I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Linda J. Harris

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Linda J. Harris conducted by Renée Watson on March 25, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Narrator: Linda J. Harris	Location: Portland, OR
Interviewer: Renée Watson	Date: March 25, 2023

Harris: Okay. My parents are Lavada Jean Land [*phonetic*] and Bernard Navarro Harris [*phonetic*]. They were married, I was born, and they divorced when I was two years old. They met in Tyler, Texas at Texas College, and my mother went on to earn her degree. My father did not. My mother later taught elementary school at Holy Redeemers Catholic School here in Portland, Oregon.

I used to see my father because we lived in the same town. I used to see him at least five days out of the week. He would drive through, blow the horn. I'd be playing softball on Dogan Junior High School softball field and I'd run and run and he would stop and give me my lunch money. And like I said, that was maybe five times a week. I think he just wanted to check in to see how I was doing. So, we lived in the north side of Tyler. He lived in the east end. But we're talking about the segregated South, so the neighborhoods were totally segregated, and the only time that I would see white people would be when I would walk down to his house. I would have to go through downtown, and I would see white people.

In our neighborhood, there were Black businesses. We had churches, a pharmacy, movie theaters, fast food restaurants, and a bowling alley, so it was very comfortable living within this little enclave of "colored folk." So that's a little about my neighborhood. I was very happy. I

was surrounded by a lot of people who knew my family, who loved us and embraced us as family. And I mentioned that my mother was a teacher, and so were her sisters, and so one of my aunts, Cleo Greene, taught first grade at T. J. Austin Elementary School. *phonetic*], and Velma Grays[*phonetic*] was a chemistry teacher who was once a nurse, but she became a high School chemistry teacher. Aunt Lois Sayles was a librarian. She was one of the first Black librarians in the state of Washington, and there was a book written about her and my sister Yvonne Williams [*phonetic*], who also was a librarian at Portland Community College.

But they all worked within the school district in Tyler, and when the schools were "desegregated," they were selected and assigned to white schools, and ultimately our Black high school, Emmett School, closed.

Q: So did you go to a segregated school or desegregated school?

Harris: I did attend segregated schools. When I came to Portland when I was in the eighth grade, I attended Highland, which became Martin Luther King School. Then when I went back to segregated schools in Tyler, came back to Portland when I was sixteen, enrolled in Jefferson High School, and graduated from Jefferson, and I've been here ever since.

One thing that happened at Jefferson in reflection is that I was in the classroom with very few other Blacks, maybe two or three Blacks. I was in one class with the valedictorian, and that was interesting to me. But one of my favorite classes, of course, was sociology. I really enjoyed my sociology class.

Q: Can you take me back to your beginning? I'm so curious about what brought your family from Texas to Oregon.

Harris: Okay. My Aunt Lois [*phonetic*] divorced her husband. She was a teacher at that time, and she divorced her husband, and I guess she wanted to just leave the state, and so she came to Portland. After her. move, other family members started following her because she would describe her experiences, and she was doing so well. First, my middle sister came out, and then my older sister arrived, then later her husband came. So, we all just ended up here.

Q: How old were you when you first moved to Portland?

Harris: Twelve.

Q: Twelve. How did you feel? Do you remember moving? Were you sad or excited or nervous?

Harris: Well, on the trip here, okay, my Uncle Walter Sayles [*phonetic*] worked for the Union Pacific Railroad, and at that time, a lot of Black men were porters and worked on the railroad. My uncle also, I don't know if he had his real estate license at that time, but he was a realtor. He also was a plumber because you know how things were for Black men, acquiring jobs based on what they had degrees and licenses in, so to speak. So at any rate, he had friends at Union Pacific Railroad, and so Mr. Russell—Bill Russell [*phonetic*]—really took care of me. I ate three

meals each day, and just he watched over me. So, the train rides on the Union Pacific and later the Portland Rose, were very positive experiences for me.

So when I came to Portland, with the schools, I would say I wasn't really, let me see—I made friends. I made friends. At certain times in my life, I guess I've been shy, but at that time I really made friends, and have friends to this day that I met during that time at Highland—well, Martin Luther King. I was in a classroom with a Native American student, Michael and with Ragnar [*phonetic*]—a Scandinavian student and so it was really an interesting experience being exposed to various ethnic groups.

But I had no problems relating with those students. I was not raised that way. Even though I came from the South, my mother and her sisters never spoke of having ill will toward anybody, so I was very open to meeting new people and associating with them. And the fact that we lived just by the freeway, so when I would leave Jefferson High School later—we lived over close to I-5 and Interstate. So when I walked home, I would be the only Black person walking home that way. I don't remember the girl's name. She was tall like I was, and we'd take the same route home each day. But like I said, I felt very comfortable in my associations with other people—other white people.

Q: Yes, you can say white people. [*Laughter*]

Harris: Okay.

Q: What kind of student were you? What were your interests? And when you thought about your future self, what were some of your dreams?

Harris: It's very interesting. I talked about my Aunt Velma who was a chemistry teacher. Her daughter, Harovel, lived in the house next door to me, was the valedictorian and Rhodes Scholar. I did not study hard. Maybe sometimes. Whatever. But when I entered college, I really studied. I guess maybe toward the end of my senior year in high school, when one of my counselors was talking to my aunt, I kind of got busy. I mean, I really became more serious about studying, and I've studied ever since. I mean, I've just been a student ever since that time.

But early on, first I wanted to be a nun, and then my mother said, "No, you have to be really strong to be a nun," and all that. [*Laughs*] Then I wanted to be a veterinarian and dispelled that. When I was in college, I became intrigued with cultural anthropology, so I wanted to be an anthropologist, and my aunt said, "Well, Linda, the only job you can hold as an anthropologist is a zookeeper," and I thought, "Okay." So, I majored in education, and I'm glad I did—really super glad. It was a good choice for me. And, of course, all my aunts were happy because they were all educators.

Q: What did you go on to teach?

Harris: I went on to teach sixth grade language arts. When I was in Marylhurst College, there were Sisters of the Holy Name, and we had lay teachers from Reed College, and I remember one of my favorite classes was world literature, and it was wonderful. I remember Miss Jenny

[*phonetic*]—I don't remember her last name—but it was just a whole new world for me, literature and theology. I just really had a great experience with books and learning.

So I'm glad that I majored in language arts. I was really headed in that direction. I always enjoyed poetry. I wrote poetry for a while when I had time. I don't make time for it anymore.

Q: Did your family attend church when you were younger?

Harris: We did attend church. We were Methodists. Like I said, I wanted to be a nun. We did attend Methodist church, and my sister had very vivid memories about our time there and Sunday School. I have fewer memories of that. When I came to Portland, I was baptized Catholic. I attended a Catholic college, and in recent years, I have attended a Church of God church, and I now am an Executive Assistant to the pastor.

Q: When did your faith become real to you and more than something you were doing with your family?

Harris: In latter years. I mean, I've looked over my bookshelf, at various versions of the Bible and all the Bible studies. But I think just in recent years it's become real to me when I've had to really sit back and maybe engage in devotionals in the morning, in the evening, and really watch how I approach people, watch how I speak, watch how I live my life. I would say I have done that more so in recent years, but I've always been a believer, yes. And so now a few of my special friends are my faith buddies.

Q: You mentioned a while ago that your family moved here when you were twelve, and then I know you left and went back to Texas and then came back to Oregon. Can you talk about that? What made you leave and come back?

Harris: Okay. We left Portland after the Columbus Day storm [October 12, 1962], and my mother did not want to deal with the inclement weather and extreme weather. In Texas at that time, it was more seasonal, and so that was the driving force. The fact that there were no lights and we were in the basement with lanterns and all of that—that whole scenario. But I would say that leaving my junior year was difficult because I really enjoyed school. I enjoyed Emmett J. Scott High School and had lots of friends. I missed being in the yearbook, all of that. And so I have been able to go back for school reunions—I've done that—but it was difficult leaving, yes.

Q: Can you talk about the Columbus Day storm?

Harris: It was hard. I mean, it was just like a hurricane. It was really bad. Trees were uprooted. It was just like a tornado had occurred. But it was a severe storm, and like I said, I remember being down in the basement, moving down there and not being upstairs at all, just having your kerosene lanterns turned on in the basement and eating on hot plates. And so my mother just couldn't get beyond that part of living in Portland.

Q: And when you went back to Texas, well, how did you find your people there, like friends? How did you adjust to moving once again? Were you able to pick up where you left off?

Harris: I was just going to use that phrase. I picked up where I left off because I had lots of good friends in the neighborhood, just generational, intergenerational friendships with families. It was great.

Q: And your dad was still there?

Harris: My dad was still there, trying to make me feel guilty for moving out here [*laughs*] because he would always say to me that if my mother had stayed with him, what they would have now, and so forth. So, he regretted the marriage ending, and so he was glad to have me home. My grandfather, his father Isaac, had died when I was ten, and I was very close to him, and my father lived with his mother, Mary. I was closer to her than I was to my maternal grandmother, Lida Henderson [*phonetic*].

Q: What made you so close to her?

Harris: Well, one of the things was I used to sleep with her when I would visit my father, so we would sleep together, and she would just talk to me. But she would also spank me too. I remember the time when I think we were playing hide-and-go-seek or something, the neighborhood kids, and so she said, "Linda, Linda, baby." She'd always put the baby when she really wanted to be kind, so I kept playing, kept playing. And before I knew it, she had grabbed me from behind. Nobody warned me that she was sneaking up on me. [*Laughs*] Famous friends that I had. But yes, she would spank me. She felt I wasn't giving her attention or whatever.

But she was a good person, and I just really missed her and my other grandmother when they passed. I remember my grandfather. There was a garden next to their house, and I was walking with a group of friends. Maybe I attended some event with them, and somehow or another, I spoke when I shouldn't have, and this boy was going to hit me and fight me, whatever, and my grandfather dropped his hoe and came out and rescued me. But I used to ride on his back all the time, get these back rides that my father never would do. My father wasn't demonstrative like that. He just wasn't. I knew he cared, but he never demonstrated in any way that he did. I knew he loved me. Yes.

Q: When did you move back to Portland and why? How old were you when you moved back?

Harris: I was sixteen when we moved back, and I, like I said, enrolled in Jefferson. It was because Jefferson was really in walking distance of my house. If I had stayed in Texas, I think I probably would've attended Xavier College in New Orleans. So I wanted to attend Saint Mary's Academy up here, but my aunt was just like, "Okay, it's in walking distance, so there you are. It's convenient."

Q: So you moved back to Portland because you wanted to finish high school in Portland? What brought you back? What was the reason for you—

Harris: It was my mother's choice.

Q: Okay. And she came with you?

Harris: It was my mother's choice to move back, right, because when she left during the Columbus Day storm, I stayed here. Was that October? I stayed here and finished eighth grade, but she wanted to get out of Portland. But when we came back, it was her choice to come back, and I think at that time is when she started working at Holy Redeemer. So she probably also saw it as a way of maybe earning more money.

Of course, that was always what I wanted to do in getting out of Texas. I saw that early on, there were few benefits there for Black people, and I remember once I worked with my mother and I cleaned a white lady's house. I thought, "No, this is not something I want to do. I will never do this." And there were no jobs for Black people my age, like high school kids. You know how you're fifteen, you get your work permit, you want to work. But as soon as I moved to Portland, I got my first job at the Pioneer Court House. That may have been my second job. I think the first one was working at a bakery over on Prescott and 12th Street, which is now a house. But I remember that, and then the Pioneer Court House. I worked there that first summer in 1966.

Then during the years I was in college, every summer I worked at the Pacific Northwest Bail Telephone Company, and I remember Angie Davis [*phonetic*] came to Jefferson High School. I think she must've worked in personnel. She interviewed us, and I remember at that time, they were saying that at the phone company, good attendance was very important. So she interviewed me, found out that I did have good attendance and I was hired, and like I said, every summer I didn't have to look for a job. I had a job at Pacific Northwest Bail.

Q: What was that community like in Portland? If you were to think back on those days, those years, what was Black Portland like?

Harris: Well, let me see. Those years that I was in high school, I would say that my neighborhood was not very diverse. There weren't very many Black people that lived by I-5, almost the Interstate. You pretty much stayed to yourself. The Blacks stayed to themselves. Even though you were integrated in public areas—public spaces—in terms of close friendships, you still were segregated, pretty much, and that was the case at church, businesses, or whatever.

Q: What did you do for fun?

Harris: What did I do for fun? As I see it, I was kind of shy, more of an introvert, so I spent a lot of time—I would read, but I would also watch *Perry Mason.* I would be invited to parties and I wouldn't even go. But I think a couple of times, I did attend a few parties with my girlfriends, but not many. I was not very social that way.

Q: Do you remember any of your favorite teachers from Jefferson High School?

Harris: I remember Mr. Olkey [*phonetic*] from sociology because that was like a whole new way of looking at society and the social issues of our times. Mr. Olkey for sociology, and I had a really good stenographer teacher. I can't remember her name. I had a very good western civ teacher, Mr. Jeppesen, Mr. Renny [*phonetic*] for literature. I remember reading *Brave New*

World. But just maybe three or four good teachers, but you know how it is with your good teachers. You never forget them because they discover your gifts and make you aware of them, and so I've never forgotten teachers like that, or they help you along the way if you're having problems.

Q: What was going on? What was the backdrop of the world at this time? When you're in high school, what was on the news, and were you paying attention to other social issues?

Harris: Well, even before high school, I remember back in 1962 when I was in my middle school math class, my math teacher turned on the radio and President [John F.] Kennedy had been assassinated [November 22, 1963], and he said, "Of all places he has visited, he comes to Texas and they assassinate him," or whatever. But I remember that.

Q: How did you feel?

Harris: Oh my gosh, it was just a horrible feeling. I mean, all of us, we couldn't believe it, we just couldn't, because we really loved him so much, really appreciated what he was doing, and it was awful, yes. My teacher was so sad too. And then later when I was in high school, of course, we had the Civil Rights period, the marches with Martin Luther King, and with that backdrop, I know a lot of people whose awareness was heightened about injustice and all the Civil Rights and so forth. So I distinctly remember that piece, and a lot of the protests about that time, and a lot of the songs of protest.

Is that when Marvin Gaye wrote "What's Going On"? No, that was later about Vietnam, But I know Nikki Giovanni was doing a lot of writing during that time about the world and injustice. And then there was the song, Abraham, Martin and John about assassinations.

Q: Do you remember finding out about Martin Luther King and the assassination? Where were you?

Harris: I was trying to figure out where I was. [*Pause*] It's not as vivid to me. I'll probably remember it after I get off the call. It wasn't as vivid to me. I may have just been home and saw it on the news. I think that's what it was because I was just riveted to the spot. I could not believe it. It hurt so bad, and I couldn't believe that it happened. It was just unreal. It was kind of a surreal moment. But I think that's how I found out, on the news, and I was home. I'm pretty sure that's what it was. But yes, I wasn't in school or anything.

Q: Do you remember how you were feeling as far as being hopeful or hopeless? When you look back on those days and the days that followed, how were you able to keep going? And what were people saying? Especially I'm curious of what adults were saying to young people. Do you remember having any conversations about it? Or was it like adults were talking about it amongst themselves and not engaging young people?

Harris: About the assassination of Dr. King?

Q: Yes, about all of it—the Civil Rights Movement, about the assassinations.

Harris: About all of it? Well, I'll tell you from a personal standpoint, the way it impacted me is that I shut down in terms of wanting to be engaged in any kind of politics or whatever. I just felt hopeless at that point, that now—especially with Dr. King, this nonviolent man who lived his life in service for other people, would be gunned down like that for what he stood for. Then when I found out how the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] had tracked him and basically surveilled him. I mean, all that mistreatment of him. I didn't want to become involved in politics at all, and before then, I was fairly engaged, and I would follow the marches and all that. But I just shut down.

I think that the adults in my life basically just were wondering, "Where do we go from here?" It was just like a moment, a pivot where they were saying, "We've lost some of our best leaders, and who's going to be our voice in moving forward and carrying on some of the same ideals? And who's going to fight for justice and our basic rights?" So that's what I was hearing in my home, just a lot of sadness, yes. A lot of sadness.

Q: Was there a turning point or any memory of when things started to change, when you started to feel hopeful again?

Harris: When President [Barack] Obama was elected president. [*Laughs*] It took me that long, yes.

Q: Tell me about that. How did that feel, given everything that you had witnessed?

Harris: I felt that this was a time when America would have a chance for us to have a leader for all people. I felt that a lot of the wrongs that had been done to people of color, other people in general, was going to try to be made right and we would be steered on a course that would be righteous for all. However, in my naivety, I did not realize the power behind the Republican party, how they stick together, how Mitch McConnell vowed that President Obama, would have only one term in office—which he did not. But just that working against him and everything he tried to do that would help all was undermined. There were barriers that I didn't realize he was going to have to go through. So like I said, I was naïve. But that was just the way of the world, I guess.

Q: I want to go back to your college days. I know that you've mentioned that you loved learning, and that by the time you were in college, you were really more of a focused student. Can you talk about college and what that was like for you? Maybe what you were studying, who were you friends were. What were some of the things you did?

Harris: Okay. When I was at Marylhurst, an all-girls Catholic college, and I befriended—oh gosh! I was very good friends with April who was from Springfield, Oregon, but later moved to Haines, Alaska, and she became mayor. There was also Cherry [*phonetic*] from Denver. So those were two of my best friends there at the college.

So I was involved and I played volleyball. Cherry and April didn't play volleyball. But courses were very rigorous, and you couldn't skip class because students who did, discovered that the

nuns would be on their tiptoes during the noon hour, looking over the line to see if you were there. [*Laughs*] So there was no getting around not going to class. And the classes were small, so you really felt as though the teachers had time to listen to you, and you had that engagement. There were seminars also which were small. I mentioned that we had the Palatine Hill nuns from Lewis & Clark College as well as lay people from Reed College teach as well as a few men as instructors. I remember Mr. Maylan [*phonetic*] was my Cultural Anthropology teacher.

So I really enjoyed learning. I enjoyed philosophy. I thought, "This is the best." For a moment, I wanted to major in philosophy, but that was like, "No, you can't do that." But I really enjoyed learning about philosophy, anthropology, theology, and literature. Those were my favorites courses for sure. And the girls, one of the best things I really remember about Marylhurst would be that we would get in the van and drive to the Boni Lynn, which was the local hamburger restaurant down the highway. We had the best fun. But that was one of my favorite memories of the school, going down to the Boni Lynn.

During that time, I worked in the library, and my job was to write call number of the spine of books. I would do that with a stylus. I enjoyed that part too.

Q: What was your first job out of college?

Harris: My first job?

Q: Out of college.

Harris: My first job out of college was as a teacher. I was hired to teach sixth grade at Vernon School, but Portland Public Schools moved that class to Whitaker Middle School, so I ended up at Whitaker.

Q: What? You know I went to Vernon, so my heart—

Harris: Who was principal then?

Q: Let me see. Dr. Gettis [*phonetic*] was the principal then.

Harris: Of course.

Q: Yes.

Harris: Of course.

Q: Then I think she might have left before I graduated, but she definitely was there the younger years.

Harris: Betsy Gettis [*phonetic*], I knew her well. Yes, I knew all those principals up there.

Q: So what was teaching like? You get your first big teaching job. You're responsible for all these young people. How did that feel?

Harris: Oh my gosh, teaching. Okay. I mentioned Whitaker. So at Whitaker, there was this classroom. Now, I think there were three sections of sixth grades. There was a long room without walls where we were to teach all ninety students—thirty, sixty, ninety kids. So you get up to the microphone, and I would look out in this vast array of kids, and I thought, "We're losing these kids. We're losing so many." So I went to the principal and asked him if I could—(I named specifically the children that I could take out of that classroom) move these students and create another sixth grade section and he allowed me to do that. Later, I earned the Whitaker Warrior Teaching Award.

But at any rate, I just felt that we were doing the children a disservice. They weren't learning at the rate and pace they should have been learning and so by forming this smaller classroom, we had a great, successful school year. Yes, I took them out, and it was another section of the building. It wasn't one of those little portables.

Q: Portable?

Harris: It wasn't a portable, no. It was a smaller building. I think there may have been two classrooms out there. But we had a great year, and I was so glad that I made that decision, and I had parents thank me for doing that too.

Q: How long were you at Whitaker?

Harris: I think I was at Whitaker for maybe five years, and then I became what they call a Title VII Advisory Specialist. At that time, Portland Public Schools was divided into three Areas, and I worked in the Area 2 Superintendent's office, and I would work with bus supervisors. These were people who were assigned to ride the bus with kids who were being bused out to schools, so I would meet with bus supervisors, hear their concerns, share information with them, and we would work on professional development for teachers as well. I did that maybe another five, six years, and after that I became—oh, I don't want to stop your question.

Q: Can we talk about busing? I would love to know if you could just go into the history of that within Portland public schools. Why did it occur? What was the system in place and your role? I've never heard anyone mention that there was professional development for those teachers and staff working with students who were being bused over to the other side of town, so I would love to know more about all of that.

Harris: Okay. So what we had in Portland Public Schools, during that time the superintendent was Matthew Prophet, and we just recently named the Education Service Center after Dr. Prophet in his honor. And his Assistant Superintendent was Ernest Hartzog. Dr. Hartzog supervised the Title VII Advisory Specialists, and the name of the department was the Staff Development and Community Relations Department. And yes, that was our responsibility, and we would meet and plan all of those activities for teachers and staff.

So there was a comprehensive desegregation plan signed off by Dr. Prophet and the board in 1980, and strategically located around the city, we had sending and receiving schools. The problem was that with some of the receiving schools—let's take Woodlawn. You would receive children from southwest Portland, the southwest section of town across the river. The problem was those children would come for prekindergarten and they wouldn't stay for kindergarten. For kindergarten, they would attend their neighborhood school. So they were reaping the "benefits" of pre-kindergarten and some of them had all day sessions. They wouldn't have to worry about their children being not supervised, whatever. They were learning. Prekindergarten curriculum was rich. But parents were not committed for the long haul. They weren't committed to keeping their kids at that school, say, till the fifth grade. So that was problematic for receiving schools.

But along with sending and receiving schools you had the Desegregation Monitoring Advisory Committee—DMAC—and that was led by Ronald Herndon and Haleem Rasan [*phonetic*], and this gets to the time when Ron Herndon jumped up on a desk during a school board meeting. DMAC was trying to have Tubman Middle School built, and they believed that the school district was not concerned that we were busing Black students all over the city because Black students did not have a middle school in their neighborhood. And so that's how we got Tubman.

The problem with Tubman now is that it was built on a partial landfill. The windows can't be opened. So post COVID-19, they can't open the windows because the windows are sealed and they are trying to keep the traffic sounds out from the freeway. So there is a problem. I believe that the next issue will be trying to relocate Tubman. But that came out of the desegregation era too.

So after that time, yes, staff development was huge. We had the McPherson Plan [*phonetic*] to foster interracial understanding. We worked with administrators and staffs in trying to have people understand how to treat kids who were bused into their schools, and people would listen, but then they'd close the door and it was back to business as usual. We also spent thousands of dollars on the Baseline Essays, for African-American Baseline Essays, Native American Baseline Essays, Asian-American Baseline Essays. The Baseline Essays were rich body of work. We had experts coming through here. We had Asa Hilliard [III], just all these folks. But the essays were getting dusty on the shelves. We didn't have full usage of people really appreciating the body of work and how rich the learning could be for children to hear about their past, so that was part of that desegregation piece too.

The desegregation plan was de facto desegregation, done by the board. It wasn't de jure or by jury or law. The plan was written because the Prophet administration believed that it was he right thing to do for students and the board agreed.

Q: What was it like for you as a Black woman taking the lead of this, being one of the leaders of this? Did you face any opposition from principals or other educators who didn't want Black kids coming into their schools or communities?

Harris: No, I didn't feel any opposition. I mean, I actually had a guy, Tom Parr, who was the principal of—what was that school? Eighty-second and Division that's now renamed.

Q: Binnsmead Middle School.

Harris: Yes, it was Binnsmead. Did you attend Binnsmead?

Q: Yes, I was bused over to that school.

Harris: Look at this. They actually gave me a rose because the way I helped resolve an issue with a family.

Q: Wow.

Harris: No, I didn't have any [*unclear*]. It was like, "Come on in. You want to help us? Thank you very much." Binnsmead yes. Binnsmead Middle School, I remember that. Binnsmead has been renamed, Harrison Park School.

Q: In your memory, not just Binnsmead but schools in general except in Portland northwest, what were some of the concerns? What were you having to help them with? What was the challenge of having Black students coming over?

Harris: I think one of the basic challenges was relating to Black students' behaviors, learning to deal with them as students, realizing that they were highly capable. What I used to tell my teachers when I was principal was, "What's good for talented and gifted kids is good for all kids." Just like you have these high expectations for these children. So I think one of the biggest

concerns is when parents would not feel invited into the school, invited and appreciated, and their kids have value and all that. So it was that piece. Yes, the biggest concern was feeling appreciated, and staff wanted help with children's behaviors. But we were concerned, too, about their treatment of students, and like I said, you have high expectations—if the curriculum is appropriate and all that.

But we're still having some of those same issues. They haven't gone away. And some of this, leadership in the schools as well, with principals, with teachers, because as you know, you set the bar. You have to have high standards as a principal for what you want, what you expect from your staff, and you have to be in the same court with that. Did that answer your question?

Q: Yes, absolutely.

Harris: Okay.

Q: So after you did this work, did you stay in education and do another role?

Harris: Yes. Well, let's see. After I worked as a Title VII Advisory Specialist, with Ernie Hartzog supervising Dr. Prophet as superintendent, I became an assistant principal at Boise-Eliot School, and that was very interesting because my sister , Lydia Roy, was the Title I Reading Specialist at the school, so I couldn't evaluate her. But it was really great, being able to work with her. So I worked at Boise-Eliot, and during those years, too, I also worked as a summer school principal, so I received lots of experience that way.

Then later, I became a director of district intervention, and that was a job that they just created. And then after that, the superintendent at that time was Ben Canada. He came to see me and asked if I wanted to be assistant superintendent for elementary schools' accountability, and I asked if he could give me a while to think about it. He gave me the weekend, and my aunt said, "Well, Linda, you can't say no." So I didn't say no. [*Laughter*] So I became assistant superintendent, which meant I had to go—I had my master's and all, but I had to go back to Lewis & Clark [College] to get my superintendent's license, so I was in class with the superintendent from Beaverton. She's teaching and all. So it was a great experience, though.

Q: I want to talk about being superintendent, but I want to go back first to when you were assistant principal and what that was like to transition from teaching and maybe being a little more hands-on with young people to now being in this role of administration. What was that like? And what were some of the challenges? And did you have any successes or moments when you look back on that time that you're very proud of?

Harris: Oh boy. Okay, the first time, let's see. I think as assistant principal, you are the assistant, so I was hired primarily to work with discipline. And you really can't run the school because the principal's running the school, so I had to sit back, look at exactly what I was allowed to do, and it's like, "Okay, I can't do that even though I have this idea, because somebody else runs this school." So I would say that—boy, that takes me back a long way—but I remember one of the best things I enjoyed about it was really getting to know children, getting to listen to them and hear their point of view—their perspectives—and to also realize that there's no, as they say,

cookie cutter approach. Kids are different and you just have to use your best thinking, sound judgment and fairness, and they know when you're fair. Some kids have a real strong sense of justice, and so I was very much aware of that.

But I would say, yes, those were the years when—I don't know—I guess the main thing was just listening to children and really appreciating them as little human beings, understanding their developmental levels, that sometimes they didn't even understand why they'd done what they had done, and when you get them in the office, the two of them had forgotten why they started fighting. [*Laughs*] So I had fun with them, really, yes.

Q: Do you remember what years you were doing this work as assistant principal?

Harris: Assistant principal positions? Let's see. Probably 1986 to—no, I take that back. Okay, I was at Boise-Eliot and before that I was assigned to Whitaker Middle School. [*Pauses*] Probably 1983 to 1988.

Q: What was going on in the city of Portland in the Black community at that time? What was the backdrop, the climate of Portland, while you were assistant principal at Boise?

Harris: Well, that was definitely the desegregation years. I can remember there were at least twelve buses that would arrive at Boise-Eliot. We were getting kids from all over the North East Corridor, just lots of kids from Laurelhurst. So we were getting kids from throughout the city, and we had a large school as well. But yes, deseg was huge.

Q: What was the neighborhood of Boise like?

Harris: During that time, that was prior to gentrification, so we had lots of Black families, but like I said, we had all the white kids being bused in. But yes, but the neighborhood essentially was a little mixed, but a lot of Black families still residing in the neighborhood.

Q: So you get this invitation to then become superintendent years later, and you said you had to say yes. Was there any hesitation? And if so, what was that hesitation? Why would you have said no?

Harris: There was huge hesitation. Number one, I had gone from being a principal to the Director of District Intervention, which I had just formulated all this body of work around that job. And then in December, to be asked to become superintendent is like, "What?" You have to go back.

But I really saw the bureaucratic piece of this looming large. I mean, a lot of negativities around that piece. And one of my friends, who has since died—her name was Chris Pool-Jones [*phonetic*]—she said, "Linda, when you became assistant superintendent, you had rose-colored glasses on. You saw the world that way, and it was like, boom." But I think it was just realizing the gravity of that position, of how many people I would have to supervise, and really after I got into it, and from day one—before day one—the problems that I encountered that I had nothing to do with, external to me. But there were some people who wanted my job. Yes, I'll just say that.

So that created for me, well, some trepidation even getting into there, but also just wanting to start the job and do one of excellence, which is what I was always prideful in doing, but having those forces working against you, because when I was principal, so much good had happened during the ten years that I was at Woodlawn that I was very proud of.

Q: How do you deal with that animosity, jealousy, competition? How did you stand firm and keep focused on what you were tasked?

Harris: I think focus is a key word. But one of the things that I did, number one, was I had some prayer warriors. I actually had a lady come. One of my good friends came and she anointed me. We prayed. I had lots of people praying for me, praying for me to do well, and I prayed as well, and I was focused. I was focused on what I had to do, the job I had to do, and I was going to do it well.

There was a performance report that the district had paid for and I read that performance report, saw where the gaps were, read the recommendations, and I just went down like a checklist. "Okay, this is what they said we didn't do, we should do. Well, this is what I'm going to focus on." And I just kind of laser focused on those areas, and that's what kept me on the steady path. Yes.

Q: What are you proud of about being in that position?

Harris: Of the assistant superintendent? I guess that I can be prideful of the goals I had at that time that did come to fruition. I can't remember all of them. I remember some disappointments. I think that one of the things that I'm proud of is the fact that Math Every Day Counts was a math curriculum that has some traction and to this day is used by many districts across the country, and it was co-authored by Jan Gillespie, who was a math teacher on my staff at Woodlawn. So I would say that in my three years as assistant superintendent, I have less things than I remember to be prideful of than when I was principal.

Now, when I was principal at Woodlawn, we rocked, okay?

Q: Tell me about that.

Harris: We had awards. Our kids felt good about themselves. You would ask them, "What's your favorite subject?" And they'd say, "Math." And the math teachers would ask them questions. They'd do mental math problems. Our teachers enjoyed teaching. Kids enjoyed learning. I mean, it was a tremendous journey. I mean, I'm blessed to have been a part of that, truly blessed.

Q: For folks who will be listening who don't know about Woodlawn, can you just describe—I know any principal would be proud of this at any school, but why does it matter so much at a school like Woodlawn? What's the neighborhood? Talk about that.

Harris: Okay. Well, at Woodlawn, at least when I was principal there, I would say more than eighty percent of the children were African American, okay? And at that time, of course, I

believed that all children can learn and that they can learn at high levels, and so my job was to show the community—first of all, show the children, the teachers, the staff, parents, the community—that, indeed, was so. And so what I had to do was build up my staff. I chose a staff who also shared the beliefs, and if they didn't, I made it so uncomfortable for them that they had to leave. I mean, you have to do it. My filter was, you've got to be on board with our vision for what we want for this school and for our children.

So I built up the staff. We selected a curriculum that was, first, age appropriate. It was shown to be successful in creating results—best results, best practices, all of that—and after a while, I mean, we received grant funds and recognition from the state because our kids were scoring better than the kids across the river on the west side of town—the white schools. And so people started taking notice, and the Northwest Regional Educational Lab had us participate in workshops to share what was working, how are students were scoring high on state tests. We were designated as a had high-performance learning community through Stanford University and won a five year grant. People were wondering, "What's their formula? What are they doing?" So we had to share what worked for us in producing positive results.

Q: Where did you learn to have high standards for young people? Who had high standards of you that made you also pass that down to the young people you were working with?

Harris: Who had high standards for me? I would say that my family had high standards for me because it was never a question of, "Are you going to college?" It was, "Which college will you

be attending?" [*Laughs*] So they always had high standards for education and just pushing me to do well and supporting me always.

But I had a couple of key people in my life, probably, who were encouraging as well. I would say, yes, when I was at Area 2's superintendent's office, it was Roy Carlson [*phonetic*], Don James [*phonetic*]—who was the Area 2 superintendent—and Don James had supervised my Aunt Lois when he was principal at Roosevelt High School and she was the librarian. And during the time she was the librarian at Roosevelt, they won a Knapp Foundation grant to remodel and build a state-of-the-art library. That's in the Library of Congress records to this day. So he was networking that way.

But yes, but in terms of having high expectations for young people, I would say it came about through my reading works by Ron [R.] Edmonds, and that was before the successful schools network. Ron Edmonds created the slogan, "All kids can learn. We already know all we need to do to teach them. All we have to do is do it." And he goes on. And it's true. Everybody knows all you need to do, but it's hard work, and people may not like you at the end of the day. Like I said, I had to move some teachers out. But at the end of the day, it was the best thing to do for kids.

I mean, come on. We were fundamentally working on skills that were going to sustain them for life, okay? That great foundation. And so it's so hard to look at what's happened during the pandemic and the loss of learning time kids have had. I mean, we already had learning gaps. We have teaching gaps as well and ultimately achievement gaps. So it's hard, but you learn from some of the best teachers.

Q: I'm curious of what you think about what's happening right now in education with a lot of book banning and the policing of curriculum and forcing teachers to take out Black history, African American studies. What are your thoughts on that? And if you were mentoring teachers right now, what would you be saying to them?

Harris: Wow. It must be really, really tough being a teacher in this climate. I mean, anybody in education knows the value of learning—lifelong learning. The whole thing about learning is exposing children to the genre of literature and books, and part of teaching, too, is to be open minded and accepting. But I would just tell teachers to be strong in their beliefs. I just think it's awful with critical learning theory, all of that, that as people have shifted the focus to say, "Oh yes, that's just a theory, and you're teaching to hate other people." You have to share all of the stories, all the truths, and somehow or another the truth has got to be told, and the truth will come out and prevail in the end.

But I just think it's a sad time in history when you have people who know nothing about teaching and learning and are out banning books and telling teachers what to teach and what not to teach. They're doing a disservice to not only the children and families, but to our society and to our world, and they've pushed us back. I mean, we had this forward momentum at one time, and now we're regressing, and that's never good.

So I would say to parents who are on the other side of this, teach your kids at home. Expose your kids to those books at home, that learning at home, because, like I said, there are always going to

be these learning gaps, teaching gaps, all these instructional gaps. But we've got to do our part as Black parents to make sure that our kids, that we fill in the gaps, because otherwise our kids are missing those essential parts of history and learning about themselves and the world and of others. It's not fair, not fair at all.

Q: Thank you for answering that.

Harris: You're welcome.

Q: I'm not going to keep you much longer, but I wanted to also talk about what brings you joy. What are some of the things and some of the people who you love, who you celebrate, who you honor? Can we talk about that a little bit?

Harris: Okay. What brings me joy? Probably would be my family, especially my grandchildren. I have three grandchildren, ages nineteen, fifteen, and seven. I think what brings me joy is being in the presence of people who share like-minded values as I do, in terms of my spiritual stance and growth. Like I said, I have faith buddies. But it brings me joy to talk about things that bring them joy, and it brings me joy to make other people happy. I was just thinking, my sister and I were at a restaurant the other day, and we started talking to a lady—a white lady—and we had the best fun, and that wasn't the first time it's happened. And I thought, "I just like people to be people, to be open." It just brings joy to me, to my soul.

So I would say what brings me joy is giving—I like to give—good conversation, family, my faith buddies, and my meditation devotionals and reading a good book versus listening to them on Audible. I go back and forth. [*Laughs*]

Q: Do you have any—

Harris: If I'm stretched for time, I pull out Audible. Huh?

Q: Do you have any favorites?

Harris: My favorite books? Oh man. Well, I'm reading one now. It's called *Spiritual Warfare*. Let me see, what are my other favorites? Oh man. There are so many. I just started reading—let's see, I drew a blank. It's by [Viktor] Frankl. It's about his survival in the Holocaust. The other day, I gave my son a copy of *Measure of a Man* and he said he'd already read that, but I was trying to get him to read that. Something about the meaning of life and meaning.

Q: I don't know.

Harris: I could get it for you real quick.

Q: Sure, if you want to, yes.

Harris: Soon as I got up, I remembered it. [*Laughter*] *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl.

Q: Okay, thank you.

Harris: Yeah, [*unclear*]. So I'm dipping into books that are more spiritual-based because the last time I really enjoyed a book was Michelle Obama's *Becoming*. Now, I did get her new book, but I'm not really as into it as I was before, about the light, *The Light We Carry* [*sic*]. But I'm going to finish it. But meanwhile, I'm dabbling in these other books as well. But I really enjoyed *Becoming*.

Q: Can we talk about some of your volunteer work that you do?

Harris: Sure.

Q: I know that you're very [*crosstalk*].

Harris: Okay, back in 1970 when I was a junior in college, I was initiated into Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and I worked with the sorority for a while with their various programs, and I was secretary for a while. But then I joined the Portland Chapter of The Links because my aunt was a Link, my sisters were Links, and so I was invited, and I have been a Link now for thirty years. And so it's a public service organization. There's 17,000 women, 299 chapters in forty-two states, the District of Columbia, Nassau, the Bahamas, used to be a chapter in South Africa, and

there was one in Germany too. But we are an international women's public service organization, and I'm a Program Chair of our chapter.

Oh Renée, you know what I did? I wrote a book.

Q: Really?

Harris: I wrote a book about our chapter.

Q: Oh, wow.

Harris: You want to see the cover?

Q: Please show it to me. I would love to see it.

Harris: Okay. [*Pauses*] Okay, here it is. Can you see that? Oh no, you can't see it.

Q: I can't see it because of the—oh, there, I see it. Oh, I love that.

Harris: Isn't that pretty?

Q: That's beautiful.

Harris: *Portland History of our Links Chapter*.

Q: Oh wow.

Harris: So I wrote that book, and that was in 2021, and one of these days you could see it. But here's my sister when she was in there. Okay, I wanted to share. But I don't know if you can see that.

Q: I can, yes, I see it.

Harris: We used to have a Starlight Cotillion [*phonetic*]. That was what that was all about.

Q: Tell me about that.

Harris: But the reason why I mentioned that is because I'm the archivist for our chapter and I've been the archivist, assisting my older sister who died in 2016, so I became the archivist and wrote that book. But I'm now program chair. I've been president. And twenty years ago, when I was Chair of the Health and Human Services Committee for the chapter, I met with—I don't know if you know Mardica Hicks and the Cascade AIDS Project, and we have a Memorandum of Understanding about raising awareness about HIV in the African American community. And so at that time, twenty years ago, we thought about a name for our group, and it became the African American AIDS Awareness Action Alliance, A6.

And so to this day we've been working in the community with other organizations whose missions align with ours in regards to this health issue, and currently we have been funded by the Oregon Health Authority for a grant, which is going to be a Culturally-Specific Campaign to Raise Awareness about HIV/AIDS, and STIs in the African American community. We're going to have in this a media campaign with lots of billboards in the community, so that's going to take up a lot of our time.

And I'm a co-founder of A6, but I am the president and founder of the White Rose Educational Fund, and what we do is we fund scholarships to deserving high school seniors. We have many people in the community who make donations to our fund, and this year we're going to fund maybe four or five scholarships, and they're in the name of some people in the community. Did you know of Paul Coakley?

Q: Yes, absolutely

Harris: Okay. There's a scholarship being awarded in his honor, Harriet and Kenneth Adair [*phonetic*], Janet and Tim Gillespie [*phonetic*] and other donors. There are many people who are stepping up to say, "We'd like to help these young people," by giving them this scholarship the beginning of their freshman year in college.

Q: That's so wonderful.

Harris: So that's primarily what I'm doing, and what I do is I am an aid to our pastor at church, so that too.

Q: What church do you go to?

Harris: Maranatha.

Q: Talk about what does it mean to be an aid to a pastor? What are your responsibilities?

Harris: [*Laughs*] Well, my responsibilities primarily involve coordinating his schedule, scheduling his appointments, and organizing—God, there's so many ministries that we have going around, so it's looking at the calendar to see—for instance, today he and his wife presented at Every Single One of You session. That was the name of the ministry. Last night, it was Marriage Made EZ. Sunday it will be Kicking It with Pastor C. We have all kinds of family nights, family fun night, New Partnership classes and more. So juggling those ministries, and talking about various ministries and organizing and so forth.

Q: Your hands have touched so much in the city, meaning your involvement in church or your involvement with volunteer work, and then the thousands of young people who you've had a hand in either hands-on or just by way of your leadership impact. Do you ever think about your legacy or think about this wide impact that you're having on the city of Portland? Or do you just keep doing the work and not really think about that?

Harris: The latter. I just keep doing the work. I'm so very busy, and I thank God that I am busy and I have the mental state to continue to do the things that I do enjoy. And so I don't slow down and think about, "Well, what's after? What's after this?"

Q: This is my last question for you, unless there's something else you would like to talk about that I haven't asked. I'd like to know what your hope is for future Portland? You think about your grandchildren and all the Black folks that are moving to Portland. It's been this influx of folks. What's your hope for future Portland?

Harris: Well, I just hope that Blacks primarily—well, I won't say Blacks. I would hope that Black people will be in strategic positions to lend a voice to affect change and to address societal issues that impact our people. I mean, be they economic, the health disparities, the housing, employment, all of that. But that they have a voice in legislation or whatever. But we can't just sit back. We have got to speak out and speak up because as I look around me in Portland, I am just so dismayed by how our city looks. It used to be a city of high livability, and now, I mean, every week you hear of a restaurant or a store that's having to close, and everything's boarded up. Graffiti's everywhere. This morning, like I said, there was a three-hour workshop on church security because our church had some issues with graffiti in the summer.

So there's always a way that I think we can help, but we have to be actively engaged. We can't sit back and let other people do this for us. We've got to be first and foremost. We've got to get out there. And our kids have got to see us doing this as well, and we need to bring them in, too,

to the discussions so that there's this intergenerational crossover of ideas and thinking and a dialogue. Yes.

Q: Well, thank you so much. I appreciate you. I really am honored to speak with you and I thank you for taking the time, and I'm so happy you're a part of this project.

Harris: Well, thank you. I'm honored that you even asked me, and I hope that I've served you well today. I don't want to disappoint you. [*Laughs*]

Q: Not at all. You were perfect. Everything you said is what I wanted to hear. I just wanted your story, so thank you so much.

Harris: Okay. All righty.

[END OF INTERVIEW]