

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNICE VENABLE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This begins an interview with Bernice Venable. The interview is taking place on October 1, 2015, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Can you say when and where you were born?

Bernice Venable: I can say where. I was born in Somerville, New Jersey a long time ago.

MG: Did you grow up in Somerville?

BV: Yes. I grew up, went to school in Somerville. Of course, it's a great town, not too far from here, the home of Paul Robeson. [Editor's Note: Performing artist and activist Paul Robeson graduated from Rutgers College in 1919.] Graduated from Somerville High School. I loved the idea that he was there before me, and I feel like I'm walking on his shoulders, as do many other people who went to Rutgers, especially from the Somerset County area. So I'm very proud of Somerville. Again, it's a little town with a main street, an authentic main street, a wonderful educational program there that I was allowed to go through. It was at a time, of course, when--not that many minorities were in Somerville when I was going to school. There were three of us, starting in kindergarten. All of us graduated, together, from High School. Not a lot as compared to nowadays. But I can recall in many of my courses, I was the only African American in them. There were few Hispanics, that I recall. There was nobody else but me, myself and I, so to speak. But again, a wonderful education, great teachers, and many of them supported me when I left Somerville High School and went on to Douglass, because I was orphaned by the time I was thirteen years old. So I was raised by a foster parent. The interesting thing about it is by the time I got to be a senior, getting ready to graduate, I received money from various people--individuals, entities, my church community, and a number of my teachers did many different things for me, from paying fees to buying books. I'm not talking about just my freshman year--all four years. I remember going back to visit with my French teacher, [who had been filling out--], every time, every year, she would drop some money in an account and I would go by and say hello to her. I had another teacher who was paying a lot of fees for me. So, it's one of those kinds of things that you can never forget. It socialized me because I'm talking not only faculty members from Somerville High School. I'm talking my church, and I'm talking about members of the community, what they did. Then of course, scholarships at the time. There was a state scholarship, the New Jersey State Scholarship. Then there were other matching funds. In other words, if you received a scholarship from A, B would match that scholarship. So, a number of lodges supported me, also--and I'm taking this to the point to where I am right now. I just believe that people have to give back. You don't necessarily give back to the people who gave to you. It's like paying forward, because somebody back there did things for me. By the time I got to Douglass, not only had I received monies from my community, but also, there were a number of scholarships at Douglass that I qualified for. So all of that took me to my senior year, basically of not having to pay anything. Also I worked as a waitress. So that helped to, of course, provide me with pin money and additional monies that I needed for books. By the time I was in my second semester my senior year, just about everything had been paid for. It's because of all of those people paying for me to do something for someone else. That

explains why, to this day, I give, and I still give, and have given for a long time to Rutgers and to Douglass because people gave to me. That's the way I am. [laughter]

MG: It's interesting that you were not ostracized where you were the only black student in your [classes] courses.

BV: [In some of my classes, absolutely.] I was never ostracized, in any courses, in Somerville or at Douglass. In some of my courses at Douglass, especially the electives, there often was a mixture of upper/lower class men--freshmen to seniors, who were from many countries.

MG: How were you forming these connections in the community?

BV: Well, I have been away from Somerville for a very, very long time. When I became an adult and started teaching, I was working in Franklin Township. Then I, believe it or not, got a job in Somerville and worked in Somerville for a number of years after that, and of course, had a chance to meet people that I hadn't seen or just get reacquainted with a lot of people who were my former teachers, as a matter of fact, and many family members, of course. Then, staying in Somerville for a number [of years after I had worked in Franklin Township. I was there and became a principal of the middle school.] I also got a Master's Degree at Rider in Guidance & counseling and became a counselor at Somerville High School. Years later, I became the principal of the Somerville Middle School. So, you begin to see generations behind you. You don't know younger students, but you know that somebody in that family went to school with you. So that was a good way to become reacquainted with a lot of people. I remained in Somerville for 11 years, as an administrator after teaching and counseling for about twelve years, and then went on to other ventures. I went on to Elizabeth, New Jersey, and became the director of elementary curriculum and instruction there. I was there for about two years and left there, went to Irvington, New Jersey and became an assistant superintendent and then superintendent of schools. I was there for about three years. After that, I went to Trenton. That's where I finally retired. I was a superintendent in Trenton for six years, and then retired from education. But I have fond memories of having started out in Franklin Township and then winding up as a superintendent of schools. It's all one hour to me right now, but it was over a course of about thirty-three, thirty-four years.

MG: I look forward to hearing more about that, but I want to back up and talk more about your early life and childhood. I know you lost your parents at a young age, but do you know anything about your family history?

BV: Well, not really a whole lot because when you lose your mother and your father--except for the fact that you had relatives in the South. Of course, [I was] my brother and I were raised by a foster parent who was not related to [me] us. Back in those days, it was not always easy sometimes for other members of the family to take you in, but this woman who did not have children of her own, she did that. That was a wonderful opportunity for me, because not everybody would have quite an opportunity like that to be raised by someone who truly cared about us.

MG: What was your life like before you were in foster care?

BV: That takes me way back. I almost couldn't remember that. My mother was sick for a long period of time. It was one of those things where she was either in a hospital, or bedridden, or that kind of thing. So I don't really have a lot of memories of my childhood growing up when my parents were alive, because they were gone by the time I was thirteen. My mother was a domestic and worked for the same family, until she took ill. I do recall the fun times, for example picnics, and, when, as small children, would spend time, at Lake Hopatcong, where the family that my mother worked for, as domestic, had a lakeside home. That was quite a different world for my brother and me! We also visited our grandmothers, in Florida - our maternal grandmother, in Fort Pierce, our paternal grandmother in Greenville. Of course, my mother was later diagnosed with stomach cancer and we moved with her to my grandmother's house in Florida. We did not know how serious this was, given our ages. We went to school in Fort Pierce. Within a few months, my mother died. I was 10 years old and my brother was 12. My father had us brought back to Somerville. He was killed in a car accident, when I was 13.

MG: Do know how your family settled in Somerville?

BV: Well, my mother--believe it or not--was a domestic for a very wealthy family. They had a home in Somerville, of course, and they had a summer home in Florida. So, she worked for them. I would imagine the conversation was, "Do you want to come with us to Somerville, New Jersey," or whatever the case may be. I guess she decided that she would do that. My father was from another part of Florida. I'm not even sure how they met. I don't know whether or not they met while she was in Florida, or they met when she was in Jersey. I couldn't answer that question. But well, anyway, they got married.

MG: What did your father do for work?

BV: He was a construction worker. My mother was a domestic.

MG: I know you have a brother.

BV: Yes. I haven't seen him in years.

MG: Is he older or younger?

BV: Older than I am.

MG: Were you placed in the same foster care family?

BV: Yes. We were both raised together, absolutely. But he went his way and I went my way. Every now and then--so that's it. [laughter] That's about it. We would see each other, occasionally. He still has his own family, in Somerville--2 daughters and 2 sons. I see them and their mom, every now and then. I also have many relatives in Somerville

and the Bridgewater area. You see, my father had an older brother who raised 21 children in that area.

MG: How did life change for you when you were adopted by your foster mother?

BV: Not really much. Back in those days, you never knew whether you were poor or rich because if you ate three square meals, and went to school, and your clothes were clean, and you lived in a clean house, you didn't know. Today, in this society, because of social media, the world is different. A little child who grows up poor now knows he or she is poor because of everything else that they see. I'm dating myself, but we didn't have television. I didn't have a television in the house until I was a senior in high school. With that television, there were like three or four channels. They signed off at midnight. You may be smiling at me, but I'm telling you the truth. They signed off. They all had different sign-off codes. People don't realize that there were only about four channels. That's it. You didn't have a world like you have now. If someone said to me, "Well, you came up in meager surroundings." No, I didn't, as far as I was concerned, because everybody on my block had the same surroundings, if you know what I'm saying. But I feel very fortunate because I came up at a time when we didn't have all of those surroundings, and you really couldn't be defined by those surroundings. You were defined by yourself. I think that that's why I am like I am today. Things don't bother me, like they may bother other people. But young people growing up now, if you are in school and everybody doesn't have a uniform and you come to school every day and you're not dressed in designer jeans, and da-da-da-da, you really know that you are coming out of meager means. So it's different. It's so different. You're smiling.

MG: Tell me again about what school was like for you. It sounds like you had a lot of support in school.

BV: In school, I always strove to be the very best. I'm very competitive. Therefore, I was always in the honors classes or whatever they call them--advanced placement kind of a situation. I had peers who were as smart or smarter. I always liked to be the very best in my class. So, I was surrounded by the same kinds of people. I really to this day, say that the education that I had--it was almost like private school, because back in those days, Somerville was almost like going to a private school. The teachers were very, very helpful, very understanding, and very determined to make sure everybody in the class did his or her work. So there. The fun side of it, and you can quote me on this--the longest detention I ever had was when I was--I think I was in seventh grade. I have this thing for pretzels. I love pretzels. To this day, people who know me well know that I love pretzels. You know what happens with a pretzel? You cannot put a pretzel in your mouth and not chew it. If you don't chew it, after a while, it gets soft and blah, blah, blah, it's like bread. Well, my geography teacher had ears behind her ears, and eyes behind her other eyes. She knew that somebody had pretzels sitting in the back row there. That was *moi*. [laughter] I couldn't even say anything when she said, "Are you eating something?" [laughter] Well, I had three days' detention for that. That was my geography teacher. They don't even have geography anymore. But anyway, I loved that woman, but I got detention. That's my bad mark. In fact, when I took on the position in

Trenton, I remember the reporter interviewed me and I mentioned that. Do you know they had that as a big article in the newspaper, that I had detention and, because of eating pretzels? [laughter] So I'm letting you know up front, if you want to see a bad side of me. I had detention.

MG: Full disclosure.

BV: Full disclosure. I ate those pretzels. To this day, I still eat those pretzels. Every time I eat pretzels I think about that.

MG: But now you don't get detention for it.

BV: No, I don't. [laughter]

MG: Can you tell me about the experience of going to a mostly white school?

BV: Well, there were not that many--as I said before, there were not that many African Americans in Somerville, period. So, if you know the history of Somerville, it was a receiving district and received students from the now Bridgewater, Branchburg, Hillsborough--and they still do from Branchburg. So you have all these people in the outlying areas, plus Somerville. There were not that many minorities coming from those towns either. Therefore, all of us, whatever grade we were in, there were not many of us African American students in each one of those grades. The experience for me was positive. I lived on a street that was primarily Italian. I can recall when my mother was very, very sick. There was an Italian family up the street. The lady used to braid my hair for me to go to school in the morning. That's the way the town was. It was that kind of a place. There are not that many towns left, I don't think, in the United States of America. But at that time--and everybody was always watchful over everybody else's children. Well, it works both ways. If you're good, that's one thing. But if you haven't been good, somebody else will say, "Well, I saw so-and-so and so-and-so, and she was doing such-and-such-and-such." [laughter] So there. That's it.

MG: You went to school during the era of the Red Scare. [Editor's Note: The Red Scare is the hysteria associated with the perceived threat of communists within the United State in the post-World War II Era. Historians also refer to this era as the McCarthy Era as Senator Joseph McCarthy accused many people of being communists and adding them to black lists.] Was that something that you were aware of?

BV: Well, we knew about it. We knew about it because obviously it would be on the radio, etc. Remember now, I came from a town where Paul Robeson went to school. You didn't hear very much about him, at all. Not until after everything was all resolved and you were going into the '70s and of course, I'm out of school by then. I think I heard more about Paul Robeson from my mother in law who lived in the South, than I did from anybody in the North, at the time. I even lived on--are you ready for this--I lived on the street that's called Second Street in Somerville. There was this family when I got to really find out about Paul Robeson--this is now in the '70s. They had so much

information about him because one of their relatives went to school with him in Somerville. Therefore, they had a lot of information just talking about him. It was almost like, we know he went to school in Somerville, but that's about all, because of the time that I went to school. But then of course, when I became an adult, and now I have a penchant for anything about Paul Robeson because the whole idea is that I walked some of the same hallways in that same building. Plus, not too far from where the building happens to be located, which is now a middle school, the church is there. That's where his father came from Princeton to become the minister at that Methodist [Presbyterian] church. He had also lived for a little bit of time in, I think, the [Scotch Plains], Westfield area. But it was Somerville High School where he graduated from. A lot of people don't realize it because everybody says, "Well, Princeton." No. He graduated from Somerville High School. I understand in that very auditorium, which still exists, where he often performed. He was quite an orator and quite a singer, and on and on and on. [laughter] This is one thing that I'm so proud about. But as you say, during the time in which I was in Somerville, going to school, there was not much--or nothing was said about him, nothing at all. I know that Rutgers University has quite a collection, but I would imagine that there may be older families in Somerville that probably have recollections of their own about Paul Robeson because I guess the earlier [parts] members of those families, [they] probably went to school with him.

MG: Can you tell me more about Paul Robeson? He's well known in New Jersey.

BV: Well, he was an All-American at the time when that was not usual. He was also the first of his class. He was a person who was brilliant, not just an athlete, but one who went on to become a lawyer, an orator, probably the best to perform as Othello in the world, a movie star, singer. I don't think there's anyone who could outdo his rendition of "Old Man River." There have been many who have done presentations citing some of the things that he said, etc., his major masterful speeches that he made around the world. He was truly loved in Europe. I think that's what got him, because he was loved by the Russians. I think that's what really got him. Of course, [he] spent a lot of time overseas. He was the quintessential person. I think probably--and I don't believe that I would be the only one saying this--the most renowned graduate of Rutgers University. You mention Paul Robeson; everybody knows him from all over the world. As I'm talking to you, I can hear the music, "Old Man River." That's why I think I'm very honored. I'm [almost] also humbled. I am humbled about the fact that I walked some of the same hallways--the same hallways because the building where I went to high school was the same building where he went to school. I understand when he first came to Somerville, back in those days--and I'm not sure if it was the elementary level or what, but there was a school only for black children, the "colored" school. Of course, that building was torn down, but I do believe that by the time he was a junior and senior, he was in the high school with the rest of the students.

MG: Did you say you attended a church near his father's church?

BV: Well, my church was on the other side of town. The school, Somerville High School, at the time, which is now the middle school, is across the street from the church

that he attended.

MG: Tell me a little bit about the church you attended.

BV: My church is a Baptist church. I'm not going to get into it because then people will say, "Well, she's not as religious as she wants to try to be." [laughter] But it was a small Baptist church in Somerville. That's what I grew up in. Those were the people who loved me dearly. I didn't know how much they loved me until the time I was getting ready to come out of high school, for the kinds of things that they did for me, the fundraising activities they had for myself--not just for me, but other kids who were going on to college at the time. But I felt very proud about that. Those were times when it wasn't easy for people to pool their money and put together money and that kind of thing. But I felt like a very wealthy child coming out of Somerville High School.

MG: Did you always plan to go to college?

BV: I can only remember one thing I didn't want to be. I didn't want to be a nurse. [laughter] I didn't want to be a nurse, [laughter] but I knew that I wanted to go on to college. I wanted to make something of myself. That's why I pursued the college program. Besides, my foster mother wouldn't have listened to anything less than the fact that I was planning on going to college. Where we were going to get the means, that would be determined down the line. The idea was the fact that yes, you are going to college. Where? Well, we don't know yet, but you're going to go.

MG: How did you choose Douglass?

BV: Well, I had great guidance counselors. I knew I was going to remain in state. I applied to Douglass and I applied to Montclair College, at the time, and also Trenton State. Those were the three that I applied to. When I was accepted at Douglass, which was my number one choice--Montclair was my second choice. I liked the fact that you had to drive up the mountain to get [there], because it's high up in the mountains. I call it high up in the mountains, but you know what I mean. Montclair is kind of mountainous. I love the idea that you had to drive up there. So that was my second choice. Of course, Douglass was my first choice. Trenton State was my third choice. I was accepted by all three and, of course, went to Douglass.

MG: Before we talk about your experience at Douglass, what other memories do you have about growing up?

BV: I think I told you all. I was very active in sports. Hockey, believe it or not.

MG: Hockey?

BV: Field hockey. Not skating. [laughter] Field hockey and volleyball. I was a two letter winner for those two sports, varsity letters. We had interscholastic sports then. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed being a member of the Future Teachers' Club, and the Spanish

Club, the French Club, and you name any other group it was. I was a member of the choirs. One was the Acapella choir and the Somerville High School choir. Then, when I went to Douglass, I continued in choirs and really enjoyed that experience because I was in the Rutgers University choir. Of course, back then, we went to Carnegie Hall to perform with Leonard Bernstein and his orchestra. That was exciting for us. Then of course, Philadelphia with Eugene Ormandy and all of the different types of experiences we had as members of the Rutgers University choir. I understand, to this day--I know the various groups because they also have the male group and the female group. But I do think that they travel throughout either United States, and also in Europe. I know that they've had great experiences because Rutgers itself has always had wonderful musical opportunities for the students.

MG: Were all the grade schools you attended fully integrated?

BV: Oh, yes. The schools were integrated. It's just that there were not that many people of color. I'm telling you right now, it was either African American or Hispanic, and the Hispanics were even fewer at the time--almost non-existent. That's about it. [laughter] You're really trying to find out how old I am. [laughter]

MG: Did you encounter any areas of exclusion?

BV: If I did, I didn't know it. I think it's because I was a high-achieving student. After a while, it didn't matter what the kids looked like, if they figured you were smart, they maybe learned something from you, or tried to cheat from your papers on the desk, that kind of thing. I didn't experience any of those problems at all, from the time I was I guess--I don't know--by the time they realized I was a high achieving kind of a kid. But no, I never really did. Again, I don't know how many people you're interviewing who would be my generation. But back in those days, if you lived on the same block with a lot of these people, after a while, color wasn't a problem. Color became an issue--the greater the social media, the greater the problems. I'm serious. I'm telling you right now. I think that's when problems really began [because] was when people really started looking at differences. I think by the time I got to Douglass, I can only think of one or two experiences. I think when I first got there, there was a song that they used to sing. I can't even remember the song. But the song was like, "Going down to the South." I think it was "Bye-Bye Blackbird." There were some phrases in the song that would have us rolling our eyes--any of the kids who were African American. That experience, and then there was another time when we were in, I guess it was, a research study. A number of African Americans, the girls at Douglass, we were not going to be a part of the experience because they were looking at flesh color. I can't remember exactly what the issue was, but flesh color to them was your color and not my color. Therefore, they couldn't use us in the experiment. The only reason why I was lined up for it [was] because they were going to pay us money. [laughter] That got us in the line. That got all of the students in the line. My memory doesn't serve me well right now, but--I'm not even sure--I think they paid us anyway. But they couldn't use us because our flesh color was not beige. [laughter] I don't know whether it was Band-Aids or whatever it was, but they were testing--I don't think it was cosmetics. It was something having to do with

flesh color, but the flesh color wasn't our color. That stands out. Anything else? Activities, whatever it is--I was in the Student Government, Association and the Spanish Club. I continued that from Somerville High School. Sports. I can't think of anything. I can't. I'm not sure about other people because they have a better memory than I have, but I really cannot. I was always involved. I also worked. I didn't have a lot of time to sit around and think about people being angry with me because of what I looked like, because I was a waitress who waited on waitresses. Now, that doesn't make any sense to you, but waitresses had to be there to serve people by [seven] six-thirty in the morning or, before! If I waited on the waitresses, guess what time I had to be at Cooper Hall? Very, very early in the morning. I had to get up early because I waited on waitresses who waited, later, on the student body. [laughter]

MG: You would feed the waitresses before they would feed the college students. How long did you do that?

BV: I did that for three years. Then by the time I was a senior, I only worked one semester--my senior year that one semester. Then I didn't work the second semester, which was like a whole new world to me. It was like, "What? This is what people do who don't work? They have time." You know what? I guess my time was such that I was so organized. I got a job working as a Spanish tutor at the local Catholic school located not too far from the Douglass campus. It's a great big church and there's a school right there. They needed a person to teach part-time Spanish, and I got hired.

MG: Can we back up a little and talk about your freshman year at Douglass? Where did you live on campus? Did you have a roommate? I'm curious about the classes you took.

BV: I guess of all the things I would remember the first year more than anything else, because that's quite an experience leaving home. I lived on campus. But you have to go all the way back to the early '50s and maybe the '40s, when I think some of the girls of color could not live on campus. In fact, I know that's for sure. But I lived on campus. I lived in Jameson. I loved Jameson. My roommate was from East Orange, New Jersey. We loved Jameson because it was right there in the smack of everything. How far did you have to walk to get to Cooper Hall where you ate? Even though sometimes people tried to be late. But if you were late, you didn't eat. But I didn't have to worry about being late because I was always early. You know what I'm saying. So, my first year, I had of course, advanced placement classes in Spanish. The most interesting thing is that my first year there in my history class, I walked in and there was a young lady there that I hadn't seen since I was in second grade. We recognized each other. She was the daughter of a physician that lived across the street from the family that my mother worked for, in a well-to-do part of town, then. So when we were little, we would play together. Then she went off to private school and I never saw her again. There she was. It's amazing. After all of those years, you walk into a room like you and I, and you and I played as little children--well, of course you weren't born when I was little. You know what I'm saying--and you recognize. Isn't that amazing? We knew each other. We walked right up to each other. Isn't that unbelievable?

MG: Yes.

BV: That was in my history class. I will always remember that. Then, of course, as I said, I was active in the choir, and various things--the Spanish Club. Then, of course, after my freshman year, I lived over on Gibbons Campus because I was in the Spanish House for a year.

MG: How did you become interested in studying Spanish?

BV: Now you're going to take me back to my elementary days in Somerville. I was among that first group of students way back--not going to say the year--that were selected by a government grant. It was a grant to try what they called the FLES program, Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools. It was a federal grant. The RAND Corporation was a part of this. They selected schools, five sites, five districts, I guess, in the entire United States. In Somerville, I happened to be in the third grade, and that was the year. I followed the program, of course, right straight through because it was a requirement. The next year, the kids following me, they had French, because they were teaching foreign languages in the elementary schools. After a time, I think more and more districts got involved and went to the first phase of that grant, got around to the whole rest of the nation. I tell people that somewhere along the way, in either *Look* or *Life* magazine they did an article. You can see my arm when I was a little kid. The picture was taken [inaudible] and I think they caught my arm in the picture. At any rate, that's how I got interested in Spanish--because of the FLES Program. Then of course, when I went on to college--I think I was maybe a sophomore or a junior, I was interviewed by representatives from the Rand Corporation at the time from, I guess, the people who were involved in this major grant. A survey was being done to go back and look, after all of those years, at what happened to the people who continued into the language. There were several of us. One young lady, I think she went on to the UN and became an interpreter. Others did different things. Some majored in Spanish and wound up teaching. It's interesting that that's how I got interested! It's amazing that you asked me because I wasn't going to say anything. [laughter] That's how that happened.

MG: Knowing Spanish and living in New Brunswick today would be really useful because there's such a huge Latino population.

BV: I use it whenever I have to.

MG: Was there a large Latino population in New Brunswick when you attended Douglass?

BV: No. No. Absolutely not. Nowhere in New Jersey was the makeup the same as it was then. You can start with Newark and go all the way down to Camden. Nothing is the same. Everything is different. Perhaps maybe in Newark more than anywhere else, there were people of Hispanic backgrounds and a lot of Portuguese back in those days, but not as much as you see today. I was telling someone not too long ago, even the town of Bound Brook, which now has quite a population of Hispanics--I can recall Bound

Brook like Somerville, very, very few. It's just amazing how the communities have changed. A town, which was nearby or still is nearby, Raritan, New Jersey, most of the people in that community--and still are--are Italian. Manville, New Jersey, Polish or Hungarians. It's just amazing where people have settled. [laughter] It's unusual. Like they say, the Norwegians, they went cross country. I wonder how in the world they got all the way out to Montana, Wisconsin, and take the cheese with them. Why didn't they stop here? [laughter] Because I love cheese. It's just amazing how people wound up going to different places in the United States. It is. Have you ever thought about that? Where are you from?

MG: My family, on my father's side, is from Ireland and ended up in Long Island. You're right.

BV: You wonder.

MG: Who says, "Let's stop here?"

BV: Yes. "Let's stop in Somerville or let's stop in Staten Island, or wherever." Someone asked me--I was at a meeting. It was a professional meeting. There was a lady at the table. Her last name was Basilone. Now, I don't know if that name is familiar to you.

MG: Yes.

BV: John Basilone. [Editor's Note: John Basilone is a famous Medal of Honor recipient who died fighting on Iwo Jima.] Second World War, decorated, [da-da-da-da]. Well, he's from Raritan. Well, she looked at me [like I was nuts] in shock that I knew that name. Turns out she was related. The Basilones, no matter where they are, they probably were one great big family. She was startled. I have to say she was startled. She could not believe that I knew that name. I said, "Of course I know the name. I lived in the town right next door to his family and probably went to school with some of the Basilones." It's just amazing how things like that come up. There are so many amazing--I could talk all night about Somerville--and I'm not going to. Somerville is an amazing town because right on the outskirts, in Hillsborough, there is the Duke Estate. Doris Duke's estate is right outside of town. It also came up in her biography. She gave a lot of money, anonymously, to students who at the time went to Somerville High School and graduated and went on to college. I probably got some of the money and didn't even know it at the time because they gave away a lot of anonymous scholarships. When they had a movie about her life, they talked about her education fund. I know that at that time there was no Hillsborough High School. There was no Manville High School. There was no Bridgewater High School. All that money was coming to Somerville. That's why there are just so many different things. Hall-Mills murder case. Where was it tried? Well, it was tried in the Flemington area, or somewhere up there in Hunterdon County. But a lot of the reporters stayed in Somerville at the old Somerville Hotel until they went--I guess you drove up Route 202 or whatever way you get to go to Flemington. It's a town that people know about. The bicycle races--probably the most famous bicycle race in the United States is the one that is held in Somerville. [Editor's Note: Ms. Venable is

referring to the Kugler-Anderson Tour of Somerville Cycling Series, a four-day bike race that takes place in Somerville every Memorial Day weekend.] It's an unusual town.

MG: I think I will have to explore there.

BV: They have the Old Dutch parsonage and the original Rutgers was in Somerville.
[laughter]

MG: I had no idea.

BV: They got all kinds of signs. They tell you where [and da-da-da-da]. All of that community is still there. They resurrected, of course, a lot of the buildings and they refurbished them all. But the Old Dutch parsonage is there and Washington's headquarters. Of course, we have nothing on Morristown because [George] Washington was everywhere. [laughter] This whole area was a battleground. I don't know what Rutgers was doing during the war. No matter where you go, there's a battleground having to do with the Revolutionary War. Somerville was in the midst of all that because you traveled from Somerville, up to Morristown, Bound Brook, Trenton, Lawrenceville, all over the place. You see all these signs nowadays. But it's just amazing. Look at where I grew up. If I'm in my backyard digging in the ground, I might have found some [artifacts]. You never know. You never know. You never know. One thing I almost forgot to mention. Yes. There were Native Americans in school. I forgot about that. I almost forgot. You only knew them by their names, because they always had names like--I'm trying to remember a name. I can't off the top of my head, but it's always like, Long-something, like Longfeather or something. Always names like that and that's how you figured out who they were because they could blend in much more than maybe African Americans. But there were a number of Native Americans in Somerville at the time. I would imagine probably in Piscataway, many more because that was a complete community of Native Americans at one time. It's where it got the name from.

MG: Did you have this appreciation for your hometown while you were growing up?

BV: I always had an appreciation for Somerville. It's like a member of the family. I'll talk about it, bad and good, but you better not say anything bad about Somerville. I tell people there used to be trolley tracks right down Main Street, all the way up Easton Avenue, all the way to New Brunswick. Did you know about that? Even when I was at Douglass, those tracks were still there. [laughter] Only until they made major repairs of Easton Avenue and widened it, did those tracks come up. People said--people still say, "What do you mean? There was a trolley?" "Yes. There was a trolley that came all the way from Somerville, went through Bound Brook and came to New Brunswick." First of all, there were no trains coming to New Brunswick from Somerville. The trains from Somerville head towards Newark, but they don't come here. They don't come this way and then go to Newark. The trains go straight through Bound Brook. If you ever drive in the area--I always tell people there are two ways you can never get lost in the state of New Jersey, especially in the Somerset, Middlesex County areas. You don't have to have geography. You know that the Watchung Mountains are over there and the train tracks

are here. So, if you're thinking about getting lost, you look over there, if you see the Watchung Mountains you know where you are. If you look over here, you know the trains are going to go straight to Newark through all the towns. [laughter] Same thing with New Brunswick. You got to know where the trains are because if you follow the tracks you can get all the way to Newark. Well, you can get farther than that because you can go South and wind up in Chicago if you want to, going through Trenton. That's what I like about New Jersey. Route 1, it used to be a path probably and it's one of the straightest highways in the United States. It's straight. Are you aware that until you get to maybe around Linden and Elizabeth and whatever--in fact, not even there, because even Route 1 goes straight. You go past Anheuser-Busch. You know where that is? You know where the airport is?

MG: Yes.

BV: Then it kind of branches off a little bit. Route 1 is a straight highway, all the way through New Jersey. It wasn't made up like that, but that's probably the trail that the Indians used. You know a lot of this. Now you know why New Jersey is strange. When I say that, I don't mean strange in terms of something's wrong with it. But have you noticed how the streets go and the highways? Let me put it this way. If you live in North Brunswick like I do, there's not really a straight route to get to Plainfield. Have you ever thought about that? [laughter]

MG: You're right. Getting around New Jersey is difficult. That has been one of the biggest adjustments in moving here.

BV: Exactly. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

MG: Not in New Jersey.

BV: Not in New Jersey. That's right. Except for Route 1. [laughter] You can tell people Route 1 is straight, but everything else isn't parallel because Route 27 isn't straight. Route 28 isn't straight. But Route 1 is. So there.

MG: Can you describe the Douglass campus when you attended?

BV: Well, there was Jameson, which is not much different right now. The Student Center--but the Student Center didn't have the back section there where the parking deck is located. At the time, the new dorms are no longer new, but they were behind Eagleton. Probably the newest after that or before that was the library. Of course, Voorhees Chapel is the same. Carpenter Hall is the same. The dean's house is the same. Gibbons probably had the biggest renovation [at the time]. Then of course the building right behind the music building, none of that was there. Corwin, at the time, was part of the campus where there was--nothing but housing, almost like Gibbons. They renovated Gibbons, but they didn't renovate Corwin, which is up by the Little Theater. You know where I mean?

MG: Yes.

BV: The changes came about after I left. They tore down Cooper and built a new dining area, which was way over on the other side. But that was also used, I guess, for dining. Then the biggest thing, of course, the global community is going to have a new building right there where Jameson is. That's going to be quite a building. It's going to look like one of the buildings there, but it's going to be modern. That's about it. A lot of the existing buildings of the time, they're still there, but many of them have been renovated, that kind of thing. It's not much of a change.

MG: Tell me more about student and campus life, things you would do for fun?

BV: Fun? I worked all the time. But there was fun. They had a lot of activities. They probably still do. You were required to go to--at the time you were really required to go to chapel. I go back to the days when if there was something important, social, you wore gloves. But they don't require any of that stuff anymore. To this day, I wear gloves to any special event. But that kind of thing you don't hear about much anymore. They had dances, and of course, there were no boys over at Douglass. The boys were over at Rutgers. But they did have major events. The military ball, I remember going to that with a fellow from Rutgers. That was wonderful. You won't believe this, but they brought in guys from different colleges to meet the girls. [laughter] That was fun. Organized events, like if you belonged to a club there were picnics and all that kind of thing. It was a different kind of a town. Football games, of course. Basketball courts. You walked everywhere. That's the thing that a lot of the younger people don't understand. There was no bus to take you. If you wanted to go to the football game, you had a friend who had a car, but not many people had friends who had cars. The only vehicles you had were your two feet that were given to you, and you walked. People would say, "You walked?" I laugh because that's what we did. Nobody thought about anything else, because there wasn't anything else to think about. Do you understand what I'm saying? It was a whole different world. It was easier for the basketball games, because they were held right over there. It wasn't that far. But the stadium was where it is now. Of course, it wasn't that size. But that's where we went. We walked.

MG: That's a long walk.

BV: We had the Landing Lane Bridge--now I'm really dating myself because the other bridge didn't exist. You walked across Landing Lane Bridge.

MG: That's quite a hike.

BV: And they had just finished building that very beautiful Johnson and Johnson office building. To this day, when people are traveling into New Brunswick, they think that is one of the buildings for Rutgers. But I think that that was intended in the first place, to build a building that would look like so much like what Rutgers would really like to have, because the building looks like a college building. That didn't look like that back then. That site is there, but that's not the building that was there. There were a lot of--well,

there wasn't really a Livingston campus. But there were a lot of buildings and they still exist, that were like barrack-looking buildings. Some of them are still there at Livingston. You know where there's a day care center? A white house up there by the parking lot? That's one of the buildings that was around during the Second World War, because that was the camp, that whole area. You'll go in the back and you'll see those one-story white buildings. All that was part of the camp at the time, military camp. Even before I went to Douglass, there was a curfew, but girls really weren't able to walk up and down George Street after certain hours, because this was a whole military base area. It was not like it is today.

MG: Were there sororities at Douglass?

BV: I don't remember any. Honor sororities, but not like sorority-sororities. There were fraternities here, but I don't remember sororities at Douglass. I don't remember them.

MG: Would you attend any fraternity events on Rutgers campus?

BV: Yes, because you went where the boys were. [laughter] Any opportunity because it was an all-girls school. It became co-ed, I guess, in the '70s. I think Princeton was first, and then other schools around the United States, and then Rutgers. I can remember when I was a guidance counselor at Somerville High School, around the first time they were admitting girls. We had college day, when the various colleges, they came and they had rooms. All the kids were over at the [Rutgers table]. All the girls, they were over where they had the rooms for the Rutgers kids. People who were interested in going to Rutgers. That was fun. I'm going up and down the hall, all these other officials are there representing other colleges, and all the girls were--because that was an anomaly back in those days.

MG: Tell me more stories about what was fun at Douglass Colleges.

BV: Probably the biggest fun I had--well, not the biggest, but the things that I can remember because it's hard to remember some of these things now. But I really enjoyed when John F. Kennedy came to New Brunswick. I think I was either a junior or senior or something like that. I was working with the *Caellian*. That was the Douglass newspaper. Some of us got away with saying that we were reporters. On Livingston Avenue, they had this beautiful building--Arnold Constable's was just built. It had a parking deck on the top, which was an anomaly back in those days. At any rate, we were able to get into some of the areas because they thought we were reporters. I was as close to him as I am to you. I will always remember that. I will always remember he was walking with the--of course, people were around him. Be that close to that person.

MG: Was he campaigning for president then?

BV: Yes, at the time. Yes.

MG: What was your impression of him?

BV: He was of great stature. Taller than most people--of course, having seen him on television, you get no idea how tall people are and it's quite tall. Very handsome. More handsome than what you can imagine seeing him in pictures now. Very, very handsome man. But there were so many--you couldn't get any closer. We were close only because he was, [walking] now that I can really remember, riding by us at the corner of George and Livingston Avenue, and I guess at the time, getting ready to give a speech somewhere on Livingston Avenue [because he had just gotten out of an automobile that he was in.] I can't even begin to say how many people were around, but you can understand back in those days, he would become the first Italian-American President. Not Italian-American. Catholic I should have said Irish Catholic. He was not Italian. He was Irish, wasn't he?

MG: Irish Catholic.

BV: Irish Catholic. He would be the first Catholic American, I should say, President at the time running for office. But it didn't matter because there was every person from every walk of life all over New Brunswick that day to get to see this man.

MG: Did you support his candidacy?

BV: I don't think I was able to vote yet. No. I wasn't able to vote yet. But I was there trying to act like I was a reporter. [laughter] That was fun. The other fun thing that I had was--back in those days--I'm trying to figure out which president it was at Rutgers. We met Mason Gross. Everyone went to the president's house to shake his hand. I don't know if that's done nowadays, but that was an experience to remember. That was another thing I remembered. It was just great. It's amazing what you remember.

MG: What did you know about the history of Douglass College?

BV: I knew that it was NJC [New Jersey College for Women] not that many years before. You're really trying to keep asking me questions to get my age. But it was NJC before it became Douglass. Then it became Douglass. When I was there it was Douglass. That's all I'll say.

MG: Tell me about what classes stand out to you.

BV: Spanish classes. The Spanish classes were the great classes. I loved chemistry because my chemistry professor was left handed and he taught us how to write backwards. But he was also a good professor. I enjoyed my history class. I enjoyed music appreciation. I think everybody did. Everybody liked art and music appreciation because they were fun classes. What else did I like? I liked the fact that I learned a lot about food, because growing up in Somerville, we ate chicken, rice, vegetable, or maybe pork, rice, chicken, vegetable. But when I went to Douglass, there were all kinds of things that I had never even heard of, like Welsh Rarebit. I thought it was [it] a rabbit. Turns out it wasn't a rabbit. [laughter] I didn't know that. But I remember that one. That

one I remember because who eats rabbit? [laughter] I don't know how many people told you that one, but that's the truth.

MG: That is a first.

BV: There were different salad greens. To this day, we don't eat a meal without salad. Before Douglass, I didn't have any salad to eat. [laughter] So when I went to Douglass, I always had a salad. So I ate salad and I still eat salad. I got an appreciation for things that I never thought I would ever like. I love asparagus. I love broccoli, cauliflower, all these things that we really didn't eat, because we ate a lot of collard greens. But to this day, I love greens. They didn't cook greens at Douglass at the time. [laughter] It was fun. Those were fun things.

MG: Were you able to form the same kinds of connections in the community that you did in high school?

BV: Well, not really, because college life was college life. They had so many things going on, activities, etc. that kept the girls busy. I didn't really connect that much with the people in New Brunswick. I did attend some of the local churches while I was at Douglass, but I didn't know that many people from the New Brunswick area. I got to be friendly with a young lady--we wound up knowing each other for years. She went to Trenton State at the time. Of course, I was at Douglass. We had a friend. She and I had the same friend. The friend was at Douglass. So I got to meet her through this friend. We stuck together for years. But I didn't have that much of a relationship during those times in New Brunswick.

MG: What did you hope to do with your degree in Spanish?

BV: I wanted to teach. So that's what I wound up doing.

MG: What am I missing about your experience at Douglass?

BV: What you're missing? Probably not anything other than the fact that, as I said before, I worked and I involved in the student activities. Because I worked up until the end of my first semester as a senior, I didn't have a lot of time. Then of course, I turned around and became a part time Spanish teacher at the local Catholic school. So my time was really taken up.

MG: How many other women of color were attending Douglass when you were there?

BV: In my class, three. Only three of us--much like in Somerville. The class before us, I think--let me see. One, two, three, four, five. Maybe four or five. The class behind me was a bigger class. I think they had about twelve. By the time I was a senior, I think they had a smaller group coming in of African Americans. But there were also students from the foreign countries. There were a number of students from Africa who came to Douglass. But by and large, there were not that many of us. My class, three. That was

easy. Just three of us. [laughter] We all graduated together on time.

MG: What do you remember about graduation? Did your foster mother attend? How did you celebrate?

BV: Yes. She was there. We ate dinner at one of the restaurants that was not too far from the campus. That was great. Douglass always had a wonderful graduation. Of course, things have changed now and ceremonies are more consolidated. At the time, Douglass had a wonderful graduation. I remember all the regalia and everything. It was just great.

MG: What was that feeling to graduate for you?

BV: At last. Do you know the song?

MG: Yes. Etta James.

BV: Yes. "At last." [laughter] Glad to get out and be able to go to work full-time. I taught in Franklin Township, New Jersey.

MG: It is surprising that you say that because you ended up going on to pursue many more degrees later on.

BV: [inaudible] In September, school opens all over again. [laughter]

MG: Did you work at the Catholic School after graduation? How long were you there?

BV: I only did that for that semester. I was part time. I think two days a week. I taught Spanish. It was not all day long. It was like three hours. I did that that whole semester.

MG: The semester before you graduated?

BV: Yes.

MG: What was life like for you after graduation? What did you do?

BV: In the summertime, I was in my final year working as a playground supervisor. I had done that my whole four years that I was at Douglass. That was my final year doing that. I knew I would be going to Franklin Township to teach in the fall. Remember when we were talking about getting around in New Jersey? You try to catch a bus from Somerville to go to Franklin Township back in those days. You went all the way to Bound Brook. It was like a circuitous route. I finally wound up getting a car, a Volkswagen, because catching the bus was a long term situation. I'm not even kidding. It's not even easy to explain how many different ways you went to get to Franklin Township.

MG: How did you spend that summer after graduation?

BV: After graduation was the playground supervisor.

MG: How long did you do that for?

BV: Until the end of August, but I did that the four years, in the summertime, that I was at Douglass.

MG: What was your job that fall?

BV: Taught school in Franklin Township. That was the thing about the bus. Getting around on that bus was like, "Huh?"

MG: What grades were you teaching?

BV: High school. I taught Spanish I, Spanish II, and Spanish IV. Spanish I was beginners. Two would be the second year. Four would be an advanced class.

MG: Those years were also pretty tumultuous years in American history. It was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Were you witnessing or participating in that movement?

BV: You are so shrewd.

MG: You don't need to tell me your age, but I am curious about your impression and experience of the times.

BV: Well, there was a lot going on in the United States and in schools around the nation, all over the place. I remember many of the activities. Because I was always very friendly with the students--so no matter what kind of event, if it had anything to do with race relations--this was before I was a guidance counselor because I was teaching at Franklin High School. I was always asked to come to be a part of the meeting because I could talk to the students. I was good at that. They would listen. I could walk into an auditorium--well, half of them were scared of me anyway, because they all said I was evil. I was mean, but I was fair. Young people like fairness. So if I'm going to be mean, I better be mean to everybody. I was mean. But the students appreciated my consistency in being mean. I started out as a homeroom teacher for a seventh and eighth grade homeroom with one other teacher in the cafeteria, which was over two hundred kids in that homeroom. That was my first year, Franklin High School. If I was mean, I got meaner [inaudible]. I really got mean. But at any rate, that was a seventh through twelfth grade high school at the time, until they built the intermediate school. A lot of kids were there. A lot of heartache because some came Griggstown, some came from New Brunswick. It was one of those high schools. We had kids from Highland Park. They all had to come together into that brand-new high school in Franklin. It was one-year-old when I got there as a teacher. As time went on, and things got really complicated in this

nation, that whole era of race relations funneled its way into the schools obviously. People began to take sides. Remember now, media is coming up. Not social media like we know it nowadays, but they really had television. A lot of things were going on. Believe it or not, the year that they had the major riots in California, and all those things that were happening, I was in Mexico. I had won an NDEA grant. I wasn't there for a large part of the major events going on because I was there in Mexico for three months. In fact, they let me out early at the beginning of June, as part of this NDEA grant that I was involved in. Then, of course, I came back in the later part of August. I missed a lot of things that were going on, but I didn't miss it in spirit, because even being in Mexico you got the other end of it, but you got the news in Spanish-speaking newspapers. By my last year at Franklin Township High School, before I went to Somerville, there were a lot of problems and a lot of agitation going on because we were across the street from New Brunswick. Many of the students--what happened is that students wanted to come and march on whatever local high school. It was an unusual time. Of course, the loss of Martin Luther King, all of those tragic events, affected students going to high school at that time. Even when I left Franklin and went to Somerville, I was often pulled into meetings to help resolve some of the agitation. You have to know Somerville. When I went to Somerville to work, it was in the old building, which is now the middle school, because then they were going to be building the new high school. I can remember running after some students, with high heels on, all the way down Cliff Street in Somerville, which is on a hill going downward. I don't know how I did that. I don't even know. I can't even really wear the high heels anymore, and I don't know how I was running with them. But students were always a part of my heart. I was trying to avoid a confrontation that was going to go on at some site in Somerville--I won't mention. I was part of the underground. In other words, if students knew that something was going on, I always found out about it, and tried to help resolve it before it became a major issue. I don't care what the event was, Bernice knew about it. Sometimes, if I had the opportunity, I would try to stop it. It was not only for my years as either a guidance counselor or a Spanish teacher. Even when I became the middle school principal, if there was going to be a fight--this is not race relationships--but a fight between two boys or a fight between two girls, I'd find out about it. Young people love to fight in front of a crowd. People don't understand that. They want to fight where first, they know they're not going to get killed because there's going to be somebody that's going to pull them away, A, and B, there's an audience. Why are you going to fight in a back alley somewhere and there's nobody there but you two fighting? So high school, cafeteria. Elementary school, the playground. Somewhere where people are going to be there to be on your side or somebody else's side. But I always knew about these rumbles. The rumbles got bigger as the towns got bigger. I left there and went to, of course, Elizabeth; that's a city. Then I go to Irvington. That's another city. Then I go to Trenton. No matter where you go, I always knew. People used to ask me, "Well, how would you know?" I always knew these things. You're going to have a fight; you're going to do it in the cafeteria. Now you know. Those were the exciting moments. I took you right from being a teacher all the way to superintendent.

MG: Tell me more about what you were doing in Mexico.

BV: Studying Spanish. Because I was a Spanish teacher at Franklin HS, at the time, and I won an NDEA grant. So that's why.

MG: What was that experience like?

BV: Great. I [was] lived and studied, in Oaxaca, Mexico. That's the southern part, very close to Guatemala. It was a part of a grant I had. For that prior summer, 1964, I had studied at the Kalamazoo College, a grant that I had received from the University of Utah. That was where the grant was funded. Then of course, where I went for the program was Kalamazoo. Finished that program, and then the next year, I wound up in Mexico. [laughter]

MG: I have many more questions, but I am conscious of your time. Do you want to take a break for today or keep going?

BV: You will never get me back. So you better finish me now. [laughter]

MG: Okay. I know you went back to school in 1967 and earned your Master's Degree.

BV: Yes.

MG: Remind me where you went and what that experience was like for you?

BV: That was easy. That was Spanish here at Rutgers. That wasn't hard because remember now, I had already spent that time in Mexico. So my undergraduate degree, of course, was Spanish. My Master's was in Spanish. The greatest thing was--I tell people it was an oral exam, totally oral. That was the exam to get the Master's Degree in Spanish Language and Literature. People look at me like, "What?" Said, "Yes. It was totally oral." I had to answer questions, orally. There was a group of people around the table. I had to answer questions. It was anything that came to the professor's mind. Of course, they had their script, but it was Spanish Literature, Spanish History, whatever program I took. They knew my coursework. It was a recapitulation of a lot of that. That was great because when I walked out of there and found out that I had passed, you know I was walking on, I guess, cloud nine.

MG: Was it another "at last" feeling?

BV: Yes. My greatest "at last" feeling was my comprehensives that I took for my doctorate. That was it. [laughter] That was also at Rutgers. I had gotten a Master's in Guidance and Counseling, but the exam was written at Rider University. Now Rider University, but it was Rider College. That was for guidance and counseling.

MG: When you were attending Rutgers for graduate school, were there civil rights demonstrations or protests on campus?

BV: No. Not by the time I was here. A lot was going on, though. I can't even

remember exactly where I was, but I can tell you this, there was a lot going on more than here in Newark. Much more going on, a lot of the leadership came out of Newark. Students had more demonstrations. Then of course, it did trickle down to the New Brunswick campuses. Newark is the one I remember most of all, and getting the attention of the leadership at the time. There were people who went to school here during the latter part of the '60s, would be the ones who could really probably answer more because I was a student, but I wasn't an undergraduate. You always have to remember that the undergraduates are the ones who are going to be the leadership or serve as the leaders of something like that, more than the people who are like graduate students, because they may not be in the midst of it, but the undergraduates then during '63 to '68, '69, they are the ones who would be so much involved in what was going on.

MG: You had gotten married in the interim.

BV: Yes, I got married.

MG: How did you meet your husband?

BV: A friend of mine called--no, I take it back. I called my friend by mistake. I was calling another friend and they both had similar numbers, like 6-1-1 and the one had 6-1-2 or something. I called the wrong one. Turns to be the right one now, huh? I got into a conversation because you don't want to say, "Well, I called the wrong number." Then I asked her what was she was doing. She said, "I'm entertaining a young man." Long story made short, she said, "He's much younger than I, so you might want to meet him." I said, "Why would I want to meet him?" This was my one complete year that I had come back from Mexico, so I was quite a character then. I could care less about meeting any guy. I was so interested in my career. The point that I'm trying to make is that she said, "You should meet him." So I talked to him on the phone. He said, "Can I call you at some point?" When he told me his name I laughed because I thought it was such a stupid name, Venable. I wound up marrying this man. I'm going to make you fall off your chair and I'm not even going to say any more about it, but that was the end of November that year that I talked to him on the phone. We were married the end of January. So there. That's the end of the story.

MG: It sounds like an exciting romance.

BV: Very quick. [laughter] He proposed to me. We were driving down Easton Avenue. So he says, "You know, we should get married." I said, "So what? Let's get married." Something like that I said. He said, "Are you serious?" I said, [inaudible] He says, "Well, I'm not that exciting." I said, "Oh, yes you are." [laughter] He said, "Do you like to go out to dinner a lot?" I said, "No." So we got married.

MG: Well, it worked out.

BV: It worked. Because we've been married a number of years, and don't ask me how many. [laughter] That's the end of that story. Next.

MG: Why were you interested in earning a Master's Degree in the first place?

BV: Well, I wanted to get my Master's in Spanish because I wanted to continue in Spanish Literature. That was why I wanted to do that. I really enjoyed the courses here, etc. But that was the main reason. I definitely wanted to get my master's in Spanish. Then after that, I always had a penchant for young people. I was asked if I would be interested in going into guidance and counseling. I remember making it a point to say, "Do I have to do it full time?" They said, "Of course." I said, "Because I would like to teach, also." But you couldn't teach and be a guidance counselor at the same time--not during the time that I wanted to do it. So I said, "Well, all right. I'll try it." I took the courses at Rider and became a guidance counselor.

MG: How did you spend the years between earning your Master's Degree in '67--and I know you went to school again in '80s. How was your career unfolding in those years?

BV: I taught Spanish until 1968, at Franklin High School. Then, moved on to Somerville High School. While there, I took a group of 27 students to Spain (26 from Somerville, and 1 from Edison's JPS High School) This was a fantastic experience for us all. Our group was joined by a group of students from Bridgewater/Raritan High School. Some time, later, of course, I wound up being a guidance counselor and definitely enjoyed that. Then I became a career education coordinator for the district of Somerville. Then went on and became a middle school principle. I was there for eleven years.

MG: My father was a school psychologist in a public school and through what he has shared about that experience I get the impression that being a principal was difficult. You're dealing with students, their parents and teachers.

BV: I was at the Somerville Middle School, sixth to eighth grade. Very, very interesting to say the least. The negotiations, of course was, just like you said, from everything, from A to Z. I guess that's the reason why I can walk a room. I don't have to know a soul. I can walk up to the Pope and say something to him. That's the kind of person I am. I can get away with it. I was saying to someone the other day, "If I had been either in New York or in Washington or in Philadelphia, I would have been one of those people who walked right up to him, and they would not have stopped me." I can walk a room. Being a principal for that many years helped, but being a superintendent in two major districts in the state of New Jersey, there's nothing I can't do. I don't think I would scale Mount Everest, but I can do a lot of the other things in between, and it doesn't matter. I can say anything, speak to any crowd, and it doesn't matter how large or how small. The largest crowd I think I ever spoke [with] to was maybe between twenty-one, twenty-five hundred people, when I got an honorary doctorate, at the time, from Trenton State, which is the College of New Jersey now. I was the key note speaker. But nothing worries me, harms me, scares me. It just doesn't matter. I can remember, while serving as the Superintendent, in Irvington, I was trying to find out about a situation that was going on, on South Orange Avenue in Irvington, on the other side was Newark. I had my head out

the car trying to figure out what was going on. I was superintendent. I could hear the police with the bullhorn, "Lady, put your head back in the car," because there was a real mess going on. Gunfire, you name it. But that didn't scare me. Whenever there was a fight, I didn't hang up the phone and run in the other direction. If the high school principal called me, I was there. Nothing bothered me. In many of the urban communities, it's not always about a fight between blacks or whites, etc. Sometimes it's about what nation you came from. When I was in Irvington, there were kids who were from the Caribbean area, who were having concerns with kids from South Africa, if you know what I'm trying to say. So therefore, there was a different kind of a battle going on, rather than race relations. It was more what country. So, I understood that. A lot of folks don't understand it to this minute. So there are a lot of things going on in the world. You have to understand what the situation is in order to resolve it. You can't go there and say, "Well, you don't like black people," when the other person's black. What's the matter with you? But then they're not from the same country. I remember breaking up a fight and the guy was wielding a knife that looked like a butcher knife. "You put that knife down. You don't need to mess up your whole life." He put the knife down. [laughter] I don't care.

MG: Where do you think that attitude comes from?

BV: Where does it come from? Well, you spend eleven years as a principal, between Irvington and Trenton another eight or nine years as a superintendent, you can do anything. I can't fly a plane and I will not try to climb Mount Everest.

MG: They're off the bucket list.

BV: Yes. But what I do want to do before I get out of here--if you had any questions about why my blood is scarlet, you could ask me.

MG: Yes. I read that quote.

BV: Well, from some of the things that I've already said, and if you were to look at my past, especially while I've been here at Rutgers or Douglass or whatever the case may be, and after I graduated and got married, I have always remembered what I said to you at the very beginning. I'm walking on the shoulders of other people who came before me, people who gave and I didn't know who they were, who helped me. My feeling is that I have to do that for other people. Now, the other people are students who are currently at Rutgers or who may be coming to Rutgers. Over time, my husband and I, we've given to all kinds of different causes here at Rutgers. I'm proudest of the fact that we were able to give a little bit to the children of the parents who were killed in 9/11 because Rutgers had a big scholarship-funding program at the time for the children whose parents were killed or one of the parents was killed who happened to have been a Rutgers graduate. We were able to help fund some of that cause, among other causes. But the one that we feel very, very good about, of course, was the funding of one of the laboratories, one of the computer laboratories, the Hale Center--they've got two; one over there, one over there. We named that on behalf of Paul Robeson. That is probably the singular one. Of course,

we continue to give. We also have a special emphasis for the Graduate School of Education, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Chair--we're not related, but we have the same last name--[chair], for Douglass, and for the Scarlet R/RFund. Yes, we still give to help maintain that computer laboratory. Of course, the Cancer Institute, because my mother passed away with stomach cancer. So we still give to them and to--I've got so many--the Institute for Women's Leadership. I think that anyone who has finished college, whoever he or she happens to be, believe me, if it's a dollar, I think you should give it back. Why? Because no matter how much your mother and father paid for you to go to school, some of that funding came from tax dollars from the state of New Jersey. So if it's ten thousand dollars a year--of course, it's much more than that now. But if it's ten thousand dollars a year for tuition, there is other money that you would never ever know about that also was added to make sure it was just ten thousand dollars and not fifteen thousand. So I think that everyone--once they say, "Molly, here's your degree," then the next thing you should do is to write a check if it's a dollar and say, "I'm giving this back to the university." I mean that. I mean it. I say it and I walk it. I walk the talk. To this minute, that's the way I feel. I think that people should do that. Not everybody believes me. When you look at the statistics for our beloved university, and the amount of money that's given by the graduates, and the percentage, we are at the bottom. It's unfortunate. Because we don't get a lot of money from the state--meaning the university--and there's so many different things to provide monies for. There's the Honors College. There's the Global Village, all of these things, A to Z.

MG: I also wanted to ask you about is transitioning from working in education and administration to your printing business.

BV: Well, it was quite a transition. But not really quite a transition because you're still dealing with people. It's the public sector versus the private sector. It's a whole different world, the private sector. [laughter] You're going to laugh when I say this. Time is money. [laughter] I really mean that in the private sector. It was a different world. When I retired from Trenton, I had to go to school to become a print specialist and to get a Franchisee Certificate. I couldn't just do it because the AlphaGraphics franchise required that at the time. The whole thing is I still deal with people. I'm out on sales and marketing, etc. Did I just not say that? I can walk a room and work it. But that comes from my experience as having been in education.

MG: I think if you can handle middle schoolers, you can handle anybody.

BV: You've got that right. One piece that I did forget about altogether, and I don't know how I forgot about that because I lived it. When I was in Trenton, we started the year-round education program. I was so happy--knock on wood--that even after I left, it lasted for three years. That was the first program of its kind in the state of New Jersey. I was so proud having that as my legacy, because it took us three years to get it underway. Then of course, I left and retired, but they did keep the program for three years after I was gone. So there were three schools, three elementary schools that the students went to school all year.

MG: You have retired from education and administration, but are you still finding ways to advocate for public education?

BV: That's an excellent question because I still, to this day--I'm on Twitter quite a bit. In fact, somebody asked me one time, how come I know so much about education. They didn't know what I was; they thought I was only in business. But yes, every now and then, if it's a cause that's going to help young people, I'm involved in it. Whether it's volunteering, etc., yes. I never will get out of being the educator at all, I don't think.

MG: Is there anything I'm missing or anything else you want to add to the record.

BV: I think you covered it. You're good.

MG: I have a million more questions.

BV: Give me one of the million. I must leave here at five-thirty and it's ten after five. You got ten more minutes of my time.

MG: Can you tell me more about the families you worked with while you were a school principal? Looking back, what stands out to you?

BV: What stands out are the redheaded children because they were always the ones that people knew because--and I'll give you an example. There was this marvelous looking kid in the sixth grade, who had freckles and red hair. He decided one day to play hooky and to go to Main Street in Somerville. I'm the principal at the middle school now. I will always remember this because when I was called by the local police department, they said, "They think they have a young man walking down the street. It looks like he should be in school." I knew who he was. [laughter] That was so much fun. Then he had the nerve to ask my vice principal at the time, "How did you know?" "What do you mean? Look in the mirror, child. How many of you look like this in this school? Look around." To this day, I can tell a real redheaded person. Not one that is made up redheaded. I'm talking real redhead. That was always fun for me. No matter what. Another nice experience was when I was teaching, I had a young lady who was blind in my Spanish class. She was so bright. It was just amazing how she caught on so much quicker than a lot of the other students. That was another singular experience that I had working with her for two years, because she was in my Spanish III and then my Spanish IV class. She was just wonderful.

MG: I also wanted to ask you about your role in the Abbott v. Burke case.

BV: Major role. I guess I must have testified more than sixty times during that time.

MG: Can you tell me what the case was about?

BV: The case was about five urban districts in the state of New Jersey seeking to receive monies to bring them up to par with the suburban communities. The issue was not so

much can it be done; can enough money be funneled into the urban districts. It was the will to do it. Because there's always going to be money if there's a will and a way. Ms. Morheuser, who was the person behind all of this, and the Law Center in Newark, worked feverishly to get the then legislature to understand how important it was to erase this discrepancy, urban versus suburban districts. That case lasted for so long. As a matter of fact, you still have what they call the Abbott districts. New Brunswick is one of them. Much of the monies come from the state of New Jersey. The whole thing is the tax base. You're going to get more tax dollars in the suburban communities, but less in the urban communities because they're penniless at that time, or they didn't have the jobs where they had the land because everything has to do with land. Land is where the money is because you tax the land property, the tax base and the whole thing. I still have a lot of my testimonies. I still have a lot of them.

MG: What were you testifying--?

BV: Testifying on behalf of the Abbott districts at the time and still are. It was not easy. I recall having to give a testimony and I had to write it real fast and get it done because you always had to give the copies to them, too. Then I had to jump in my car and go all the way to Trenton because I wasn't working in Trenton at that time. It was only in the later years. But that was hard. That was hard. That was not an easy situation. Marilyn Morheuser, I have a photo of her in my house. She was on the cover of a magazine. She's standing there. She was so articulate. She was the kind of person that she walked into a room, everybody got quiet, much like the Pope. One of the greatest advocates for impoverishment, trying to eradicate it. It was quite an experience. How did you know I knew about that?

MG: It was in some of the paperwork you sent me or my research.

BV: That's a warm part of my heart.

MG: Good. Well, you have been so generous with your time. I have really enjoyed talking to you. I am so glad you took the time to meet with me.

BV: You have my card. If you ever need any printing services--I'm a sales person.

MG: All right. I will give you a call.

BV: [laughter] In fact, I came from a symposium. I said, "I'm going to give this to Molly." Molly gets this because I had to bring five. I had an extra one. This is all about AlphaGraphics.

MG: I can't wait to--

BV: You just can't wait. You get an A or a B or a C. But I enjoy talking with you.

MG: Me too.

BV: You never know. If you have to call me or if you have to email me, do that. This is about the fourth time I've been interviewed by somebody at Rutgers and also the Cancer Institute. You're the biggest fun of all.

MG: Good. Thank you so much.

BV: Call me or email me if I have to answer a question. But you're going to send me something anyway, right?

MG: Yes. We will send you a CD copy of your interview and a transcript.

BV: Then I'm supposed to review it?

MG: Yes.

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Reviewed by Bernice Venable 11/14/2016