all on the same street. Their worldviews were really quite different. My mother came to Washington in 1944, I think, to work for the government during the Second World War. A lot of people came from different places to work for the government during the war. She worked for the Navy department. She and my father met and then they got married. There are three children in my family. I have an older brother, who's actually a half-brother. We have the same dad, but different mothers. His mom died when he was small, so my mother just took him. My father and mother had me. Then I have a sister who's four and a half years younger than I am. So for a while it was the three of us. Then my brother went into the military. For a long time, it was just the two daughters and my parents.

MG: Your father served in World War II.

BMR: Yes, he did. He was in the Navy in World War II.

MG: What do you know about his experience in the service?

BMR: Well, I think he had a good one, and I'll tell you why. He's a musician. He played in the Navy band throughout the entire Second World War. So as far as I know, he didn't see any action. He wasn't in any harm's way. They played the officer's clubs. So I think as military service went, it couldn't get much better than that, as far as safety was concerned.

MG: Do you know how he was treated by other people he served with? The military was still pretty segregated.

BMR: It was extremely segregated. They were treated a little bit better only because they were the band and they were around officers and that kind of thing. But no, the military was segregated. I have other uncles that served in the military under segregated circumstances. But the things that happened--the one thing--not so much from my dad, but from my uncles--that I heard from all of them is those who went overseas were much better treated in Europe than they were in the United States. In some ways, it was almost worse that they had had good experiences in Europe, because then it put what they had experienced at home in even a deeper contrast, and that was hard for them. But my father didn't talk too much about anything negative that happened to him.

MG: How was your mother treated at her job?

BMR: Well, see this is the thing. My mother wasn't going to allow anybody to mistreat her. That's the difference. My father's family thought my mother was uppity and a little bit obnoxious and stuck up because she wasn't raised in the South. She wasn't a "Yes, ma'am, no, ma'am" kind of person. She came down and she expected to be treated like everybody else. She made it very clear on her job that they were not going to call her Janet; they were going to call her Mrs. Jones. She was very specific about that. She was proper, spoke perfect English, had no tolerance for Southern speech. There really was a little bit of a cultural clash there. But my mother, until the day she died, she really demanded that people treat her with dignity and that's how she carried herself.

MG: What year were your parents married?

BMR: They were married in 1945. I was born in '47.

MG: What side of the family does the Native American come from?

BMR: Both. It's a little bit on both sides. Come, I'll show a picture. It's a little bit on both sides. I think maybe a little bit--well, I'll tell you where you can see it a little bit. These are my mother's parents. Look at her dad. That's on my mother's side of the family. Now, I want you to come see on my father's side of the family. This is a picture of my dad when he was in the Navy. This is his grandmother.

MG: Oh, wow. I love that picture.

BMR: Yes. That's my dad when he was in the Navy and this is his grandmother. Now, interesting. I've been on all these DNA sites and learning about cousins. One contact I got was from a man in Georgia, who's a Choctaw Indian. That's where her people came [from]. I never knew. I knew it was some, but we compared charts and graphs. He had Dawes Rolls. [Editor's Notes: Drafted in the 1890s, the "Final Rolls of the Citizens and Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes" was a roster of individuals who were determined to be members of the following tribes: Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles.] He placed my great grandmother's line among the Choctaw. Now I know. But I didn't know at the time. It's an interesting history, but all of these people have been wonderful. The older I've gotten, the more I appreciate them because I have a better understanding--I've been studying history and by being adult--of what they had to deal with. It's nothing compared to--what we do now is tough sometimes, but they had it so much worse. They did it without being mean, hateful, spiteful people. So my hat's off to them.

MG: Do you mean experiences of discrimination?

BMR: Discrimination, working and not being rewarded for their efforts because of their color. My father, for example, is probably one of the smartest people I know. His parents actually broke up when he was, I think, about fourteen, fifteen years old, something like that. He always wanted to go to university, but he dropped out and went to work to help his mother. So I often think he did the best he could with the opportunities he had and what he had to work with. I'm thinking if my father had had a chance to go to someplace like Rutgers or Princeton, he would have been awesome. One of the things I told my son when he was going through school, I said, "Failing in school for you is not an option. There's too many people in our family who would have loved to have the opportunities that you've been given. So you're not going to waste them. No dropping out. No 'I'm bored.' None of that kind of stuff. I expect you to graduate from college. I expect you to do well and make something of your life." I always told him, "You stand on the shoulders of giants." These people sacrificed a lot, so you could be here. The legacy that you have to honor for them is that you do well." I always used my father as an example, because my son has a lot of my father's qualities. I said to him, "You just have to be good at what you do. I almost don't care what you do, but you have to be good at it."

MG: Well, it seemed to have worked out. He is very successful.

BMR: Yes, he is. My son is very successful. What I appreciate most about Scott is he's a wonderful human being. He's smart. He's ambitious. He's a great family man, but at core, he's a wonderful human being.

MG: Do you know how the Great Depression affected your parents and their lives?

BMR: My dad didn't talk about it too much, but my mother talked about it a great deal, because she was in a family of eight. She was the oldest girl in a family of eight. Her father came back from World War I [with] what in those days they called "shell shock,"

which now we know as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He left a sober man and returned an alcoholic, and remained an alcoholic for the rest of his life. There's some bipolar mental illness in my family. My grandmother, my mother's mother, was in and out of hospitals. During these times, you have two loving, but somewhat disabled parents. My mother as the oldest girl basically raised her siblings. She would talk about the Depression and how hard it was to get food and she tried to go to school part time and worked part time. She would say things like--with these little eight kids instead of trying to wash their socks every week; she just bought them a new pair of socks at the beginning of the week. Every Saturday, it's like they got a new pair of socks. I raised one kid and I cannot imagine beginning to take care of six younger brothers and sisters pretty much by myself. I'm amazed she decided to have any children of her own given that kind of responsibility. But she did. So the Depression was very--I'm sure it was hard in both families. I think my father's family, because of the way they lived, had a little bit more of a network in place where they could share things. My mother's family doesn't seem to have had that kind of connection. They were more isolated. So they pretty much struggled on their own.

MG: You mentioned your father played music during World War II. Did he play music in the home?

BMR: He did. He actually played with some small groups around Washington. But at some stage, he decided to give up the musician's life. I don't know if my mother insisted on it when they got married, because musicians are not the most reliable people. They're around a lot of drinking and a lot of women. She may have actually asked him to. I don't know what that history was, but at some point he stopped playing. His brother continued to play. I come from a very musical family on my father's side. His brother continued to play, but his wife insisted that it be limited to the church. I think both of those women decided that their husbands were not going to live traditional musician's lives. I heard him play some when I was young, but then he kind of gave it up altogether.

MG: What kind of church did you attend?

BMR: I didn't, which is very interesting for a lot of black families. Neither of my parents were particularly religious, in the sense that we went to church. I think they were spiritual people. My mother grew up Baptist. My grandmother tried to grow my father up Baptist, but he wasn't having any part of it. So we didn't go to church on a regular basis. Most of my friends did, but we didn't. Whenever I went to church, it was if I was with my grandmother in Virginia during the summer. She took me. But it was nothing that we did on a regular basis. In fact, my parents never joined a church as long as I can remember in my life.

MG: Tell me more about visiting your grandmother in Virginia.

BMR: Well, I think that that was typical for a lot of kids [in] my generation. When school was out and our parents were still working, we went to stay with grandma. I was there with a couple of my cousins, who were around the same age. We stayed pretty

much the entire summer until we went back to school. I found it, for the most part, incredibly boring. I couldn't wait to get back to school because there's only so much you can do in a small, rural community. You just go visit people and you eat and you run and you play. So by the time school came back, I was really ready to for it to come back. But my grandmother was a lovely woman. I'll show you her picture. Very sweet. I'll show you some family photos while we're talking.

MG: Great.

BMR: Let's me see. This is my family when I was an infant. That's my dad, my mother, my brother Leon, and my sister had not been born at that stage. This is my grandmother that I stayed with.

MG: Yes. She looks like your father.

BMR: Yes. Alice. Then this is just my brother and I together when I was a baby.

MG: So cute.

BMR: Yes. I had a sweet family. So you see tons of family photographs because these folks mean everything to me. I just find some comfort in them being around me.

MG: They are keeping you company.

BMR: Yes. They're keeping me company. They sure are.

MG: One thing you talked about before we started recording was how different Washington, DC was when you lived there.

BMR: Completely different than it is now. I remind people Washington, DC is below the Mason Dixon Line. It was really part of Northern Virginia or Southern Maryland, with all of the cultural characteristics. Well into the '50s things were very segregated. We had white drinking fountains, black drinking fountains. I went to a black school. There was actually an elementary school across the street from my house, but it was for white students. We were bussed to another school, although I could have literally walked across the street to go to school. I look back on it now with some dismay, but coming up, I think my parents buffered us a lot from the more negative parts of that. I'll give you an example. I remember whenever we went shopping, my mother would always insist that we go to the bathroom before we leave. She wouldn't let us drink a lot of soda pop while we were out. I realize what it was. She didn't want to deal with the black/white bathroom thing. But she never said that. It's just they had accommodations that they made that they kind of just rolled us into. That was just how life was. When I got to Rutgers and I met people like Wilma [Harris] and some of the other girls who had grown up in the North, their relationships with the white students were so easy, because they went to school with them. For me, it was like a first exposure. It was almost like being in a foreign country. It really was. Then I had to be comfortable--when I went to

downtown New Brunswick, when you could anywhere in any store and nobody seemed to bother you, that was unique for me. There was a kind of a feeling of freedom in being in that kind of environment.

MG: Did you go to a segregated school through high school?

BMR: Yes. Primary school, middle school, all through high school. As I said, the first white students I had as classmates was at Douglass, if you can imagine that. That kind of apartheid is hard for people to understand, where you have such a complete racial separation. But that's what Washington, DC was like.

MG: What did you think about white people before you had experiences with them?

BMR: I thought that they were privileged. I thought that they were in charge. I thought--because that's what we had been told is--that they were better, they were smarter. The nice thing for me about going to Douglass, when I learned that I could compete academically, is that there were white people who were smarter than me. There were some as smart as me. There were some that were not as smart. That kind of exposure--now, as I look back on it. It was very typical for the kids graduating from my high school--I went to McKinley High School to go to either one of the historically black colleges or to Howard. That would have been the route that I would have taken. But I think going to Douglass broke me out of that mold. The experiences I had at Douglass and then subsequently in graduate school, made it much easier for me to integrate into white work settings. In some of those settings, I have been the only person of color. I don't think I would have been able to handle it as well if I hadn't had that easing into and learning to judge people and discriminate among people based on who they were, not color they were. That's the problem with racism of course, is that you make these generalizations about people based on color. I have to tell you that my roommates--are you familiar with the Douglass campus at all?

MG: Yes. I lived right next to it, actually.

BMR: All right. Do you know those little houses? They had the little horseshoe. I don't think students are living in them anymore, but they were literally two or three story houses and they were all on these little horseshoes. So I was on Corwin when I first moved. There were probably about seven or eight girls in my house. The roommate that I had was a Jewish girl, Betty Mitchell. I will never forget her. She went out of her way to be nice to me. I don't know if Douglass had a policy when they picked out roommates. If they screened them, if they interviewed them to see if they would be comfortable having a black roommate, I don't know. But the people who were around me were very engaging and very warm. That helped a lot. That's not what I was expecting. You have to remember that 1965, '66, all the stuff that was going on racially, I expected to have to defend myself. I expected to be in fights, in disagreements. You know what? For the most part, that didn't happen. I was really pleasantly surprised. I isolated myself a lot in the beginning. I didn't want to eat in the dining hall. I didn't want to go out. I think that kind of self-isolation was my way of trying to protect myself

from being rejected. I learned later that it really wasn't necessary. People like Wilma, who had been there before, and some of the other girls just kept saying, "Just be yourself. Let it go. Everybody will not like you. But everybody will not dislike you either. So just be yourself and go on and get your education."

MG: Would the handful of black female students at Douglass stick together?

BMR: It was hard for us to stick together and I'll tell you why. They strategically scattered us, although I think that at that time, Douglass didn't want the perception that they were segregating us, so they certainly weren't going to put us all in the same dorm or in the same house. To me, it felt like one of us was on each campus. That's how it felt to me, like we were so scattered. When we got to know each other, we sought each other out. But we were not enough of us to form a black house, for example. That happened later. There were enough black students later where they could ask for things, create their own reality. Our reality was fit in, get along, and get your education. That was the reality. Then I was away for two years. When I came back, it was like a flip. I went there in '65. I left in '68. So from '68 to '70, I was up in Boston while my husband Curt Morrison was in the military, working. I had my son up there. When I came back to Douglass in 1970, it was a different school. It was a different school. The first thing that struck me was what seemed like a lot of black students, to me, on campus, both at Rutgers and at Douglass. Maybe proportionally, it wasn't that much, but when I left, there were maybe seven. When I came back, there were a lot more at Douglass. You could see that there was a different kind of attitude in the black students. They were, I felt, much more self-assured. There were enough of them that they could do things in groups. It was just a different kind of vibe. Also, the Civil Rights Movement had matured by two or three years and so, even the philosophy had moved a little bit more [from] accommodation to one of self-assertion. It reflected in the way that they behaved. I went into the dining hall. Girls had on pants. What? In the dining hall, we were always expected to wear a skirt. We went to chapel. Not any consideration of anything like co-ed dorms--when my son went to college, to Rutgers, I had given him a call. I heard some girls talking. I said, "Scott, where are you?" He said, "I'm in the dorm." I said, "Well, I'm hearing women talking." He said, "Yeah. They're my roommates across the hall." I said, "Across the hall? Girls in the same building?" That's when you see the generational divide because there was just so much more--it was more ease in the mingling of the sexes on campus, as well as people from different racial groups. It was a totally different kind of environment. That happened in two years. That happened between '68 and '70.

MG: The world was changing so rapidly then.

BMR: Absolutely. It was changing so rapidly. The other thing is I had changed. I left as a newly married college student. I came back more mature, and a mother of a two month old, at that stage. So my whole worldview--I came back a wife and mother; I left as a student. It was different. It was really very different.

MG: I want to ask you more about that, but I want to make sure we're not skipping anything from growing up. You talked about the grammar and high school you went to. Do certain teachers stand out to you?

BMR: Oh, yes. By the way, we just had our fiftieth high school reunion. One of the teachers there was my gym teacher. She was in her late eighties, but she was still there. There was one teacher I'm going to mention to you in particular because she's why I went to Douglass. Her name was Beatrice Harvey. There's a backstory there that I don't--Miss Harvey was our teacher and our guidance counselor. I don't know how many girls actually were at Douglass in 1965, but I can tell you that three of them were from my high school. That's one black high school in Washington, DC, that sent three girls to Douglass. Four--there were four of us. Miss Harvey was from New Jersey. There was something about her life or connections or something where there was this connection between her and Rutgers and Douglass. She sent what she considered to be her best and her brightest girls to Douglass. She encouraged us to get out of Washington. She encouraged us to expand our horizons. I don't know if she had any connections with anybody at Rutgers. I don't know if at some point she had applied herself. She was considerably older than us, so she would have gone in the '50s, maybe even '40s, rather than the '60s. But she was our gateway. It wasn't just for me. If you talk to Trish Felton--there were several other girls that came from my high school. Miss Harvey was the one who channeled us to Douglass. I don't know the entire story there, except she was the connection. So she stands out in my mind most vividly. She's dead now. I understand that she lived to be a hundred and five. She and my biology teacher, Melba Robinson, were probably the two that stand out the most in my mind. But we went to a segregated school. Most of our teachers were black. We had a few white teachers. But they were, by far, the best teachers. I have gone to Rutgers. I have gone to Columbia University. I will tell people the best teachers I ever had in my life were at McKinley High School in Washington, DC, because they told us, "Your color does not define you. Your circumstances do not define you. You can compete. You are bright. You get out there and you show the world what you're made of." It was like pushing the little chicks out of the nest. They basically said, "We're investing in you and we want to see some return on that investment." That's the way it was.

MG: What else do you remember about school? Were you involved in any clubs or extracurricular activities?

BMR: I remember a lot of fun. We had a lot of fun. The kids in my class were a crackup. They were really a lot of fun. I went to a technical high school, so the intent of the school was really more like vo-tech [vocational and technical], to prepare kids for trades. But there was a subset of us who were determined to be college-appropriate. I would say we represented maybe ten to fifteen percent of the study body. The classes we took were a little bit more intense. I think we got more attention from the teachers because we were the "college-bound students." I was class president. I tried to be active. I was never good in sports because I was small and short and nobody ever wanted me on their team and I tended to be a little bit of an egghead. Where I tried to make my mark was on the scholastic side, rather than being a cheerleader or in athletics or anything like

that. I remember high school very, very fondly. It was a big school. My graduating class had five hundred students in it, in our senior class. It was a big, inner city, urban school. But I think it was one of the best experiences in my life. I may not have always appreciated it at the time, but now when I look back on it, yes, definitely.

MG: Can you describe the neighborhood you grew up in?

BMR: Yes. I grew up in what was clearly sort of a working class neighborhood. The thing that was interesting about pre-full-scale integration was that there were the black professionals who did not run to the suburbs, we had the gamut. In the two or three block radius of where I grew up, we had doctors, we had lawyers, we had small businessmen, we had people who worked in the postal service, we had janitors. We had the whole socioeconomic spectrum of people who lived right next door to each other. For us, I think that that's a big difference between a lot of poor kids now and working class kids now, who are in dense neighborhoods where [there are] people of the same socioeconomic status. They can't sometimes envision themselves being a doctor or lawyer. That was not a problem for me. My neighbors, some of them, were doctors and lawyers and teachers. My parents had friends who not only worked for the government, but were teachers and professionals. It never occurred to me that I couldn't be any of those things. We had those kind of role models around us all the time. It was a true neighborhood. My mother was a working mother. My parents divorced when I was about eleven. We were some of the latchkey kids. It was still unusual, at that time, for families to be divorced. Most of my friends were in intact families. Most of their mothers were at home during the day. But stay-at-home moms were entrusted by the working parents to look out for their children. I always knew if I was in trouble or if I was hungry which houses I could go to. My mother knew when she got home if my sister and I had been involved in something that we shouldn't have been involved in because somebody had called her. "I saw your girls doing this, that." "How does she know that?" Somebody had called and told. We had a tightknit community of people who were mutually caring. They all raised us. Our parents gave them permission to discipline us if they had to, and they did. Today, you discipline some child and the parents are ready to knock you on the floor. In those days, all adults had authority. You were to pay attention to anything that any adult said to you.

MG: Tell me about your mother's work. Was this when she was doing the political organizing?

BMR: That was before she even came to Washington. Her political organizing was done when she was in Massachusetts. She was doing some kind of organizing with the Mashpee Indians who were down in the area of Cape, down near Plymouth and the Cape. My mother, I think her political activism actually got tempered a little bit when she began to work for the government. I don't know if she felt if you're working for the government, you can't be too radical. I think she was a little bit more radical when she was younger than she was when she started working for the government.

MG: What cause was she doing organizing around?

BMR: At that time, I think they were just health issues. Native American tribes all over have never had adequate resources and advocacy and helping make a case for something or whatever it was. I don't know exactly what she was doing, but my mother was a very smart woman. She was a good strategic thinker. With all of the family responsibilities she had, I don't know how she found the time to do that. She has some very accomplished siblings, considering the pathology that was in her family and the degree of poverty. Her older brother was an aeronautical engineer that worked for NASA in the 1950s. A black aeronautical engineer who worked for NASA in the 1950s! He was a Scout. He was very clean living and all that kind of thing. Her youngest brother is a PhD psychologist who worked for the New York City Police Department. Considering all of the struggles that they had, they did very well as a family. Astonishingly well, given what they had to work with. They're smart, ambitious people, who took advantage of what they had. They came from a family [where] that wasn't easy.

MG: What was her work in Washington with the government?

BMR: She worked for the Navy department in a civilian capacity. I think she started out just as kind of an administrative assistant or secretary or something. She was at the Navy Department for forty years. In the last 20 years of her career, she was in a department that was called Incentive Awards. What that was is if a federal employee found a creative way to save the government money, either an innovation and a process or something like that, they got rewards. Got, literally, monetary awards for their ideas. She managed that program. She would look at the applications that came in, where people said, "I think I can save the government if you did this, that, and the other." She had a committee, which judged which one of them are worthy of prizes. She organized the ceremony. She loved it. She organized the ceremony and had a reception for all the people who won. She was close to some of the admirals in her command. She's very well respected by the people that she worked with.

MG: Your father's job was very interesting, too.

BMR: Yes. My father had an interesting career. My father's personality in some ways is a lot like mine. We tend not to like to be boxed into rigid settings. So my father, when he got out of the service, he did the kind of things that were available to black men at that time. He spent a little time being an elevator operator. He worked for the post office for a while. At some point, he decided he needed to have his own business. He did landscaping. He worked for very high dignitaries in Washington, DC. Sandra Day O'Connor was one of his clients. Christian Herter was one of his clients. I didn't know how important these people were--except I knew at Christmas. My father would take us to the home of his some of his clients, who were always very wealthy white people and they would give us gifts. Sometimes they would give us clothes that their children had outgrown. I knew he worked for rich people, but I didn't know that they were, many of them, politically important people at the same time. So, he left he post office. He did landscaping. He continued to do landscape gardening off and on for a while. But at some point, I think around in the early '80s maybe--late '70s or early '80s is when he

started working at the White House. The one thing I remember about that is one day these government people came in suits to my house. They interviewed my mother. They interviewed my neighbors. I remember some of the neighbor women coming over and asking my mother if my dad was in some kind of trouble. Because they were asking about his character, what they thought of him, what kind of man he was, did they know if he had ever been in jail--all these kinds of questions. It turned out that they were screening him for this job. It was a part of the background screening and the character screening. He didn't tell us he had applied for it, so we didn't know. I guess maybe he didn't want to say anything in case he didn't get it. But he did get it. That was the one thing I realized was he was up to something when we had these people coming around asking us a lot of questions. Yes. So it was interesting. He enjoyed working at the White House. He had favorites. Because he did more on the social side with state dinners, most of his contacts were with first ladies. He really liked Barbara Bush. He did not like Nancy Reagan at all. He was very fond of Jimmy Carter's wife and I think he went there during the Ford administration. He was in the Ford administration. He had died by the time Barack Obama was elected. I think he left with Bush, Sr. I'm trying to see if there's a date on this photo. This was close to the time that he was getting ready to leave, with Bush, Sr. He was not there when Bush, Jr. came in, but I remember he was astonished that Bush, Jr. had been elected, because they all referred to him as "Little Georgie," because he was a kid when his father was [president]. He said, "I just can't believe that they elected little Georgie president." That's how he looked at it. Yes, had an interesting career.

MG: Did he ever tell you any insider information about life in the White House?

BMR: Oh, no. The thing about people that worked at the White House, they were like the old plantation servants. What went on there stayed there. I don't know if that was a condition of their job or an oath that they took, because he would be very often serving when they had delegation meetings and things like that. I don't know what he heard or he might have been privy too, but he never, ever talked about anything that went on at the White House. When I was old enough and curious enough, I would ask him questions and he just didn't say anything.

MG: Do you know how he felt about serving in an administration and a country that was not treating African Americans well?

BMR: You know what? Black people would have laid down and died if they thought about that all time, because they had to work. They had to take advantage of the opportunities that they were given. All of that was in the context of knowing that they were second-class citizens and treated like second-class citizens. What is so hard for me is his military service. I felt this way with my older brother, who actually lives in Mexico. He's lived in Mexico, Belize. My older brother refuses to live in the United States. He is so upset about the racial politics in this country that he does not want to live here. He doesn't like the way black males are treated. He will not be subject to it. So whenever he had the opportunity to make a decision to live outside of the country, he lives outside of the country. He had a different kind of sensibility than I think my father

had. He was a generation later. The thing about my brother, my brother was born in 1940. I was born in '47. He was a little bit too early for the kind of advantages that I had. Brilliant guy, no less smarter than me, but just simply did not have the opportunities that I had. He looked to the military to be the gateway for him. Some things happened to him in the military that he thought were unfair. He got passed over for some things and he's a bit bitter about it. But I think my father was more accommodating. One, because he grew up in the South and this is what people in the South did. You worked for rich, powerful white people and you accommodated the best way that you could. Well, that was the same dynamic at the White House. That was not foreign to him. He had a very good relationship with the other black men who worked there. They had their own little social group. They used to have picnics and things like that with their families. That's how they coped. They just had their own support system. That's how they coped. But those were considered very good jobs. He felt very fortunate to have it. That's the way it was. Whatever it took for you to feed your family and keep a roof over your head, that's what you did regardless of what your feelings about it were. That's what you did.

MG: Was your father politically minded at all?

BMR: I never saw my father as being politically active. I'll tell you what the context for that was. I think that was somewhat the difference between my mother and my father. When my mother was younger in Massachusetts, she was involved in local politics, election campaigns, and things like that. Washington, DC did not have home rule. People in Washington, DC did not vote in a presidential election until 1965. From the time of Reconstruction--and then that went away--to 1965, we did not have local elections. We did not vote local delegates. We were essentially a protectorate of the United States Congress. Congress made all the decisions about Washington. So that was another thing that was very intriguing to me. When I went to Douglass, and there were girls on campus who went home to get involved in political campaigns at home, that was a totally alien thing to me. I had never been involved in any local politics. There wasn't any local politics to get involved in. So no, my parents were not as politically overtly active, but my mother was very interesting. She belonged to a club that was called the Sedarmocs. I thought, "That's a very strange name," but when you turn it around, it's comrades, like communist comrades. So I don't know what my mother was up to quietly and subversively, but they had this [group]. They called themselves the Comrades, but because of the communist scare and in the '50s, they flipped it and they called themselves the Sedarmocs, which I thought was kind of clever. But that was this little club. From what I can see, they were basically an advocacy organization for women and families of color, which was very courageous in the '50s. But she still had that political activist spark in her. She didn't do it on the job. She did it out in social networks.

MG: Was anyone ever suspicious that she was a Communist?

BMR: If they were, she didn't say. She never told us about it. We didn't have a lot of political discussions. For example, I went home on a break once with one of the upper classmen, in terms of her being ahead of me in school--Eileen Duquesne. I remember going home one Easter with Eileen. Over Easter dinner, her family had this most

fascinating political conversation. I think because my parents worked for the government, we never argued politics in our house ever. I was just fascinated by this dialogue. The kids had opinions. The grandparents had opinions. The mom and dad had political opinions. We had never had conversations like that in my family. It was a very different kind of thing.

MG: What else do you remember about growing up during the Cold War era?

BMR: I remember the little drills where we had to hide under our desks. I remember that. [laughter] I remember the Bay of Pigs. [Editor's Note: In April 1961, CIA-trained Cuban exiles invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in an ultimately doomed effort to overthrow Fidel Castro's Communist regime.] But I don't think I was that politically aware coming up. We lived in this protected little cocoon and we were very comfortable there. Nobody bothered us. Nobody harassed us. My parents and the neighbors did a really good job--my teachers--of building this little cocoon of protection around us. There was a lot of stuff going on. I just wasn't aware of it.

MG: Did you have a different appreciation or perspective on United States history living in Washington, DC?

BMR: No. No, not at all. As a matter of fact, I found American history one of the most boring subjects that I took. It's interesting because I didn't appreciate the fact that when I rode the bus to school, I could see the Jefferson Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial. That was just home. It wasn't until I moved away and went to New Jersey, and when I took my son back to Washington as a youngster and we visited all of the monuments in the mall--do you know that that was the first time I had been to some of them? And I had grown up there my entire life. I just didn't appreciate the significance of what was really right in my own backyard until I moved away.

MG: Did you have a part time job when you were growing up?

BMR: Oh, yes. I worked since I was fourteen. I started off by being a playground counselor. During the summer in high school, I was a summer camp counselor on a playground. When I went to Douglass, I had a part-time job. I was doing accounting for Squibb Pharmaceuticals. Squibb used to be in New Brunswick. So I had a part-time job with them doing some accounting, charts like that. I've always had some kind of work since the age of fourteen.

MG: I didn't ask you much about your younger sister. Were you close?

BMR: No, and we're still not. We're not close at all. We never got along, my younger sister. My brother and I--in fact, I was heartbroken when he left and went into the military because personality-wise, we're much more alike. My sister and I have been confrontational and competitive since the day that she arrived. People kept saying, "It'll get better. You'll outgrow it as you get older." Nah. My mother died in 2011. I haven't seen [my sister] or spoken to her since then. We're totally estranged. We never got

along. It's not even that we didn't love each other. We didn't like each other. We just never got along. That's just how it was, how it is. She has one son, who I care very deeply for. His name is Cameron and I see him every once in a while, but my sister and I, no. My father used to say we were like chalk and cheese. Personality-wise, dynamic-wise, just completely, completely different. I just felt for the sake of my mental and physical health, it was a biological happenstance that she was a relative of mine. She's not anybody that I would have chosen as a friend. Knowing that, I felt why should I accept behavior from her because she's my sister that I wouldn't accept from anybody else. That was it.

MG: Growing up, was that the case?

BMR: Oh, yes. We fought all the time. We fought all the time. She resented me because I tried to be big sister and lorded over to her. I thought she was a spoiled, inconsiderate, ungrateful little brat and let her know it. I thought she got away with a lot, but now that I realize it, I think parents hover a little bit over [the] first child. By the time the second and third child come, they relax and they let them, so I always felt she got away with stuff that I could never get away with. So there was a little bit of resentment about that. Some of it was just family dynamics and sibling rivalry. I thought she had a mean personality and I just wasn't going to let her get close enough to me to hurt me. That was it.

MG: Tell me a little more about Miss Harvey.

BMR: Yes. Miss Harvey was the classic schoolmarm. You know those old black and white movies where you see someone who's very plainly dressed, their hair is up in a bun and they carry themselves in a very dignified way? That was Beatrice Harvey. She was a strict disciplinarian. If she saw you running in the hallway, she would stop you. When I see kids--I go into some schools now and I see these kids all over the place, I can't even wrap my mind around that. That was so unlike what our school atmosphere was like. She expected girls to be ladies and to carry ourselves with some dignity. She expected us to apply ourselves in school. She was tough, but it was a tough love. She really loved us. She wanted us to do well. I think school was her life. As far as I know she was not married and I don't know if she'd ever been. I don't know if she'd ever had children of her own, but we were all her kids. She was an amazing woman. She really was.

MG: You suspected that maybe she wished she had attended Douglass.

BMR: There was some connection. If it wasn't direct, it was indirect. There was something about Rutgers and Douglass in her mind that she wanted to send her best students there. Like I said, I don't know if she had a relationship with somebody on the campus. But she was from New Jersey, so she certainly knew about Douglass and the history of Rutgers. I think she just thought, "This is one of the best places for you to go for an education and I want you to go there." My parents had never heard of Douglass College, so when I went home and told them that I was applying to Douglass, they said,

“Where is that?” Howard and Hampton they knew. My mother knew some of the schools in Boston or around DC, but they didn’t know that much about Rutgers.

MG: How did they feel when you applied?

BMR: They were happy and they were delighted when I got in. You know what was interesting about that? I’ll tell you who was upset about me going to New Jersey was my father’s mother, my grandmother. Her concern was that the association she had with New Jersey was with the Klu Klux Klan. She had remembered during her lifetime--now, here’s a woman in Virginia who’s afraid for her granddaughter to go to New Jersey. It’s so crazy, right? Here’s a woman in the South who’s afraid that her granddaughter’s going to go to school in the North. But what she remembered was the Klan action in New Jersey. She was fearful for me. She articulated that. “I don’t know if I want you going to school in New Jersey.” But I didn’t know that history. I didn’t know anything about it. So I went.

MG: I was surprised when I learned that. I recently moved to New Jersey and wasn’t aware of that history.

BMR: My grandmother was very much aware of it. Given her age, because she was a young adult and an adult when a lot of that stuff was going on, so she was very concerned about it. Maybe even some of the shyness that I felt when I went up there in the beginning was a little bit of her in my ear about what this place was like. That wasn’t my experience.

MG: You said there were three other girls from your high school that attended Douglass?

BMR: Yes. Barbara Murray, Trish Felton-Montgomery, and me. I don’t know if there was one before us, but Trish was in the class--let me see. There were four of us. I’m trying to remember who the fourth one was. When we get together in New Jersey, we might--I’m blocking on it right now. Given that there are only like eight or nine, for a third of them to come from one high school in Washington, DC is pretty amazing. Statistically, how would that happen? There’s a story there. I just don’t know what it is.

MG: Did you have an opportunity to visit the campus before you applied?

BMR: No. I set foot on that campus for the first time--my father drove me up. I got to tell you. You know what downtown New Brunswick looks [like] now, so let me describe for you. So we drive up and we’re on George Street, the main street, on George Street. There’s one bank, People’s National Bank. There’s a Rexall drugstore. There’s a Kresge’s Five and Dime, a dry cleaner--I can remember there were maybe about ten or eleven businesses and one bank. It felt like a small town little country downtown area. When I went back ten years ago to the New Brunswick campus, I couldn’t believe it. I could not believe how much it had changed even since I left, since I graduated from there in ’70. It had really, really changed and grown exponentially. It felt like a very small town. I remember so vividly that day because my father took me to the bank and he

opened a checking account. He put a hundred dollars in there and I thought, "A hundred dollars." In those days, a hundred dollars was a lot of money, right? I was so excited to have my first checking account for a hundred dollars. I can just remember crying hysterically when he drove away. I thought, "Oh my god. I am really here now, on my own, heartbroken." But it worked out.

MG: This was 1965.

BMR: 1965. Yes.

MG: This was really when the Civil Rights Movement was amping up.

BMR: Yes, and it was really amping up. While I was at Douglass, Malcolm X was murdered, Martin Luther King was murdered, Robert Kennedy was murdered--JFK had been murdered just before I came. Was he in '64? I'm trying to remember the year. '63 or '64. [Editor's Note: President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Friday, November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.] It was this spate of assassinations. It was almost otherworldly. It just felt like to me that the whole world was coming apart. You could barely catch your breath from one before something else happened. Medgar Evers--it was just bop, bop, bop, bop, bop the whole time. [Editor's Note: Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated on June 12, 1963.] This was before--I think a lot of activism on the Rutgers campus happened after I left. It was relatively quiet when I was still there. But I think a lot happened in '68, '69, '70 and I was not there for some of that.

MG: There were a lot of the Vietnam War protests.

BMR: Yes. Yes, exactly. Because when Curt and I got married, he was going into the Army. He wound up not going to Vietnam, but I thought he was going to go to Vietnam. So he decided that we should get married because if he should get killed, I would have some insurance and support. I was not pregnant at that time when we left. My son was born in 1970 and we got married in '67. But he just wanted to take care of me. He said, "Well, you go ahead and you stay here and you finish your degree," but I missed him so much that I was on the campus for my junior year '68 and then I left. We both finished up our undergraduate degrees in 1971. We came back in '70 and we got our degrees in '71.

MG: A lot of sit-ins and civil rights protests were taking place while you were still in high school.

BMR: It had started amping up. '64, '65, it had started amping up. I can remember. I still felt a little bit removed from it, except I can remember when I went home to visit my mother. I don't know if it was Thanksgiving or Christmas. It was when DC was in full riot. I remember military tanks driving down my street. I can't begin to even describe to you--my wonderful, quiet, little, friendly neighborhood with military tanks going down the street. I just thought, "You know, this whole thing is just spun totally out of control." But there was so much going on at that time. There was the Civil Rights protest. It was

the war protest. It was the Women's Movement. It was a chaotic, but also a very exciting time to be growing into adulthood because there was a lot of change, a lot of change going on.

MG: Did you align yourself with or support any of those movements?

BMR: All of them. All of them. I thought they were all--first of all, I had a husband I didn't want to go to Vietnam, so I was definitely anti-war. I sort of woke up to Civil Rights because it was in dialogue and looking at what people were talking about that I realized how segregated and discriminatory my early life was. I think when you're young and that's all you know, you don't have a context for looking at it in any other way. That woke up me up to a lot of things. My mother had always been a feminist long before because she just believed that women were capable and competent and she wasn't going to let anybody discriminate against her because of her gender. She wasn't going to play second fiddle because of her gender. So I already had a very strong feminist model in my own household. The feminist movement made absolute sense to me.

MG: Were you still living in Washington, DC when Martin Luther King made his "I Have a Dream" speech?

BMR: Yes. I was in that crowd. Yes.

MG: Tell me about that.

BMR: It was unbelievable. I think for me, what I was most proud of was all the people who showed up there. I didn't march in Selma and I didn't have people put dogs and fire hoses on me. So I can't imagine what kind of courage that took. That's courage of another whole order. Those students, who were down there involved in that and the three students who were killed, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, that's a level of commitment--I don't know if I would have had the courage to do that, but I was certainly capable of being part of a big mass movement. [Editor's Note: In the summer of 1964, three civil rights activists, James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were abducted and killed by members of the Mississippi Klu Klux Klan.] I was just so proud of people for standing up. The other thing that struck me about that movement was that it was at least biracial. I don't know how much multiracial because we didn't have a lot of Latinos at that time. But there were white and blacks there and I was impressed by that. Because what it said to me is that there were whites of goodwill. There were people who wanted us to be treated fairly and many of them were putting their lives and their careers on the line to do that. So that was when I think that some of my notions about racial stereotyping--and it still today happens on both sides--began to change. I said, "These people are out here; they don't have to be. They have what they need. They're out here advocating for us." I was impressed by that, very impressed by that.

MG: What else haven't we talked about concerning growing up?

BMR: Growing up? I think that's pretty much it. I think I had a fairly normal, protected, I don't think, particularly extraordinary life for black working class, middle class kids in DC at that time. I think my life was pretty typical. Yes.

MG: You talked about how you didn't experience any overt racism.

BMR: Well, I had one incident of it, but it [was] at Douglass. One evening, me and a couple of other black students--I don't know if we were coming from pizza or something. I remembered walking past one of the white fraternity houses and somebody called us "niggers" from the porch. But that was the first time anybody, at least overtly to my face, had used a racial slur. That was hurtful. I thought, "Boy, if in three years, that's all I got, that's not so bad." Now, I don't know if people talked about us not in front of our faces. I don't know how the white students felt about us being there. What I'm saying is nobody overtly caused me any hurt or embarrassment.

MG: Were there examples of more subtle discrimination?

BMR: I didn't sense it. Interestingly, I felt more of that in Boston. When I moved to Brighton, which is right outside of Boston, when I went to join my husband that was when there was a fierce backlash against busing and school integration in Boston. Louise Day Hicks movement. [Editor's Note: Louise Day Hicks was a city council member in Boston during the 1960s and was a strong opponent of desegregation in the city. She became a symbol of racial tension and division.] I was there when all of that happened. I can remember people making comments to me on the bus and on the street. It's so interesting because it totally blew my mind about the North being the mecca. That's what we had always been told in the South. When you go north, the people in the North are different. You don't have to deal with this in the North. Ironically, the further north I went, the worse it got. Boston was horrible in terms of the racism at that time. Really people were so antagonistic at that time. I was working as a bank teller in Harvard Square. The Harvard students and professors--but once you got more into more--the neighborhood we lived in was very working class because that's what we could afford in terms of an apartment. They were not nice. They were not nice. Now, what Curt experienced out doing his military stuff, I don't know. If he encountered anything, he never said anything to me about it. I know what I experienced as a young black woman moving around in that environment and it was hard.

MG: Can you tell me more about living through the Louise Day Hicks days in Boston?

BMR: Louise Day Hicks was an organizer. She was an anti-bussing organizer. I just think that with mini movements like that, it stirs up the worst instincts in people. I can remember older people saying to me--and I'm thinking, "You don't even have kids," but maybe it was their grandkids or something like that. But what happens is if you feel threatened or you feel your rights as a white person are being abused, that makes any black person a target for your anger and your disagreement with the movement. I just caught some of that. People made remarks on the bus or they would talk real loud about it to make sure that I heard exactly what they were saying. That kind of thing. That was

just the climate at that time. I was surprised because it was in Boston. My mother had grown up in that area. My mother never talked about racial problems that she had growing up. She grew up in a very multi racial community. People were decent to each other. She went to school with white kids from all different kinds of ethnicities. So that was the last thing I expected in Boston. That's what kind of caught me off guard.

MG: Jumping back a little, can you tell me more about your first semester at Douglass?

BMR: Well, I went home for Thanksgiving and didn't want to come back. My mother nudged me back. I can remember talking to Wilma about it. Some of it, I think, was just being in a place that felt so different and having to adjust and accommodate. So academically, it was not bad. My grades were decent. I felt that I could hold my own academically. I just felt that socially it was a little bit of a challenge. Then I met Curt, Scott's dad, and that was a motivation to go back because I really liked him and I also had met a couple of really nice guys--no women at that time at Princeton--but there were some black students, male students at Princeton that we had become friends with. So I started to get a little bit more of a social network and that made it a little bit easier. So we just hung together. When a couple of the black guys, including Curt, moved off campus and they got their own apartment, they would have parties there. Douglass has never--I don't know now--but at that time, they didn't have sororities, which was a good thing, because that was one less hurdle you had. I know that there were fraternities on the Rutgers campus, but Douglass did not have sororities. I think that that was a very wise policy decision on the part of the school because it gave one less avenue for people to be discriminated against each other. That was really good. Once I developed a little bit more of a social life and once I started to feel more comfortable in my own skin on the campus, after the first year, it wasn't a problem. I just went on about getting my education and trying to enjoy myself as much as I could.

MG: How did you meet Curt?

BMR: I'll tell you where I saw him first, but I didn't really get to know him at that point. There was a tradition at Douglass. Upper class guys from Rutgers would line up--there's a street. I'm trying to remember the street that runs up the Douglass campus. The Student Center sits here. It had this barrier in front of the Student Center where you could sit. It wasn't for sitting, but you could sit on it. The guys used to come and kind of look over the freshman girls. They knew we were freshman because we had to wear these little green hats called dinks. They knew we were freshman because all of us had on these little green hats for the first two weeks or something when we were there. The first time I remember seeing Curt he was with some friends of his and they just simply greeted us as freshman. Then it must have been maybe almost six or seven months later. I met him at one of the house parties that they had. He was dating somebody else, but I thought he was just so handsome and nice and friendly. He, to me, was sophisticated. He was from the Bronx in New York. New Yorker, wow. That was really a big deal. We became friends and then we started dating, I think, toward the end of my freshman year. We actually got married my sophomore year. We got married six or seven months later.

MG: Tell me about your courtship.

BMR: It was whirlwind, in the sense that we were almost inseparable. We spent every moment--in and out of class. We'd see each other between class. We spent every weekend together. It was just like the two of us. It was really college, mad, puppy love kind of stuff. We were just inseparable. That's why when he went into the military, I said, "What do you mean? You can't. What do you mean? You can't go into the military and leave me behind." I lasted a year without him and then I decided, "You know what? If I want to finish, I'll come back and finish, but I just have to be with him." That's when I left.

MG: I want to ask you more about that. Before we talk about your time away from Douglass, can you tell me about the classes and professors you had?

BMR: It's so interesting. One of your questions, I think, on the survey you sent asked which of your professors do you remember the most or stand out in your mind. Molly, I have to tell you I did not remember any of them. Not one of them. Then I had to stop and really think about it. I realized I don't remember anybody that I took classes from before I left. When I came back in '70 and went back to school, that's when I took a class with Ivan Van Sertima. Ivan was the one that I remembered. If you asked me who any of my professors were prior to 1968, '69, I don't know them. I don't remember them. None of them stood out for any reason. Not one.

MG: You were a sociology major.

BMR: I was a sociology major.

MG: What interested you about that subject?

BMR: Let me put it this way: I started out thinking that I was going to be a biology major because I wanted to go to medical school. That didn't happen. That was just too hard. I decided to go into sociology. I had always been interested in anthropology, sociology, social relationships, human behavior, that kind of thing. It was a comfortable degree. I thought the classes were really very, very interesting. The content was interesting. But then you sort of graduate with a degree in sociology and you say, "What am I going to do with a degree in sociology?" I wound up getting a scholarship to Columbia, and I went to the School of Social Welfare, where most of the students were going to be clinical social workers. That's another story. I didn't do well as a clinical social worker, so I took a different route. Same school, but a totally different route. But sociology was my major. As far as I know, I did fairly well. The classes were interesting. The other students were interesting. I just can't remember who any of the professors were, for some reason. Nobody stood out in my mind.

MG: Where did you live on campus the first two years?

BMR: I lived in Corwin, which was in the little houses for the very first year. Then I went to Lippincott and then Katzenbach more up in the Heights, up in those two [buildings]. So Corwin first year. Lippincott the second year. Katzenbach the third year. That's when I left.

MG: Can you talk about how it might be different then compared today, in terms of traditions and activities?

BMR: I just think the difference was in the number of black students who were there to interact with. Girls who came behind me with larger classes, it's not that they couldn't have white students as friends--I'm sure many of them did--but there was enough of them to form a black network. We had what I would call a marginal network because there were so few of us. The little times we could spend together we did, but it wasn't enough of us to feel like a minority presence on campus if that makes any sense. There just were not enough of us. Most of the people that I interacted with were my roommates and a couple of people that I took classes with and then Wilma, and I remember Joyce, and I remember Trish, and a few others. Maxene Summey who became very big on campus was, I think, a year or two behind me. Maybe a year behind me. I think when I was in my sophomore or junior year she was a freshman. I remember when she arrived, but I didn't get to know Maxene very well because I left fairly soon after she came. But she stands out in my mind as one of the freshman who I thought she's going to be something.

MG: What gave you that idea?

BMR: Just her personality. Her personality and the way that she conducted herself. She was sharp. She was really, really sharp. Not that the other students weren't. They just don't stand out in my mind. She's the one who stood out in my mind.

MG: Did you finish your sophomore year before you left?

BMR: Yes. I finished my sophomore year before I left. Actually, I finished my junior year. I left at the end of my junior year. My senior year was the one that I missed, so I had to come back and finish up. I had gotten three-quarters of the way through.

MG: The reason for the move was Curt was going into the Army.

BMR: And he was based up in Boston. I was a newly married, over the moon in love with my husband, young wife. I just simply didn't want to be separated from him. I thought, "You know what? Rutgers will be here." Basically, I took a leave of absence. I didn't quit. I asked for a leave of absence that they gave me one for a year. I don't know what would have happened a year or two if I hadn't actually come back and finished. I may have never finished, but he hadn't finished either. We talked about it. We decided when he got out of the service, we would go back and we would finish. I think our families were kind of holding their breath because they didn't know if we were really going to do it. But we did. Not only did we do that, he got accepted to Rutgers Law School and I got a scholarship to Columbia. We did well in spite of the break.

MG: Tell me about your wedding.

BMR: [laughter] You're going to see a side of my mom--we decided we were just going to get married. We were just going to have a couple of friends. My roommate stood up for me as my matron of honor. She had gotten married the year before me. Then Curt's best friend from Rutgers Don Brown was his best man. We were just going to be the four of us. I started feeling a little bit guilty about getting married and not telling my family. So we decided we would tell our families, but we would wait until the very last minute before they had the opportunity to impose anything on us. So three days, we were just going to married at the Justice of the Peace. Three days [before], I call my mother. I said, "Mom, Curt and I [are getting married]." She really liked Curt, so she wasn't upset about the wedding. She wasn't upset about the marriage. It's she didn't like the way we were planning to do it. Molly, in three days, my mother called her brother, who was in New York--this is the psychologist that worked for the police department. They had organized a church wedding, a singer from Julliard and a sit-down dinner for Curt's family, my family and some people that they invited to the wedding. We wound up with more of a traditional church wedding, sit-down dinner, the whole thing. The one thing she did allow me to do was get my own wedding dress. In my little spite of defiance, I decided to get married in culottes rather than a typical wedding dress. So I had pants. They were white and they were lacy, but nevertheless, that was my little bit of opportunity to assert myself. But my mother took over the entire thing. Bim, bam, boom. In three days it was done. So what was just going to be a little college elopement wound up being a regular wedding.

MG: That's amazing to plan it in three days.

BMR: I tell you, that woman has some good organizational skills. She called my uncle who is very connected in the city. He got the church, he got the place. He knew somebody at Julliard. We had the singer.

MG: What was the wedding date?

BMR: April 15, 1967.

MG: Did you go on a honeymoon?

BMR: Sort of. What we did was--we had no money. We were just broke students. We rented a car and we drove across country from New Jersey to Los Angeles. Curt had relatives in Los Angeles. Our trip was to drive across country. That was an interesting adventure. We didn't have a car. So what he did was--they had these things where you could become a bonded driver. There was this rich movie star type guy who bought this incredibly beautiful car in New York, but he lived in L.A. We picked it up, and Curt got bonded as a driver, and we drove across country in this car. Our honeymoon was sort of the time we spent in L.A. with his family. I think we were out there maybe three weeks. Then we did the same thing coming back. We delivered that car and then there was one

on the West Coast that had to come to the East Coast. So we drove back the other way. Actually for me, that was the first time I really saw what the United States looked like. We'd always sang the song about amber waves of grain. I can remember in the Midwest seeing amber waves of grain and purple mountains. All of a sudden, the United States became alive to me in terms of being able to see all that expanse of stuff coast to coast. It was fascinating. It was really, really fascinating. We had a great time. But broke as we could be, we ran out of money when we got to Colorado. Thank God my older brother Leon was stationed at an Air Force Base--I think it was Fort Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado. He gave us money. He filled up our tank of gas. He took us to the commissary, so we could get food. That got us from Colorado to California. We were winging it the whole time, but it was fun.

MG: It sounds like a great trip.

BMR: It was fun. It was a great trip. Yes.

MG: Tell me about Curt's family's background.

BMR: Okay. You'll get to interview him. His family's originally from North Carolina. He was born in Pinehurst, North Carolina in a typical black rural family. He was actually brought up by an aunt and uncle who moved to New York. That's how he got to New York. They moved to the Bronx. All of his education was in New York schools because he left when he was about two or three. He was a little kid when he left. He basically grew up in New York. He was a New Yorker for the most part. His aunt and uncle raised him. When I met him he was in his second year at Rutgers. He's two years older. Maybe two years in front of me. I think he's two years older than I am. He went to Evander Childs High School. He was on the swim team. He was a swimming celebrity in New York City, one, because there were not that many black swimmers, but he was phenomenal. I was fascinated by that, somebody who was a black swimmer. But Curt, he's a wonderful man. He really is. He's a great man. Our marriage didn't work, but I think we were very young when we got married, which is always a risk because you never know if you're going to grow together or apart, but he's a wonderful human being. He's been a great dad. He's been a great friend. He was just to me, just kind of amazing in a lot of ways. I fell head over heels for him. It was not difficult.

MG: Tell me more about your life in Boston.

BMR: It was kind of isolated, one, because I had no friends up there whatsoever. He was very busy with military work most of the time. The friends I had tended to be the older women that I worked with when I worked in the bank. We were all bank tellers. I was probably one of the youngest ones that were there. They were like surrogate mothers. When I got pregnant they gave me a baby shower. They took good care of me when I was expecting and all that kind of thing. I remember Dotty Paysnick and Rose Lewis. These were older women. I think they knew that I was up there on my own. Not that my mother didn't visit and Curt's mother didn't visit, but they were in New York and Washington, and I was up in Boston. I pretty much went to work and I was a stay-at-

home housewife for the most part. I tried to keep up on politics and do reading. So I wouldn't get too much out of touch with what was going on, and also not lose my study skills because I had planned to go back to school, which I did.

MG: In those years, it seemed like major cities were on fire.

BMR: There were. There were all kinds of stuff going on a lot in downtown Boston. I lived in the suburbs. I was in Brighton. I worked in Cambridge. So I was never really down in the heart of it, down in downtown Boston. I was a little bit more on the periphery. I certainly could see it at night looking at the news, seeing stuff that was going on. I was very much aware of what was going on, but I wasn't in the middle of it.

MG: What stands out to you?

BMR: Again, I think what stands out to me was that there was so much racial animosity in the North. I didn't expect that. I think that Northerners, including my mothers, had always prided themselves on not being as racist as white southerners were. That was a myth, but it was one that everybody seemed to believe. So that was the hardest thing for me to kind of reconcile that and to know that in some ways it had gotten worse because my mother, who didn't have me until she was about thirty-three years old had not experienced that as a young person. Somehow the racial situation had deteriorated in some way. It's either that the accommodation to it became less or people were less civil in spite of it or something, but the relationships had deteriorated from the time that she was growing up in the '30s and '40s. I mean, in the South, there were lynchings and all kinds of things going on. I don't think the North was quite as bad, except in some places like South Jersey. Somehow, it's like the order of things got turned upside down to me. I just didn't expect the North to be like that. So that was a surprise.

MG: What was Curt's job in the Army?

BMR: I don't know exactly what he did. He was in military intelligence, which is why I didn't know. He was like my dad at the White House. They did not talk about their work. It'll be interesting when you ask him, when you interview, if he will tell you because I sort of learned very quickly that I wasn't going to get a lot out of him about it and I didn't ask. I don't know what he did really. But it kept him out of Vietnam and for that, I was enormously grateful. Because I was waiting at any moment for him to call me and tell me that he was going overseas, and that didn't happen.

MG: You started your family in Boston.

BMR: Yes.

MG: How did that change things?

BMR: Well, being a mom changes things. That was very interesting because I had a strange pregnancy. The first pregnancy test I had was negative, although I was pregnant.

So I kept getting bigger and not feeling well. I went to the doctor and he said to me--I said, "You know, I think I'm pregnant." He said, "Now, that first test was negative. This was before Roe v. Wade when abortion was legal. If there were any issues with a woman's reproductive system--if you were going to do exploratory surgery or anything--you had to do a pregnancy test first to make sure you didn't inadvertently cause an abortion. Turns out the second one was positive. By that time, I was five months pregnant. Okey dokey. While some people have nine months to get used to being parents, we were on like warp speed because that baby was coming in four months. All I can remember was they thought maybe I had a tumor and they were hoping maybe there were uterine fibroids. They were hoping that they weren't cancerous. They were doing exploratory things. So the doctor comes out of the office. I can remember Curt and I sitting there. He said, "I have very good news for you." He says, "I don't think that you have a tumor or you have cancer." He says, "But you're going to be parents." I thought Curt was going to strangle this man. "After all my wife has been through, coming in here, complaining, you've been seeing her on a regular basis, now, five months later, you discover that she's pregnant?" Fortunately for me, I was not a heavy drinker, smoker or partier, so I didn't do anything in the first trimester, which would have caused a problem. It was fortunate. It didn't have to be that way. I had a very complicated pregnancy. I was in labor for forty-eight hours. They finally decided to do a C-section. Now, you plan your C-sections, right? In those days, doctors were very reluctant to do C-sections. They said, "Once you have one, all your children are going to be that way." They were just determined that I was going to have this baby vaginally. Poor Curt. I said, "Go home and go to sleep. You cannot stand here. There's nothing that you can do. Go home and get some rest." By the end of that almost forty-eight [hour] period, I said to the doctor, "You are going to either have to cut this baby out or cut my throat. At this stage, to be honest with you, I don't care which it is." [While] I was in that labor room, six women came in, had their babies and left, and I was still laying there. People tell you, "Oh, you'll get over it. You'll have more children. You won't remember." That is seared in my brain. That is why I have one child and thank God he survived. I was not doing that again. I was so traumatized by that. I'm not doing that again. One, I didn't know. Then when I discover I have four months to get accustomed to it, and then all of this problem, no. Scott, who's not super, super tall--he's about five [foot] ten [inches], he's right in between me and Curt--but he was very long as a baby. He was twenty-two inches long. You can see my torso. So he was rolled up in there like a little knot. But it turned out all right. So I went home. I gained an enormous amount of weight. I remember I gained sixty pounds. After my son was two months old, I remember walking past one of my neighbors. He said to me, "Girl, when are you going to have that baby?" I'd already had it. The baby was upstairs sleeping. I was going to the store. I gained an awful lot of weight. It took me years and years to try to work it off. Part of that was the fact that the bank made me stop working at seven months. The whole philosophy about pregnancy and women's weakness was they didn't want me to work. Now women work up until the time that they go practically to the hospital. I was home for two months with nothing to do except eat and sit around. That's what I did. But when I had the baby, in some ways, I kind of learned as I went. My mother and Curt's mom were not there to handhold the entire time. Fortunately, I don't think I made any serious mistakes. Shortly after that--because Scott was born in April of '70. We came back to New Jersey.

MG: Was the decision to come back to New Jersey because you wanted to continue your education?

BMR: Yes. We had made a definite decision that we were going to finish, so we went back. Rutgers accepted him back, Douglass accepted me back, and we went back to school.

MG: Did you live on campus?

BMR: We did. We lived up in the Heights in that graduate student housing. I don't think those little huts are there anymore. They had temporary graduate student housing that was made from airplane crates. They had converted these airplane crates into little housing units. They had one bedroom, a little kitchen. A little row of them. It was like a little community of them. We lived up in the Heights. That was the other thing, which made it harder for me to get reintegrated into what I called the "New Douglass," because I was working part time, going to school, and a new mom. We lived way off campus. We didn't have a car. I could take the bus back and forth, but what am I going to do with an infant? I'm trying to study at night. Although I lived on campus, it felt more like a commuter student. I was not down in the middle of the mix, when all that kind of stuff was going on. Yes. I heard about things and when I would go to class during the day, I would hear students talk about things, but I wasn't really a part of it.

MG: Were there other married couples on campus that you would get together with?

BMR: Only the ones who lived on either side of us. I remember there was a couple from Nigeria. It was a Nigerian student. Julian. He was so interesting. Because my father was a gardener, I had planted all these flowers in my little front yard. He had planted vegetables. He looked at me and he said, "You know, you African Americans." He said, "I don't understand you people. You have all this land, you could be growing vegetables for your family to eat and you're putting in flowers." I said to him, "Well, you know, what can I [say]?" I mean, he had a point, but he was African for Pete's sake. When Africans see soil, they think, "Food." I'm thinking, "Flowers." I've always tended socially to be a little bit of a loner. I'm not a real social-social person. I've lived here for eighteen years. I know that family and that family, and that's it. And I've lived on this street for eighteen years. I just don't go out of my way to engage people or invite them into my space. That was not like I withdrew. I've always been like that.

MG: How was Douglass different when you returned?

BMR: I don't know how to describe it. The vibe was different. There was a different kind of vibrancy. There was a different kind of intensity in the atmosphere because I think of all these social movements that were going on and the students were much more politicized and much more politically engaged, even in class. The tone of the discussion was more debate and advocacy around issues. It was just the whole climate was completely different from when I left and when I came back.

MG: In an email you sent me, you said you felt like you missed the revolution.

BMR: I did. It felt that way. It felt like in the two years that I was away, there was a cultural shift at Rutgers. One, because of more minority presence, but also because of all the social things that were going on. I was not there during the transition. The transition still continued to go on, but the birth of it and the movement and the engagement, I missed it.

MG: Did you wish you had been part of it?

BMR: Yes.

MG: Now that I look back on it, I very much do, especially now. Even with Scott, when I talk to my son about the things that he was engaged in at Rutgers in the '80s, there was a vibrancy in the '80s around social issues that was not there in the beginning of the movements in the '60s. So, Rutgers was a different place. I feel like I missed the action. I wouldn't trade my son or my husband or my family. It's just that I kind of wonder what kind of person I would be. I would be different, I think, if I had, in some ways, been more engaged in that. I don't know how, but I just somehow feel like I would have been different.

MG: Who was this professor that you mentioned earlier that you liked?

BMR: Ivan Van Sertima. Have you heard of Ivan? My goodness. Ivan Van Sertima, you must look him up. I thought he was still alive, but somebody told me he died several years ago. Ivan was from British Guyana. At that time, he was working on a book called *They Came Before Columbus*, where he was making a case that West Africans had been to the New World before Columbus. He had found artifacts and things like that that suggested--a lot of it, the whole Olmec culture he said was basically West African brought into Mexico. He was brilliant. With my love of sociology and anthropology and human history and evolution and human societies, he, to me, was just it, in terms of a professor. He also had a class on literature of the Caribbean. I have to tell you this story. We were looking at literature written in various black dialects. One of them was from the Gullah people. Have you heard of the Gullah?

MG: Yes.

BMR: Down in South Carolina. I'll tell you a story about that later because I was on the faculty of the University of South Carolina. At that time, he had given me some transcripts from a Gullah book and he had asked me to read them and to translate them if I could. I remember I got an A on the paper. He's saying to me, "I have never known an undergraduate who had such a command of this kind of translational skill and in a language where the dialect is so different." It was in English, but it was very dialectically different. To make a long story short, about ten years ago, I did a DNA study, and found out that I'm related to the Mende and Temne people in Sierra Leone. Many of the Gullah

people are from those same tribes, because these were rice-growing people in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. That whole rice coast of West Africa, they chose slaves from there because that was the primary agriculture in those swampy areas of Louisiana, and South Carolina, and Georgia. Come to find out I'm ethnically, genetically related to the Gullah. You know Molly, I'm a very scientific, empirical person, but I tell you, the older I've gotten, the more spiritual I've gotten. I remember when I was in the University of South Carolina, I was drawn to the Gullah people. This was before I knew anything about this genetic ancestry. I was down in Charleston and the low country. Every spare moment I got, I made friends with them. Emory Campbell who was at the Penn Center--these were all my friends. I spent so much time with them and felt so comfortable with them. When I got this DNA result, I called Emory and I said, "Emory, you're not going to believe this." I said, "I have Sierra Leone Mende and Temne ancestry." He said, "I'm not the least bit surprised." He said, "When you came here, you just fell right in with us. You were so much at home." The scientist says to me, "Well, you know, that's probably just--I don't think so." There was a strong connection and the first inkling of it was that assignment that I had, because when I went to Sierra Leone and people were speaking in Krio--they spell it K-R-I-O, but it's exactly the same as the Gullah language. I understood them. How does that happen? I didn't grow up in the Carolinas. How does that happen? You have to wonder. Now we know they have all this science about epigenetics, where they're wondering if people inherit cultural memory as well as biological memory. There may be something to that. These people who talk about past lives and they've been in places where they feel like they've been before--associations and stuff like that, I don't know. You see all this African--this is all stuff that I brought back from Africa, like that mask behind you.

MG: Yes. I wanted to ask you about that.

BMR: That's a Mende ceremonial mask. The Mendes, they're in West Africa, are the only known culture where women have a masking tradition. Most of the masks are worn by men. They have a society called Sande. It's like a women's rights of passage society. You learn all the things you're supposed to learn. They also do genital mutilation, I discovered. Thank God I wasn't exposed to that. When I went to Sierra Leone, I was privileged to see a traditional ceremony, where they had young women who were being initiated into womanhood. These are worn by the senior women. They're called Soweï. They're the elders of the whole organization and of the community really. Each woman's mask is uniquely made for her. I just want to show you--I know we're bouncing all over the place, but that's okay. This mask has some very specific features. First of all, a woman's hair should always be adorned, right? So these are like braids. A big broad forehead to them represents intelligence. The slanted down eyes are modesty. The closed mouth is discretion. These are tribal marks. These designate what subgroup or tribe you come from. So I actually bought this from the Peabody Museum because I needed to have a Mende traditional mask in my household. So I have that. But I actually saw them in Sierra Leone when I was there. So I have a whole story about Sierra Leone at some point because I actually went there right after its Civil War. We started a school and health clinic. I am in constant contact with the folks over there. I was going to go back just before Ebola hit. So I don't know when I'm going to get back, but I still have

friends over there. I support programs for children and families over there, but those are my folks. Before I left, they had a naming ceremony for me. I was given ceremonial dresses. The whole thing. Before you leave, I'm going to pull up a couple of pictures on my computer so you can see.

MG: When was the first time you went?

BMR: I went in 2005. It would have been ten years. Because here was my dilemma: It cost so much money to go over there that I always said to them--just to give you an example, one of our dollars--their money is called the leone. One of our dollars is worth 4,600 leones. So when I send five hundred dollars, it's a million and a half leones. So when I think about spending four thousand dollars to make a trip, it's almost unconscionable to me. What they could do in terms of school fees. So I said, "Let's use the money now to put to good use. I promise you I will come back. So I was going to go for a tenth anniversary and they were expecting me this year in the spring and then Ebola hit. So I don't know when I'm going to get back over there. They need to get an Ebola virus vaccine first probably before I go. But nevertheless, even long-distance, they email me. They have a little Internet center in the town. I send emails. A couple of days later I get responses. I know everything that [goes on]. I know who's gotten married, who's had babies, the whole thing. It's wonderful. It's really great.

MG: That's an amazing connection to develop.

BMR: It is. It is absolutely amazing. But as soon as I got those DNA results, I told my son, "I got to go to Sierra Leone. I have to see these people."

MG: We are jumping around a little, but I'm really interested in what we're talking about. What drove you to do the DNA test?

BMR: I had always been curious. I think there's a natural curiosity in human beings to want to know where you come from. This is the way I explained it to people because it was almost an obsession with me. I said, "You know how it is when adopted children just have to know who their families are." I said, "Imagine a child who's abducted. What happens when you're a stolen child? Not only were you separated, but you were separated sort of without your knowledge." That's the way I think a lot of African Americans [feel]. We were stolen people. The way that we were managed when we came here, the intent was to make sure that we could never trace that trail. People were mixed up. You were put with different tribes that didn't speak your language. So, one night I was watching television and it was a program about the grandmothers in Argentina, I think it was. Their student children had been murdered and their grandchildren had been given to military families during one of the dictatorships. So these grandmothers insisted that they be DNA matched to these children, because they said, "I know that that is my granddaughter. The only way to prove it is through genetic studies." I'm sitting and I'm thinking, "Now, wait a minute. So, if I could find a match, a genetic match to somebody in Africa, would they be able to tell me which tribe maybe I was from." There's one lab in Washington, DC. It's called African ancestry. Not

Ancestry.com. Africanancestry.com. This geneticist--his name is Dr. Rick Kittles--went all over the African continent--not just West Africa--all over the African continent and collected genetic samples. I had sent my DNA to three or four labs before then and all they could tell me was "Well, you're 20% European, 10% Native American, and the rest is West African." I'm saying, "You know, I can look in the mirror in the morning and determine that. That's not what I want to know." So when I found out about African Ancestry, I sent them--and I'll show my letter they sent me. They sent it back. I had my female line tested, so this answers for my mother and her sisters and everybody else. I had my father tested, so that we could look at his mother's genetic history. So it turns out, my mother and the women in her family are Mende from Sierra Leone. The women on my father's side of the family had some Temne DNA. So these are the two major ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, are the Mende and the Temne, and they're both women. So I was curious by that because the male lines in my family went back to Nigeria, to the Igbo and the Yoruba. I said to Dr. Kittles, "Why do you think--what's the chances that both of the women would be from Sierra Leone?" He said, "Well, you'll find out." He said, "If you ever go to Sierra Leone, what you'll find out is that the women are the ones that grow the rice." So there was selective decision making in who they chose to enslave. The women were the ones that had the knowledge about rice agriculture. Sure enough, when I went to Sierra Leone, it was the women in the field who were working on the rice. So statistically, more women were taken than men, because they knew about rice. So anyway, once I got my DNA results letters, I tell you Molly, when I just held that--I'm going to get emotional. I held that letter and I thought, "When I open this, this is going to answer three hundred years of questions." I just held it for a few minutes. When I opened it, and I read it, I just fell to the floor and I cried. I just thought for all of my ancestors who didn't know, I have an answer. Thank God my mother and father were still alive and I was able to share it with them. But I spent the entire night on the computer reading about the Mende, the Temne, their history. I found out that the Mende were not originally from Sierra Leone. They were part of the Malian Empires. They left Mali. They were in Timbuktu. They were part of the Mende group. They came down the Niger River when the Malian Empires were breaking up. They left and they came down the Niger River into Sierra Leone. I spent the whole night, the entire night reading. I couldn't get enough. Reading, reading, reading, and reading about how much respect these societies have for women. They had women chiefs. In fact, this group that left Mali left under a woman. Her name was Monsarico. She took 40,000 people and came down the Niger River under her leadership into Sierra Leone. I'm going, "Why was I never told this?" That's when I really felt cheated. I felt cheated that there's all this history about the people I came from--and it's amazing history--and I don't know this. So it was a process of me educating myself. What I appreciated was Ivan Van Sertima at Rutgers was the one who got me thinking, "Who are your ancestors?" Slavery is not who you are. It's something that happened in the history of your people. It was an event that happened in the history of your people. You have a whole history pre-slavery. That's what he was saying. You need to find out for the thousands of years before the Atlantic slave trade. Who did you come from? Ivan was the one who was asking those kinds of questions. So I have been on this journey of self discovery and discovery for my family all along, but I knew about that horrible blood diamond civil war in Sierra Leone, which ended, I think it was in 2003 or 2004. [Editor's Note: The Sierra Leone Civil war was

fought between Revolutionary United Front and National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The war started in 1991 and lasted 11 years.] I decided to go there in 2005. I found a couple of other people who had traced their ancestry--one family who had been there before the Morans--and I told them if you ever go back, I want to go with you. [Editor's Note: Ms. Morrison-Rodriguez is referring to Mary Moran, a woman from Harris Neck, Georgia, who discovered her family's roots in Sierra Leone. Her visit to Africa and meeting relatives there was documented by National Geographic and reported on in the news in the late 1990s.] They said, "We're going back in 2005." I said, "I want to go back with you." I went. It was life changing for me. First of all, I had been to Africa before. In 1995, I went to South Africa and Cameroon. So it was not the first time I had been to Africa, but it was first time that I had been to Africa in a space where I knew I had ancestral roots, and that was different. That was a very different kind of experience. But the way the people welcomed me--I'll show you some pictures. So then when I came back, my identification was not an African American descended from slaves. It was an African American descended from enslaved Mende people and Temne people. It's different. It's a very different kind of conversation. I have a pre-slave history and I know what it is. Your whole sense of your self is just really, really changed. You just kind of walk with your back a little straighter.

MG: It sounds so empowering to reclaim this lost history.

BMR: It is so empowering to reclaim it. It's important to reclaim it. Because when I went there and met the women there, there were mannerisms that they had and ways of behaving that I saw in my mother and my grandmother.

MG: I was going to say that sounds like your mother.

BMR: Yes you do. You wonder where does that come from? That steely determination, that almost kind of haughtiness that my mother had--all the women there are like that. They don't walk with their heads down. They're proud. They're very proud. The way that they carry themselves is just completely different. I understand that there are African Americans who don't care to know. I feel sorry for them because I think that they would be enriched. But if everybody had the opportunity to go back, it does two things--one, it lets you know that your roots are so much deeper than who got off that slave ship. That's important to know. The other thing is it also lets you understand that as bad as the institution of slavery was--and it was horrific--the upside of that is that we have had privileges which our relatives in Africa had not had. When we talk about poverty here, poverty is a relative concept. The kind of poverty that I saw--and I'll show a couple of pictures. The kind of poverty that I saw in Sierra Leone, grinding doesn't even begin to describe it. It's a depth of material poverty and yet, the spirit of the people, their sense of community, of mutuality, of self-respect, caring for their children--they may be materially poor, but they're much richer than us in some very significant ways. This was an enlightening experience for me because it reframed a lot of the ways that I think about things. Those children over there are so hungry to go to school. There may be eight of them sitting on a bench and they're passing one little slate board back and forth. But they're so anxious to raise their hand and show that they know, they would die for the

schools that we're ready to put in the garbage. They would give anything to have those schools. So I would like to see more American children travel so that they could understand how privileged they are compared to most of the rest of the world. We are privileged people. We don't know that because we don't have any basis for comparison. So our people complain about what they don't have. You don't know what not having means until you see these third world societies.

MG: Were you ever able to share this experience with the professor who inspired it many decades earlier?

BMR: That's one reason why I wanted to get in touch with Ivan and then I was told he had died. That's my fault because you always think people are going to be around forever. I'm saying, "You know, at one point, I'll go back to Rutgers for something and I'll look him up," but it's too late. But he was the impetus for a lot of that.

MG: Tell me about graduation and then we can take a break to look at some pictures.

BMR: Okay. I'll give you some refreshments. Graduation was very interesting because Curt and I graduated at the same time, so the Rutgers had their graduation and Douglass had theirs. My family came up. His family came up. By the time I graduated--let's see, I graduated in '71. Scott was a baby. He was a year old at that stage. It was just a big family party and my family drove up [from] Virginia [and] DC. His folks came down from New York. We had a little apartment in New Jersey. It was packed full of people. It was a wonderful time. For us, it was a real sense of achievement because it would have been so easy for us not to go back, but we did and we finished. At that time, we had both gotten our acceptance letters, him to Rutgers Law and me to Columbia. It was like a double celebration. That was amazing. Yes, it was amazing.

MG: Let's pause and we'll pick back up with Columbia.

BMR: Let me get some refreshments, but while I have your attention--I'm looking for my glasses. Let me go find them. Here they are. I just want to quickly--

[Tape Paused]

BMR: This is a woman; she's one of the elders in this community in Sierra Leone. At the very beginning, when I arrived, she marches up to me and she says, in perfect English, "My name is Boi Martha Koker." Boy is a title which means "elder sister." "My name is Boi Martha Koker. I can speak English. I'm a nurse. I was trained in the mission school. I am going to take care of you while you are here." Thank God. She translated for me. Everywhere she translated for me. She was just a blessing. Needless to say, I have broken Creole, but I could not speak any of the African languages. So let me go down to my Sierra Leone photographs and pull up a couple of those. Look at all this stuff I have on this computer. It's crazy. Most of it's because I have my own business ... All right. So first of all, I want to show you how I was greeted coming into the village.

MG: Wow.

BMR: Look at this. We get there and I thought we had arrived on a celebration day. I thought, “How lucky are we? There’s some kind of celebration going on,” not realizing this whole thing was planned for me. Up and down the roadway they had women--they have a thing, it’s a gourd covered with beads and when you pull it makes like a “chh, chh.” So it sounds almost like a soft train. So all of a sudden I hear drums and this “chh, chh, chh.” There’s women on both sides of the road. Then, I’m standing in the crowd watching. Behind me, I feel these little hands pushing me into this sedan chair. This is how I get carried into the village. Is that amazing or what? People talk about, “Oh, I’m not going to Africa. They don’t like African Americans over there.” Really? This is Martha and me and her cousin Kemma. These two women, both of them trained nurses, both of them speak English. They were just wrapped around me. When I had my naming ceremony, Martha chose my name and she organized the whole thing. They stayed up half the night cooking. Eighty percent of the community is Muslim, so they had the chief, they had a Christian minister, and a Muslim Imam all gave me blessings at this ceremony. But one of the things I want you to see--so when people talk about poverty--by the way, the Sierra Leone dance troupe turned out and gave us a concert. I have to show this. You see this man?

MG: Yes.

BMR: He looks exactly like my mother’s oldest brother.

MG: Wow.

BMR: I almost choked when I saw it. I showed this picture to my mother. She said, “What’s Clayton got on?” I said, “Mom, that’s not Clayton.” See this is what happens when you go back and you see these people who look like your relatives. I want to find the one where I was in the country with the--here. That’s poverty, Molly. Look at their stomachs. This is protein deficiency. They look all (quashicore?). All these kids [have] a major protein deficiency. I would venture to tell you that these children that look like toddlers, they’re seven, eight, and nine years old, because their growth is stunted. Look at their little spirits, in spite of it. They were funny. They were fascinated by me. Look at this little girl’s smile. She’s holding some little thing that she’s playing with. It’s just unbelievable. But these were some of the--these were the women in the community; they got together. These are the senior women. This one (Kemma?), this lady--these would be the ones who would be wearing the wooden masks during formal ceremony. But the men, they have their own compound outside of the village where they do all of their traditional ceremonies. So one time, we were laughing and fooling around and the men say, “Go on down there.” Like, “You’re disturbing us. Go on down.” The women were down there. The little tiny babies--they can take the little baby boys. The bigger boys don’t go down. These were the women in the village. Now, they have a thirty-five percent maternal mortality rate in childbirth. So when I left, I was choking up because I was wondering how many of these women would be gone the next time I go back. Their life

expectancy is like forty-five years. What I'll do is I'll select a couple of these to send to you. By their standards I'm a very old woman. By their standards I'm considered a senior elder in the group. What I do is I vote. I vote on email on village things. I started building a house there, which is just about finished. That's one reason why I was going to go back. What I'm going to do to be on the safe side is I'm going to make my friend Martha the co-owner because if, for some reason, I never get back there, she and her family will have a very nice home. I told her. I said, "You stay in it. Because if you don't, everything we put in is going to be stolen within no time at all." So they've actually been living in it. I told her. I said, "You need to have some ownership in this because if something happens to me or I don't get back, I want you to have it." I'm going to fix us some fruit.

[Tape Paused]

BMR: I'm graduating with this degree in sociology. I'm saying what does one do with a degree in sociology? It's sort of like being an English major. It's so eclectic. Someone said, "Well, a lot of people with degrees in sociology, they go into social work. So you might want to think about that." I've always kind of liked the helping professions. I remember I told you I thought I'd be a doctor one time. I applied to the Columbia University School of Social Welfare. They gave me a scholarship. I went. The first clinical assignment I had was at a child welfare agency in Harlem. It was awful, absolutely awful. It was the most rigid, punitive--I didn't like how they dealt with the families. I didn't like how they dealt with the kids. I went to my advisor. I said, "I know you're going to think I'm crazy to think about leaving Columbia and with a scholarship, but I can't do this work. I can't do this work." It happened so that at that year, I had taken my first course in research methods, which I loved. I've always liked science. She said, "Of the things that you've taken, what do you like?" I said, "I like research. I like research methods a lot. As a matter of fact, of all the classes I've taken--the social welfare policy, the clinical practice--I like the research the best." She happened to be my advisor, and was also my research teacher, research professor. So I said to her, "Well, maybe I could concentrate in research." She said, "We've never had a research concentration at the master's level. We have clinical work. We have social policy. We have social welfare administration." I said to her, "Well, maybe I could be the first." At that time, they only had three research courses. You can't get enough credits for a degree with three courses. She said, "Well, let me think about it." God bless her. Dr. Shirley Jenkins was her name. She's since died, but she was my mentor. We went to see the dean and we said to him--she said, "I have a rare student who really wants to concentrate in research. We don't have a research major, but if we could put together a program of study for her, where she would graduate from our school and have sufficient credits, but she would have to take a lot of her courses in other parts of the university. We would need agreements." He thought about it a couple days. He did it reluctantly, let me put it this way. He said to her, "Well, what kind of job is she going to have?" Now, because all he could think about was the administration of a social welfare agency. I said, "Well, don't they have programs that they need evaluated? Don't they do research on social issues?" We put together this thing. Molly, graduate school for me was amazing. I took the three courses my school offered. I took epidemiology and biostatistics in public

health. I took measurement in the Bank Street College of Education at Columbia. I took another measurement course in psychology. What she did for me was go to all these different departments and we sat down with their class schedules, and looked at what they had to offer. We picked and selected--she personally contacted each of the professors, told them about me, that I would have to take it for credit--it wasn't an audited course. I would have to take it for credit. They said, "As long as she can pass the requirements of all the other students, it's not a problem." So I had really--although my degree is in social welfare, I had a multidisciplinary experience. It has served me so well because I decided to make research a career. For example, when I was at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, I taught epidemiology and biostatistics to medical students. My degree is in social welfare. But I know epi and bio-stat because I had taken those classes. For me, it was like a kid in a candy store. I took advanced statistical methods, computer methodology and how to analyze stuff. At any one of these schools, if they were offering something that I wanted, that's what I took until I had enough credits for my master's degree. Then when I finished my master's she said, "Well, listen. We do have a research concentration at the doctoral level. So you just might as well keep on going. Before you work and you make money and have any reservations, while you're in this student mode and you don't have any money"--by that time I was a single mom--"keep going." So that's what I did. I just kept right on going through until I had a PhD.

MG: Also from Columbia?

BMR: Yes.

MG: Where were you living at the time?

BMR: In Columbia student housing, an apartment on the upper West Side. They provide not the best apartment in the world, but it was student housing and it was walkable. My son was in a daycare. There was a church right across the street from me. My son was there in daycare. When Scott was about six, I think that was the first time--I don't think Curt would mind me saying this--that we tried to get our marriage back together. We had not been formally divorced. We had been separated all that time. So we got a house in New Jersey and moved to Somerset, New Jersey. We had the house in suburbs, both really good jobs, the perfect kid, the whole nine yards. Then I was commuting from New Jersey into Manhattan every day. Then after I finished my degree, I was teaching at Hunter College. I've done so many things. I was teaching at Hunter, got recruited from Hunter to be a research co-director in the social work department at Mount Sinai Medical Center. So I was at Hunter for four years, Mount Sinai for four years, and then I got a call from the New York State Office for Aging under Mario Cuomo's administration. They were looking for someone with a research background to come and do some work in aging for them. Off I go to Albany. Pick up my kid, who was not happy because by then, he was a junior in high school. I was moving him to another high school his last year. He was not happy, but he went. He graduated from a high school in Albany, New York. I've always been very fortunate job-wise. I get recruited for a few jobs. I was in New York State Government from--I must have been there almost nine years in Albany. Then got offered an endowed chair at the University of South Carolina. That's when I

met all the Gullah people. I was at the University of South Carolina. But I did not enjoy living in South Carolina. Maybe if I had lived in Charleston, I might have stayed. Columbia, no. Then what happened was I got a call from a friend of mine, a colleague of mine, who had been with me at New York State Office of Mental Health, who was now the dean at the [Louis] de la Parte Mental Health Policy and Research Center at USF [University of South Florida]. He was looking for an associate dean. So he called me, and I said, "Okay." That's how I got to Tampa. But I've never had to apply for and compete for a job. I have been so blessed. It's just these opportunities come along and I've gone from one good thing--I never had anything I considered bad. I've gone from one good thing to something that was better. I've been really, really lucky.

MG: When was it that you came to Florida?

BMR: I came here in 1998 from South Carolina. I was in South Carolina from '94 to '98.

MG: Your CV is several pages long. There are so many things I want to ask you about.

BMR: Go right ahead.

MG: You have written so many journal articles and book chapters. There are a number of positions and accomplishments you were recognized for. I don't know where to start, but perhaps chronologically makes the most sense.

BMR: That's the rundown I just gave you. Right after graduate school, I taught at Hunter College in their School of Social Welfare. I taught research methods and family policy. I was there from 1976 until '80. I think I left there in '80 ... I left there in '80 and then I went to Mount Sinai Hospital after that.

MG: Tell me more about what you were doing at Hunter College.

BMR: I was an assistant professor. I taught research methods and statistics. I supervised a couple of doctoral dissertations. They had a doctoral program. My life has been a period in academia, out of academia into what I call the real world, the real world for a while, back into [academia]. It hopped like that. Then back into an academic thing. I really started my career as a professor at Hunter. Then I went to Mount Sinai Hospital and worked as the deputy director of research for the social work department, which was a clinical department. So I did studies on social issues for patients. Then I got recruited from Mount Sinai, where I went and spent my first time in government. I got recruited to the New York Office for Aging in Albany. While I was in Albany, I was in Aging for two years, and then I got recruited from there to the office of mental health. I was an Associate Commissioner of Mental Health in Albany under Mario Cuomo's administrations. My area of responsibility though, was psychogeriatrics. I had all of the old people, whether they were in the community or in the psychiatric centers. I had responsibilities for policy and services for all of the elderly psychiatric patients in the state of New York. That's a big responsibility, and I liked it. I really did. What

happened was I was a gubernatorial appointee. When Mario lost the election, it was very clear that heads were going to roll, because that's what happens. Some of these people found out that they were removed from their positions by reading it in the newspaper the next day. It was vicious. But the year before that--see, because I spent a lot of time out in the field talking to people, I told my colleagues. I said, "I think Mario might be in trouble." "Oh, no. Who's going to challenge him? There's nobody to challenge him." So they're sitting pretty. They're comfortable. When this endowed chair came up, I had some friends in South Carolina who called me and said, "Barbara, there's an endowed chair. It's named after a very famous African American here, I. DeQuincey Newman. We think you would be perfect for it. Would you at least write in a letter of interest for consideration?" I'm going, "South Carolina? I don't think so. Not from upstate New York. I can't see myself living in South Carolina." But then, when I thought Mario might lose that election, I said, "I don't want to read my name in the newspaper." I thought, "Let me take a look at it." I asked them if I could come down for an interview. Make a long story short, they offered it to me. So off I go to South Carolina. This is the year before all of the heads start rolling, when [George] Pataki won. That was it. Then I was in South Carolina for four years. Then, like I said, I got a call from my colleague David Shern. He brought me to USF. That's how I got to Tampa.

MG: Was any of the work you were doing involving or impacted by the AIDS epidemic that took place in the '80s?

BMR: It hit at Mount Sinai. When we started seeing the first cases of AIDS, they were calling it GRID [Gay-related immune deficiency], gay men's disease or something like that. We didn't know what was going on. All these presumably, should-be young, healthy men, given their ages, came in. They had Kaposi sarcoma. What is going on? They thought that they were maybe ingesting some kind of drugs that were causing their systems to break down. They could not figure out what this thing was. The fear among the staff there--and this part of the research. We had a doctor who was doing the medical research on the young men. I was interested in the social effects of a mini-epidemic on the psychology and behavior of the hospital staff. We had nurses that refused to put their food in their room. They wanted one of those doors like in a prison where you shove it in, because they said, "Listen. We don't know if this is contagious. I'm not going to expose myself to this and take it home to my children." These were rational, medical professionals who were in hysteria because they didn't know what this thing was. They then put the patients in isolation. No one understood it. We know so much more about how it's transmitted now and everything else, but at that time, it was almost like the reaction to Ebola. What is this? It's totally out of control. Then there were people who took the moral position. "These are gay men. They deserve it. Whatever they're doing is causing them to be sick." We even had some staff who said, "That's how God deals with [it]." The moral discrimination and condemnation of these men because they were gay and they thought that this was some kind of punishment from God for their behavior--it was all kinds of things going on. I left maybe about two years after that. We were just starting to see it really escalate in New York City. Then when they started seeing heterosexual cases, first among the Haitians and then among others, they realized, "Well, wait a minute. This isn't limited to homosexuals. There's really something else going on

here.” Yes, some of the first research on HIV was done at Mount Sinai, because we were in the city, which was the epicenter for it.

MG: What would you say your expertise is in?

BMR: I think if you would have asked people what they identify most closely with me, it would be evaluation and evaluation methodology. Almost all the work that I do now is if someone gets a federal grant, and they need to design an evaluation for the project to know if it’s effective and they want an outside evaluator. A lot of my work is for federal grants, for state grants or other philanthropic grants, helping them to evaluate whether their programs have been successful. I also train a lot of grantees in how to write the evaluation sections, because that’s usually what they get downgraded for. The program descriptions are great, but when it comes to talking about the scientific rigor of looking at outcomes, they struggle with that. Some foundations actually pay me to come in and work with their grantees--Florida Blue Foundation, Allegheny Foundation here. A couple in New Orleans, Texas pay me to come in and do workshops with their grantees on how to write their evaluation plans. I would say research and evaluation is really what I built my career around. That’s how I make my living.

MG: That’s the home business you were talking about earlier?

BMR: Yes. I have a home-based business, because all the work that I do is contract work. Analyzing data is easy. People send it to you in a data file now. You can do that on a computer from anywhere. So I have a great business. It has virtually no overhead aside from that little office you were in. I have some graduate students from USF, who are very skilled in doing data analysis and graphics and reports and things like that. I pay them to work with me. So when I get overloaded, I’ll just call them. I might assign them to specific projects. They will do the graphs and charts. I’ll write the reports. So it’s really a collaborative process, but I pay them very well. They have some money. I get paid well. So it’s a win-win situation, all the way around.

MG: When you were in Albany, is that when Scott went to Rutgers?

BMR: Yes. When he graduated from high school up there, and yes, that’s when he started going to Rutgers. I wanted him to go to Rutgers. He looked at several others schools. He was talking about California. I said, “California?” Because my son, he’s a tennis player. He’s very athletic. I wasn’t living in Florida at that time. I was still in upstate New York. He was looking for somewhere where he could do athletics all year round and do sports. So he was thinking about California. He was thinking about Florida. I said, “Well, maybe we could start a tradition in our family. Your dad is a Rutgers grad. I would love to see you go to Rutgers.” He decided on Rutgers. So he went.

MG: What was that like for you, taking him to campus and visiting him there?

BMR: It was so amazing because once again, to me, the school had gone through another metamorphosis. When he told me on the phone that he had girls in his dorm--you have to remember when I went to Douglass, in a girl's dorm, if there was a man in the building, someone would yell out, "Man on the floor." You could hear the doors shutting and slamming. You could not have a guy come into the sleeping areas. They could only come in the lounge and with permission. We had chaperones. To go to when the girls and boys are living in the same building--are you kidding me? The gender stuff--I think what changed equally to the racial dynamics were the gender dynamics were so different. The thing about Scott is when we had male friends they were usually boyfriends. He has women friends who were friends. When they went somewhere, he wasn't romantically involved with them. They would get together and they'd go to the movies or go out to dinner. It was a mixed group and they were just simply friends. We would go out in a group, but we tended to be paired up. It was a boyfriend and a girlfriend going out with another boyfriend and girlfriend. These were just friends. The whole thing about dating and who you could go out with, and you could have a girlfriend and still have women friends, and all of those kinds of dynamics had changed so much between the time that I went to Rutgers and when Scott went to Rutgers. Of course, New Brunswick was a different place. He said, "Mom, I'm going to take you and we're going to go get something to eat." I remember Tony's Sub Shop, Greasy Tony's Sub Shop. Curt and I lived off of Greasy Tony's subs. That wasn't there anymore, but they had all of these trendy type restaurants on George Street. I was just astonished because at the time that I left, they were just starting to build--I think it's a Hilton. Is it a Hilton? They had just built the Hilton, but the rest of the development came long after. He said, "Mom, you're not going to believe [it]." Because I had dropped him off--I didn't have time to stay long. Then when I went down to visit him, it was like, "Wow." Then the building up of the campuses, the whole medical campus and all the stuff that was going on in business, Rutgers has just--it seemed like it mushroomed to me in those years. It's huge. It is a really first-rate university, and it is really up there in the big leagues now. My son is a Rutgers fanatic. Anytime you see him casually, he's got something red on him with an "R" or "Rutgers" on it. He's so proud of being a Rutgers graduate. He's a bigger alumni fan than me or his dad. He doesn't miss events. He stays connected. There's a Rutgers alum group down here in Tampa that he's involved with. He's a real Rutgers fan.

MG: He is visiting Rutgers right now.

BMR: He's there right now. Yes.

MG: You must have continued to receive additional training as you went along in your career. Some of these things are so advanced.

BMR: They are, but what you do is you never stop learning, especially in a area like research and statistics. One of the things that happened over the course of my career was a level of sophistication in computer analytics. When I did my dissertation at Columbia, I did it on a mainframe. Do you know what a mainframe is? Some people now don't know what a mainframe is. It was this big computer in a big room in the computer

center. The data for my dissertation was on IBM punch cards. I bet you've never heard of that. Have you?

MG: Vaguely.

BMR: Vaguely. Well, they were cards that were maybe ten inches long, three inches deep, flat of course. You punched out what was called Job Control Language in the beginning, which were all the computer commands. So in the front were all of your definitions of your variables, your labels, your computer commands, all this stuff was on paper. It had to be in exactly the precise order. That was followed by your data cards. You carried your stuff in a box of cards. If one of them in the Job Control Language was out of order, nothing would work. I spent hours in the computer center fixing stuff, moving around. I will never forget--just about at the stage where I was ready to run all of my data--this was on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the winter. I was carrying my computer cards and I slipped on the ice at Broadway and 122nd Street. My cards went like this [up in the air]. Molly, I thought they were going to take me to Bellevue. I had a total meltdown on Broadway, ten o'clock at night. Because when Scott was resting and sleeping, that's when I went to [the computer center]. I was in hysterics. What am I going to do? I have to literally start recreating this all over again, because there's nothing that says this is a data card, this is a Job Control Card. When it's all up in the air, it's all up in the air. Then, over the course of the years, as I'm teaching, they develop the capacity to do SPS and SAS. All of these languages were computer-based. You could sit and write your program on a personal computer and enter your data on your computer. To a student, for whom that's how they started their studies, they do not understand what a quantum leap that was in data analytics. It was huge. It went from the mainframe to being able to put it on a desktop, to now being able to put it on laptops and all these portable devices. You would have to have been in this field for forty-five years like me to appreciate the level of sophistication that this technology has taken analytics to. Every step of the way, I had to go back and learn. Okay. So nobody's doing IBM cards anymore. I learned how to do it on a desktop, then on a laptop. One reason I like working with graduate students--most of them are in public health or education--is because they're up on the latest technology. Things that used to take me three days to do, they can literally do in an hour. I just say, "This is how I want it arrayed. These are the graphics that I want. This is how I think the report should be laid out." Bip, bap, boom, there it is. It's fascinating to me. But that's the way the world is today. I typed my dissertation on a typewriter. That was before word processing. What you would do is you would pray that nobody would do an editorial change, which would put you on another page because it was like a domino. Once it gets to the next page--and this is a typewriter. When you're doing it, the final form, no white out, no strikeouts. It meant retyping every time there was a major edit and it was on another page. It meant retyping all of that. Students don't understand what a gift word processing was. Then you could shift things all over the place and you could do it in a matter of a couple of clicks. This is a great time to be in this work now, compared to what it was even twenty, twenty-five years ago.

MG: Are there a lot of women in this field?

BMR: There are some. Not as many as men. I still think it's a field that's dominated by men for the most part. I think there are more younger women who are getting into it. They're more evaluators in certain fields. I think that on the medical side, probably epi, biostat you have some. I'm seeing more and more women. Where I see them is when I go to these grantee meetings in Washington for SAMHSA [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration] or for the Department of Education. There are more women evaluators in the room now than there were 20 years ago. They're younger women. It's a field that's growing. Women are showing their skills in that area. Part of it is just simply because women were discouraged from math, and you can't do evaluation without math and statistics. I just think that they're much more comfortable in their own competencies in terms of moving in this area. So I see a lot more women in evaluation in the field than when I started.

MG: Have you encountered any resistance because of your gender?

BMR: I think still because I am an African American woman people tend to underestimate me. I think that they are surprised. Let me give you an example. I was on a study section for one of the federal agencies where people apply to the federal government for funding, a study section reads the applications and then we rate them and we make decisions about who should get funded and who should not. I remember one time there was a project that came in from Harvard. I actually didn't think it was very good. But everybody was like, "Well, it's from Harvard." It wasn't that it was a terrible proposal. I just thought it was weak in certain areas. So I wrote a rather detailed review of what I thought were the methodological weaknesses and that we ought to send it back if they wanted to reapply the next time. The head of the study section was a very brilliant physician from Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago. He has all the reviews. I'm sitting in the room--I have to show you that picture because I want to put this in context for you. I think if you see the photograph, it will put it in context for you. It was a very interesting experience. This was the Agency for Health Care Policy Research, which is called something else now [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, AHRQ]. This was in 1983. Here are all of the scholars. He's from Michael Reese Hospital. This is Joe Newhouse. Joe Newhouse in the back is from Rand Corporation. This is the level of scholars who were here. Mitchell--I can't remember his last name-- University of Michigan. These are people from Harvard, Yale, University of Michigan. Barbara Starfield, Johns Hopkins University. There's me. First of all, you see the number of women. This is actually a pretty good representation of women, given this particular group. So there I am. They want to show they have diversity on the committee. So they put me right in the middle in the front. So this is the group where I said, "I don't think that proposal from Harvard was so good." I wrote it all up. Lee says, "Joe--Rand Corporation--your analysis of the Harvard grant was absolutely amazing." Joe says, "I didn't review that one." Lee goes back to the stack. "Who wrote this? Who wrote this analysis of the Harvard application?" I'm sitting there with that sweet little smile, just like, "I'm not going to say anything." I'm going to let them go down the entire roster of everybody in the room. I was the last one that he got to. To answer your question. It never occurred to him that I had the capacity to do that. This was 1983. Let's give him

some credit. So maybe twenty, thirty years later, he would probably at least out of political correctness maybe have asked--but all of the women came last. He went through all of the men. Actually, I had put my name on the last page when I signed it, but he didn't flip it through. To make a long story short, they approved it because it was from Harvard and it was a well-known high science guy, but I wasn't going to rubber stamp it. I was at Mount Sinai when this happened. I was so pleased to have been asked to serve on that committee; I wanted to really do a good job. I said to myself. "I'm not naïve enough to think that proposals don't get approved for political reasons, but this is the scientific merit level. We should not be making political decisions at this level. This is the scientific merit level." The fact was that I would be--they very often asked me because I had a PhD in social welfare, to look at the ethical implications. They wanted to know how is this going to affect people. Let's look at the ethics. They didn't think I had the brain to look at the scientific rigor. I was pigeonholed. "She's the one who's going to tell us if anybody's going to be hurt by this. She's come down from social welfare. Let her look at the ethics of it." They didn't think that I had the intelligence to do a scientifically, analytic review, and I did. Now, every once in a while, I will get that. I will be asked to attend a meeting on behalf of a client, where there are research and evaluation issues. You can see a little bit the look of surprise on people's face when I walk in. What really trips them up now is the Rodriguez name because then they're expecting somebody who might potentially be Latino, which I'm not. I was married to a Hispanic. That gets people a little confused as well. It's interesting. This was a very interesting experience for me because I think that there was still a lot of lack of respect for some of the women. That was probably less true for Barbara Starfield because she is a very, very well known researcher at Hopkins. She's just up there with the big guys. But whoever heard of me.

MG: What was the feeling when you would prove them wrong, so to speak?

BMR: I just decided I needed to let my work speak for myself. I could have said, "How dare you? Why did you go through everybody else and leave me last?" I said, "No. I will just let my work speak for itself." That's how I've always been. It's just like, "I will show you." I'm not going to argue with you or try to convince you. I will let my work speak for itself. That's the way it is.

MG: What was the position that first brought you to Tampa?

BMR: USF had a department, which was not an academic department. It was the Louis de la Parte Mental Health Institute because I had been in the Office of Mental Health in Albany. What they did was they did research, evaluation and social policy analysis related to mental health services and mental health policies. The connection was mental health. David Shern, who had been with me at the Office of Mental Health in Albany, had come down around three years earlier to become the dean of this particular--he was called the dean, although it wasn't an academic unit. It was really a research and policy unit at that point. When he was looking for an associate dean, he thought of me. He called me. At that time, I was in South Carolina. He said, "Would you be interested?" I thought, "Yeah." Florida, with all this diversity, after Columbia, South Carolina,

probably would be a step up. By that time, I had married a Hispanic and I thought he--my husband would have been a fish out of water in South Carolina. I said, "I've got to get to somewhere where there's a Latino community because he's going to be miserable." That was the other impetus. We've since divorced, but that was part of my motivation to move here so that he would have a Latin community as well.

MG: Was that important to him as well?

BMR: Yes. He wanted that as well. I really got this house for the two of us in this community, but I still have the house. He's gone. I'm not sure where he is. Anyway, that was part of my motivation to get to Florida.

MG: Was being a dean a big departure from your research and analysis work?

BMR: That's part of the story of why only--when my parents got ill, I decided to leave, because it was more administrative. The people who knew me said, "Don't take it. You're not going to like it. You like doing research, doing evaluation. You like teaching it in the classroom. When you're, especially an associate dean, you're dealing with faculty upsetness, space issues, budgets. You are not going to like it." They were absolutely right. After two years, I thought, "No." Even if I had stayed at USF, I think I would have tried to get more of a teaching position than an administrative one. Being a dean is administrative. No, I didn't like it.

MG: You took time off from that to take care of your parents when they came to live with you.

BMR: Yes.

MG: We talked a little bit about it earlier, but maybe you can talk on the record about what that was like?

BMR: As I told you, they were divorced when I was eleven. When they got ill and frail, neither one of them had a spouse, so my mother came first, and she was here a couple years. I could start to see gradual declines in her, but she did have full-blown dementia when she died at ninety-seven. She was here for a decade. I watched her just gradually lose my mother [not] physically, but in terms of her personality. My father's situation was very different because his mind was sharp. I was with him, talking to him, the night before he died. We were talking about something. His mind was as clear as it could be. But my father was very ill. He had had two strokes and he had prostate and colon cancer, had been through chemotherapy. He was very ill. Of the two parents, my father was actually the more frail, the more fragile of the two of them. He was living in Washington alone and like I told you, I told him, "You can't stay. You've had a stroke; you can't go up and down steps." He needed care. Fortunately, I had enough room. My brother came back from South America to help me. My sister helped a little bit around the edges. We were able to get them what they needed. That's not unusual for women my age. That's one area that I really think a lot more research needs to be done. We've talked about the

impact of working on taking care of children and the cost of childcare. The flipside of that is at the other end of the age spectrum, and that is elder care responsibilities. It typically falls to women in the family and often the oldest daughter, regardless of how big the family is and the age structure. The sons tend to--some of them will do direct caregiving and God bless them when they do, but a lot of them will provide financial support. But when it comes to hands-on caregiving, it's very often the women in the family who do that--very often the oldest daughter. I was fortunate that I had room for them. What it meant was I couldn't stay on the same career path I was on and take care of them. That's when I decided to go into consulting because it gave me flexibility. It was work that I could do at night in the evenings, around taking them to doctor's visits. You reorder your life to make it possible to work. That's just what you do. There's going to be many more career women who are in my position. The other thing is nursing home care and even assisted living is expensive. They think childcare is expensive. We do not have nearly the facilities in place to take care of the demographic. The people who are aging are baby boomers like me. They're [in their] sixties, early seventies. They're fine up until about seventy, seventy-five. Then you start seeing these very steep declines. Even here in Florida, if you look at some of the senior communities, people moved down here when they were fifty-five, sixty. What happens to them when they're seventy-five and eighty? They can't stay there. They can't do independent living. That's when their families have to pick it up, or somebody has to pick it up. We're on the wave of a silent epidemic when it comes to elder care. As a country, we are not preparing for what's going to be facing us. It's going to be unbelievable. If we think medical care costs are through the roof now, just wait. It's going to be unbelievable.

MG: Is there any thing else we skipped over, in terms of your career?

BMR: No. I think we got--as you can see, it kind of hopscotched. But I think that's interesting. My mother stayed in the same job for forty [years]. I could not do that. I like the challenges of doing something new and something different. I think the longest single position I had actually was in Albany, when I was under Mario Cuomo. That was nine years. But within that nine years, I held three different positions. So every four or five years, I need something different. That's the beautiful thing about consulting. It's a shifting landscape because most of these projects are three, four--now we're getting some that are five years. Even those, that's not the only thing I'm doing. I'm doing two or three, four, five, six things at one time. I like juggling all of that because they're [different]. Some are with kids. Some are with seniors. Some are with HIV. Others are in the field of early education. It's a mix.

MG: That sounds exciting.

BMR: It is exciting. It's very exciting. I like working with young researchers because they bring a different kind of perspective. Like I said, their knowledge of this technology is just--it would take me forever to catch up to where they are. I really respect them for those skills that they have.

MG: I wanted to ask if you stayed in touch with the people you attended Douglass with?

BMR: I haven't stayed in touch with Wilma. I think I saw Wilma at one reunion. The one I went to was not mine. It was with my roommate Susan Wilson, who was my roommate the second year. Susan was from New Jersey. Susan was in my wedding. We had been friends throughout. She, I can honestly say, is the one person at Douglass that I've stayed connected to. Over the years, we've stayed connected. Then when she had her reunion. I think it was her 25th, 30th maybe. She asked me if I wanted to go and I said, "Yes." So I went, but those were mostly her classmates, not mine. But we had a nice time anyway.

MG: Have you been to any of your own class reunions?

BMR: No.

MG: What are your expectations for the Black on the Banks conference next month?

BMR: I can hardly wait. When I look at the list of people who were on the panels, I just kept saying, "Oh my god. Oh my god." Like, Trish. I haven't Trish Felton-Montgomery since we graduated, but we went to the same high school. I haven't seen them. I can't wait to see them. I recognize many more of them, than I did, for example, kids I went to high school with because it was closer in time. I'm looking forward to seeing all of them. I talked to Trish on the phone. We reconnected because I got her email address from that list. So I emailed her. We've been in touch already. But I'm really looking forward to seeing all of them. It'll be nice.

MG: I think it is going to be great.

BMR: It is. I'm excited about it. I'm so excited about it.

MG: Finally, talk to me about being a grandmother.

BMR: Yes. Which one?

MG: Scott had children.

BMR: Yes. I'm a grandmother. Let me show you more pictures.

MG: Good.

BMR: Scott waited very late--by my standards--to get married. He was forty-three. I got married at nineteen. You see the difference. I thought he would never get married. So he married. This is Sandra. This is his wife.

MG: She's beautiful.

BMR: Her family is from Colombia. She grew up in Queens, New York. She had Kayla when they met. When you see them out together you would not know that he was not her biological dad. They are a wonderful little family. That's Kayla and here's Scott when they had the daddy daughter dance at her school. This was when she was in middle school. She's in high school now. Let me see. The most recent picture is probably this one. You can see she's getting to be quite a young lady. She's a great soccer player. Over the last summer, she shot up. She's much taller than her mom now. She looks like she and Scott are almost--she's going to be very tall. She's going to really be tall. So that's a picture of my sister with her son when he was small. That's my sister there. That's my granddaughter. This is what Scott looked like a couple years after we moved back to New Jersey. I think he was about two and a half or three in that picture.

MG: Very cute.

BMR: That's him when he was a baby. There we all are.

MG: You have a wonderful family.

BMR: Thank you. I'm real proud of them and I love them dearly. I really, really do. This is my great-great grandmother on my mother's side.

MG: What was her name?

BMR: Betsy. Her name was Betsy Burrell. Look at that outfit, high neck and the hair. This is two or three generations back. Who else? Let me see who I haven't shown you. This is three generations back. That's my great-great grandfather on my father's side. His name is Collins Jones. My father was Lester Jones. Collins was a mulatto, as you can see from the way that he looks. He had all kinds of offshoots that came out of that family. These are just my loved ones I call them. I feel really good by having them close by. I love them all dearly.

MG: That's wonderful. Is there anything I'm missing or is there anything I forgot to ask you about?

BMR: No. I think you've got my whole life history down. You know about Sierra Leone. I'll send you--an article about my trip was written up in the Charleston Newspaper, in the *Times-Picayune*. I'll send you the article and some of those photographs, so you can see. I am dying to get back to Sierra Leone, but I will tell you, this Ebola thing has thrown me through a loop. Until there is some signal--but now what they're starting to--this is the love I have of epidemiology. What they're trying to know now is that there are secondary manifestations of it. That even after people have survived it, two things are happening. They're having residual illnesses. I don't know if there was some kind of organic damage that was left behind. Now, which is awful for Africa, they have discovered that Ebola survivors can transmit Ebola sexually. So if they think that they're fine, the virus is still in them and they can transmit it sexually. The stigma that is going to come--we used to be able to say, "He's a survivor. He's free and clear." No,

you're not free and clear. It's still in your system. We're going to see secondary epidemics that are coming out of this. There's no question about it. You got the first primary hit and then you're going to have secondary and maybe tertiary waves that are coming out of it. My son said to me, "I know you are not thinking about going back to Sierra Leone." I said, "No, I'm not that crazy, as much as I want to go back." Honestly Molly, I don't know when it will be safe to go back. I don't know. My friend Martha and I, there are many--there are quite a number of African Americans who have ancestry from that part of the world because I'm in touch with the lab. I said to them, "When you looked at the matches, which countries had the greatest matches?" They said Nigeria was number one. But Nigeria is huge. Sierra Leone is the size of the state of South Carolina. It was a tiny little country. Do you know that that was second--which gives you some indication of how many slaves were taken from that country. The thing is, is what I was thinking is that maybe because there was so many matches, there would be more African Americans like me who would want to go over there and visit. So I built a four-bedroom house there, which Martha and I were going to run together as kind of a bed and breakfast for visiting African Americans. One, they're not going to sleep in the bush. I don't care how tough they are. They're not going to be without lights. They're not going to deal with the mosquitos. They're not going to sleep in a hut with no anything. I said, "Well, what we'll do is we'll have a modern house where they can stay at night. We'll fix traditional meals for them and things like that." Then, my house is maybe a two-hour ride by jeep up to the village where you saw those pictures. They can go up into the countryside. It's like going back into two hundred years of time, but come home and sleep comfortably and take a hot shower and all that kind of thing. This was our grand vision for this business we were going to run. We were going to get local women to cook. What happened was she called me and she said "(Yanni?)"--my Mende name is Nyanepor. She said, "(Yanni?), there's a place for sale, which is four lots. The family was a big family. They're selling it because they actually needed the money. There are four lots." She said, "We could put the house on one lot and then we have three that we can decide what to do with." I'm thinking if we had a small crafts center, if we had a small educational center. I'm friends with some of the people from the university in Freetown, who could come out and do lectures, who could actually talk about the slave trade and some of those dynamics. We had this whole vision of this little compound that we were going to do. The house was just about finished. We were getting it furnished. It's practically furnished. I was thinking I would tell the lab, "If you know of people who are tracing back to Sierra Leone, let them know we have a place for them to stay if they want to come and visit." We'll make a business. Then Ebola hit. Who is going to want to go to Sierra Leone on the tails of the Ebola epidemic? Not anybody any time soon. I may not even go back any time soon. I'm thinking that I need to make some arrangements if I don't make it back because Martha's been partner hand in hand through this, to make sure that she and her family can live comfortably in that house. Who knows what the future will bring, but right now, it doesn't look very promising.

MG: I hope you get back there.

BMR: I do too. I'm dying to get back there. I keep up on everything that's going on. She informs me of everything that's going on. I continue to support the school and the

health clinic. I pay school fees for about ten kids, but that's easy with the exchange rate. What I spend a month eating out, I could pay school fees for them for an entire year. I will continue to do what I can do from here, until it's possible for me to go back over. I will send you the article and some photographs.

MG: Good. I hope we can get together in November.

BMR: Absolutely. I would love to talk to you. I feel like I'm taking so much of your time.

MG: No, no. I might even have some follow up questions.

BMR: Yes. Once you get back and look at all of this. I will send you some photographs from Sierra Leone and the newspaper article so you can see it. It was a life-changing journey.

MG: It sounds amazing.

BMR: It was a life-changing journey for me. Even though I had been to South Africa and I still have friends in South Africa--do you know my closest friends in South Africa are Afrikaners? Who would have thought? I was invited to go over there--one last thing because this is really interesting. After [Nelson] Mandela was released, what they said was it would be interesting to see how our post-Apartheid situation changes compared to what happened to African Americans after the Civil Rights Movement. So they invited me to come over and do a lecture on African Americans post-Civil Rights movement. They were not happy with what I had to say. Because what I told them--because they think "Mandela's here. In a year, everybody's going to have a job. Everybody's going to have a house. There's going to be a chicken in every pot." You have the vote, but what you don't have is the reigns of the economic situation. We fifty years post the Civil Rights Movement are in the same situation. We don't control the economic structure. Not only that, we are still a minority in terms of voting. At least here, if you have majority of vote, you can make political decisions, but until you can make economic decisions and control the economy, it's going to be an uphill fight. Now, all the things I said then, they understand. Because if you read now, people are discouraged, they're disappointed. The jobs are not coming like they thought. The housing is not coming. I said to them, "You're in this for the long haul. This is not going to flip overnight." What they said was, "Well, the difference is we are a black majority. You're a minority in your country. Because we have the vote, we can make things happen." I said, "I don't want to discourage you. I want you to hold onto that and make it work for you, but you invited me here to tell our story. Our story is we are still struggling and we continue to struggle. It goes up and down in terms of how we fare at any given time. It will be a bumpy road and it will not be an easy road." They just didn't want to hear it. Didn't want to deal with it. I didn't want to throw water on their parade. I was enthusiastic for them. I'm saying to myself, "Who knows? Maybe it will be different here because they're in the majority. Maybe they can do more. Their situation is very comparable in a lot of ways to what we have here for the same reasons." I knew that that was going to be the case.

When I was there, I met these two psychology professors who were Afrikaners. When I learned that they were white Afrikaners, I was perfectly prepared not to like them at all. They were the most engaging people. What they said to me was, “Many of our colleagues have left the university. They’ve gone to England. They’ve gone to New Zealand. They’ve gone to the United States. We have stayed because Africa is our home. We have been in Africa for generations. We want to be part of the new South Africa.” Their teaching load tripled. They now had to offer courses, not in just Afrikaans, but in Afrikaans, English, and I think Sotho was the third language where they live, [for the] same amount of money. Their workload had absolutely tripled, but they were committed to trying to see that these black students were going to get a decent education. How can you not respect people like that? We’ve been friends. They’ve been to my house. When they come to the United States, they come visit me. When I’m in South Africa, I’ve stayed with them. I have other friends on the African continent besides Sierra Leone, but now my heart is in Sierra Leone. So I may get back to South Africa, but I don’t know when I’ll get back to Sierra Leone. It’s so sad that just as we were getting our directions set--but that’s human history. Look at the plague. That’s human history. Just when you think you’ve got a leg up, Mother Nature reminds you as big and mighty as you think you are as a human being, a little microbe can knock you on your behind. That’s what happened here. It’s a sobering, humbling experience because just when you think you’ve got it all, you never know. You never know. So if you want to get together again when we’re up in New Jersey, I welcome seeing you again.

MG: I would love it. This has been such a treat. I really enjoyed our conversation.

BMR: Good. I’m glad you could come over and see my home and get a sense of my environment and see all my “peeps,” as I call them.

MG: This worked out so well. I will look forward to seeing you in a couple weeks.

BMR: Good.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/22/2016

Reviewed by Barbara Morrison Rodriguez 9/23/2016

Reviewed by Molly Graham 12/12/2016