I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Patricia Welch

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Patricia Welch conducted by Renée Watson on January 3, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders Oral History 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: Patricia Welch | Location: Portland, OR; Baltimore, MD

Interviewer: Renée Watson | Date: January 3, 2023

Q: So thank you so much for joining me today. I thought we could start with your name, your age and where you were born.

Welch: My name is Patricia Hill Welch, my age is seventy-three. I was born in Baltimore, Maryland.

Q: And let's start with your beginnings. Can you tell me what your childhood was like, growing up in Baltimore?

Welch: It was wonderful. I was raised during the time of de facto segregation, so I was raised in a Black neighborhood. And I think that was wonderful, because being surrounded by the Black community, going to solely or predominantly Black schools through, say, middle school. I could just be a child. I sometimes look at some of the kids that I see in the Portland area, and I just think that they really—some of them– suffered from what I call the "for a Black kid" syndrome. It's, like, if you're smart, "Well, you're smart for a Black kid." But see, where I was raised, if you were smart, you were smart, if you weren't, you weren't. It didn't have anything to do with your race, it's just who you were.

I was raised at a time when children could be children. I mean, my greatest joy, growing up, was riding my ten-speed bike to places where my mother, I'm sure, told me that I was not supposed to go. But I learned so much about the city of Baltimore, just riding around on my bike. Or I did kid things: jumping rope, playing Dodge Ball. We didn't have all the outside influences. Life was not measured by social media. So you could just be carefree and have fun. And I so appreciate that.

And of course, we had extended family. We never lived any more than a block away from our maternal grandparents. And we lived in a fairly stable community, so truly, everybody knew what you were doing, whenever you were doing it.

Being raised around grandparents, I so pity people who don't know the unconditional love of grandparents. I mean, to be raised in that kind of environment where people tell you, you are wonderful and beautiful, and can do anything you want to do. I had a good childhood. It was a good foundation.

Q: What were your dreams? Like, when you were, I don't know, in elementary school, if someone were to ask you, "What do you want to be when you grow up," did you have an answer for that yet?

Welch: In early elementary school, I wanted to be a ballerina, until I got to the point where you actually had to stand on your toes. I don't know if people understand, before you get to the point of being able to do that easily, that stuff hurts! [*Laughs*] It's, like, I don't want to do this. This is painful. No, I don't think I knew what I wanted to do, or had any real career thoughts until

probably junior high school. Maybe, I worked in the library there. And I was so impressed with the librarian. She just seemed to know everything. And you know children have to test you. And I saw her do something to a bug and I thought it was cruel. I was, like, "Ooh, why did you do that?" And she went on to explain about the bug's very minimal nervous system, and it that it was not painful for this insect. I still don't know if that's true, but I believed it at that time. But most importantly, I believed that she was smart. And even in elementary school, the notion of being smart was an important value to me.

And, of course, also, this was the time when teachers went to school coiffed, made up, nails manicured. So the look was right and the intellect was right. I think that introduced me to the notion that that might be a profession. But it was only when I was in, I think, maybe high school, and *Seventeen* magazine had this little tear-out card. It had a little test. If you did well on the test, which of course I did, it said, "You should be a librarian. Send this card in to the American Library Association," So I sent the card in. And I was a regular at the Pratt Free Library, which is the library system in Baltimore. And I knew Linda Lapides, who was the young adult librarian. I went in and I mentioned that I did this. I didn't know the word "mentor." But, at the very least, she was an encourager. So that is when I decided that the something I wanted to do was to be a librarian, because I was in libraries all the time. Loved to read, so that was only natural. Yes.

Q: Do you remember any of your favorite books or offers from that age?

Welch: Oh, gosh, you know, I remember, liking historical novels, thanks to a friend of mine, Regina Meekins. Now that's a name I haven't said or thought in literally decades. But, as a pre-

teen, finding somebody who loved to read as much as I did, that was a gift, because not everyone did, you know? So I know that Regina was into historical novels, and I wasn't, but thanks to her, I started reading historical novels. I don't really remember the names of the books that I read. I was in a fairly intensive accelerated program in junior high school, so I was reading for school. And in high school I wasn't being introduced to young adult literature that had African Americans in it, you know? I was reading that *Dick and Jane*, and whatever, stuff. And it was not anything that stuck, which is sad. But, I think it was probably all right in the end, because I read a lot of different things. I read magazines, a lot of magazines, and that was great because my mother had *Reader's Digests*, so, I got a lot of *Digests* of a lot of different stories and articles. Whatever I did read led me to a wider world. And, even then, I loved the movies. I'm not even going to say "cinema." I just liked plain old movies. They could be crappy or intellectual and unique. I just enjoyed going to the movies. And I am sure it is because I was a reader.

I remember reading about a film called *Black Orpheus* or "*Orfeu Negro*," because it was in Portuguese. It was about Carnival in Brazil. And I was, I don't know, probably thirteen or fourteen. I was in high school and we were on an early schedule. And so I would get out of school, which was in downtown Baltimore, and I could catch a bus anyplace I wanted to go. So I would go to these art houses. And I would see all of these great films that I had read about, you know, French New Wave films, and all of that. But one of the films that has stayed with me throughout my life, every once in a while I'll just see it again, is *Black Orpheus*. And it was just—I'm sure a lot of it was just—seeing Black people. And I liked mythology, so to see a myth that I was familiar with, but with Black people. And there was this statue, which I now realize is Christ the Redeemer, one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern world, but I didn't know that. I

didn't know that everybody else thought it was wonderful, but I have always thought it was wonderful. I'm not big on the idea of a bucket list, but I will say if I ever have an opportunity to safely go to Brazil, I would go just to see that, because I just thought it was wonderful.

So no, I don't—I can't think of any books, any particular books. And that really is rather unfortunate, but I thoroughly, without even knowing it, I was thoroughly an example of how reading will change your life. I understood at an early age that there were things that I knew that adults around me did not know, because I read. And again, children will test you. I remember asking one of my mother's friends if she was familiar with some author. She wasn't and there would be no reason for her to be. If it wasn't in *Reader's Digest*, I wouldn't have known a thing about it. But she didn't know [*laughs*]. And I did. So it gave me this sense of power, which I think is wonderful. I think children need that.

Q: Was reading big in your home? Where do you think your love of reading came from? Was it something that was modeled? Or was it something that you did kind of on your own?

Welch: Absolutely modeled by my mother. I don't know if she read many books, but she read magazines. We had *Reader's Digest* and all other kinds of magazines around the house. When we were little, after our parents divorced, we lived with our maternal grandparents. My youngest uncle was still living at home, but he was in college, where he was taking architectural classes. I remember he had *Architectural Digest* around the house. If you're a reader, you're a reader. So in addition to whatever else I was reading, I would look at his *Architectural Digest* magazines,

which led to me taking at least one architecture class in college, just because it was interesting to me.

Our mother had us down at the Enoch Pratt Free Library main branch every Saturday for story time. Yes, reading was modeled in the house. And once I started, I was hooked. I really do believe my sister was dyslexic, but that was not something that we knew about at that time. Whatever the reason, she really did not like to read as much as I did. She was like, "You are always reading." But I was enjoying it. I mean, besides riding my bike [*laughs*]. Something good, what could be more fun?

Q: Tell me about your mom. Tell me more about her. Where was she born? And what is it like to be her daughter?

Welch: It is wonderful. My mother has passed on to another realm, but I always feel like when I need my mama, she's still there. My mother was a liberated woman, before we used the term. She was born in Greenville, North Carolina, but I think maybe by the time she was five years old, her family had moved to Baltimore. One of the things that I admire about my mother is that she was a very physically attractive woman, and she knew that, but she didn't depend on that. When she decided that this marriage was not working for her, that was it. There was no looking back. There was no, "I'm getting another man to take care of me," no. My mama was, "I'm working, we are a small family unit, but we're going to stick together and do what has to be done." My mother always told us that we were going to college. But, how did this woman with a high school education know that we were going to college?

People need to be so careful of what they say to children, and to realize the power of their words and their example. Because my mother, Gladys Mae Cox Hill, said that we were going to college, *we were going to college.* Of course, we did have the benefit of having grandparents who would support us. But still, I know folks who had grandparents, aunts and uncles and a lot of others who didn't value education. So, they didn't believe higher education was possible. But my mother, she started working. She had a variety of jobs. I'm sure at some point she worked in somebody's house, as so many Black women did. But things opened up at Westinghouse, and she started off working nights in the print shop, on something called a multilith machine. I don't know what it was, I don't know what it looks like, I just heard a lot about it. So, let's see, and she did not drive, so she had to get a ride for a number of years. And then she got a day job. But she still did not drive. So my mother would get up about 6:00 in the morning and put on her loafers, and she would walk to Downtown Baltimore to the Greyhound station. Then she would take a bus out to—let me see—it was called Friendship Airport then, now it's BWI [Baltimore/Washington International Airport], and *then* there was a shuttle that took you to Westinghouse. She did that for so many years. And she used to laugh and say, "I know all the garbage men," because they're out on early, too. And she said—you know, people were, like, "Aren't you afraid when it's dark?" And she said, "No." She said, "I see these guys, I say hi." She was protected. She instilled the idea that if you are willing to work for something, you can get it, and that there there's nothing so hard that you can't do it. I mean, I'm sure my mother could have had a car anytime she wanted it, though given her temper, we were all kind of glad she didn't drive. But it was okay. You don't have to have this or that, if you have a goal.

And so, of course, we grew up thinking that we wanted our own money, so we were going to work. And of course, a woman who has been divorced and who bears primary responsibility will model a lot of thing. She modeled for us, and said to us very clearly and specifically, "I am sure you will get married, but I want you to be independent." She said, "First of all, I don't want to hear about you working, and the man's not working. When your foot hits the floor in the morning to go on that job, his better hit it, too, probably before you. But I don't ever want to hear that you are being abused, or you are unhappy, because I want you to be in a position where you stay because you want to, not because you have to. And if you have to go, you should be able to take care of yourself."

So the idea that we would not work was never of value. But also, the idea that you looked forward to going to college and you looked forward to your job was a given. One year I worked for the post office—for some reason I thought I was going to be riding around in a van. No! I was walking around in that 90-something degrees, absolutely overwhelmingly humid Baltimore weather. One day I almost fell out; I had to go home. But I got up and went back. And, that bag is uncomfortable until you know how to wear it. And this was during a time when there weren't a lot of women who were mail women. I didn't realize until later that some of the men were not real pleased that I was there. Then somebody who knew my grandfather found out that I was not there to take a man's job, I was just there for the summer. A sea change! Somebody showed me how to hold my bag so I wouldn't have backache, neuritis and neuralgia. And just said, "Sweetie, pace yourself." And there are relay trucks: You take your mail out, follow a certain route, and reach this box that has your next bags of mail. There will be several relay boxes.

And, sometimes people would do my relays for me. But generally I did my work. But while I would see men coming out of their girlfriend's houses at noon, I might be still trekking at 4:00. But I wanted that money. [*Laughs*]

There were these—at that time, they seemed – ridiculously expensive boots. I mentioned them to my mother. I was, like, "Oh no, they cost too much money." And she said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "Did you work this summer? Can you afford them?" I said, "Well—" She said, "Will you be able to go back to school?" And I said, "Yes, ma'am." And she said, "Honey, you worked, you deserve it. You get those boots." My mother exemplified a lot of very basic, common sense and values. She was a woman who had a great deal of personal dignity, a lot of warmth, a really great attitude towards people.

I'll tell you this now, then we can go on to something else. I remember being about fourteen years old. I was at that point where girls are “smelling themselves.” And one of the winos on the corner said something like, "Ooh, you look good." And I went home and said, "This wino just said something to me," and my mother stopped me cold and said, "Wait a minute." She said, "You don't ever"—because I was, like, "I'm not going to speak." She said, "You don't ever *not speak* to somebody. If somebody speaks to you, you respond, and then you go on." And she said, "You don't know, the very person you want to spurn, ignore, may be the person that you need to help you out one day. You don't do that. I don't want to ever hear that come out of your mouth." That was humbling, but that was correct. And that attitude of, "You respect everybody," that

understanding has served me well throughout my life. So yes, being Gladys Hill's daughter was a gift. My sister and I were very, very, very fortunate.

Q: So where did you end up going to college? And what was that transition like for you from high school to higher education?

Welch: I went to Towson State College, which is now Towson University, which is just north of Baltimore City. It was eye-opening, simply because I had no idea that this college was under some kind of federal mandate to increase integration. I had never been in a situation where I could walk around all day and see few, if any Black people. So that was eye-opening. But, then again I had been to a fifty-fifty integrated high school, so I was used to that. What was a bigger change was, having gone to an all-girls high school, I was amazed to see these girls in my classes clearly deferring to men, not wanting to disagree, not wanting to speak up. That just seemed really strange. It took me a while to figure out what was actually happening. But I thought, they're just going to let these boys talk? There were four schools that were four schools considered the premier, public, academic high schools in Baltimore. There were two for boys, two for girls. I went to the premier of the two girls' schools. So there was a high value in being a smart girl, and just feeling comfortable with your mind, and feeling comfortable speaking up. So that was different.

But other than that, I enjoyed college. I could be a kind of a stick in the mud, so I enjoyed being in a situation that forced me to try new things and meet new people. And it was good for me to be in a situation where I still maintained all the Black cultural things that I brought from my

home, but I also learned some new things. Baltimore has a very large Jewish community. So it was good to be on friendly terms with a Jewish girl who told me all about "shiksas" [a non-Jewish, probably white woman] and that there was some feeling about Jewish men dating a one. And I was, like, well yes, sometimes I think Black women get tired of seeing Black men with white women. So those kinds of things.

Another really dear friend of mine was Asian. I didn't appreciate it then, but she would always say that she was descended from Genghis Khan. I now realize that she had been raised to have pride in her heritage. And that's what she was actually saying at that time.

So a wide range of friends broadened my world view and also let me know what I was missing. I took a Black literature course at Morgan State University one summer. So I went to Morgan and was just introduced to all of these authors that I didn't know about, all this literature. But that just let me know that there was a gap in my education. In my senior year we had a Black student union. Some young men came over from [Washington] D.C. [District of Columbia], political workers, and they were going to raise our political awareness. They helped us to draw up our list of non-negotiable demands and take over the administration building. and everything, One of my friends was one of the key leaders of these activities. But when the building was taken over and the news cameras came out, we were both like, "Oh Lord, we can't be on TV," because our mothers did not know what we were doing. And they did not send us out there to be rabble-rousing and taking over administration buildings. [*Laughs*] It was really a very successful effort. Nowadays, you never hear people say they don't want to be on camera. Now we were, like, Lord,

we got to go home. Somebody else will have to take over this building. It shows how times change.

One of the outgrowths of that is was the question: “Are you Black enough?” The same as asking “Are you woke?” So these “woke” young men invited us to the opening of the Drum and Spear Bookstore in DC. And we went over, and I decided that I would put off graduate school and librarianship for a year. Instead, I’d go to D.C. to learn everything else I needed to know about being Black. One summer ended up being about five years. And then from there, I moved to Detroit, and then ultimately ended up out here.

But yes, I had a very interesting year. [*Laughs*] D.C. was a fabulous place to be young at that time. And if you were interested in exploring Blackness, I mean, maybe New York could have been better, but that's about it. It was the place to be, because everybody was coming to D.C. So I think I came of age at a good time, when Black folks were feeling really good about ourselves, and James Brown was singing, "I'm Black and I'm proud." And I was old enough to really appreciate the difference, and appreciate seeing myself mirrored in women who looked fabulous, and knowing that I could be fabulous looking, just like me in my own way. That was a wonderful time to come of age.

Q: Do you remember what you were fighting for? What were the demands, or what brought about the young folks wanting to rise up at that school?

Welch: The Civil Rights Movement was kind of in force for all of our lives. I remember telling somebody recently, I have not seen *Till*, the movie about Emmett Till, because I grew up during that period. Even though I was a little girl when he was killed, you could hear the adults talking about it. The picture was on the front of *Jet* magazine, which the adults were all hiding from us. You can't hide anything from children. If we didn't see that picture in our house, somehow or other, all of us saw that picture of that child. So we knew about Emmett Till. We grew up knowing about the freedom fighters and the people going into the lunch rooms. We grew up with Martin Luther King, so we grew up understanding that things might not have been as bad as our parents told us, but they were still bad, and there was work to be done. And the issue was, what were you going to do? And how could you be involved? And it might have been working with an organization that helped Black youth, it might have been just going to hear Sweet Honey in the Rock at a church or marching or something else. But people felt a sense of mission. Just showing up and showing out as Black folks who were proud of who we are, who knew who we were, and who were available to be called on to study, to learn. When I went to D.C., I met a lot of people who were Pan-Africanists. I didn't even know what that was.

With the people that I knew—again, things would show up in different ways. When Russell Means, the head of the American Indian Movement came to town, some friends of mine had him over at their house. And so, I mean, we were all feeling in solidarity with AIM. We were absolutely in solidarity with Cesar Chavez and the grapes boycott. So we boycotted what we needed to boycott. We marched where we needed to march. We were all feeling our way—we were also having a lot of fun. We went to Howard University to see Miriam Makeba who was, like, thirty-six, and seemed much older because we were all in our twenties. So when Stokely

came on the stage people were impressed to see Stokely. But, the men were impressed that Stokely had this fine older women, and all the women were, like, "Well, she's real old, isn't she? But he's real fine." [*Laughs*]

And eventually, most of us got jobs in areas where we could do something. I worked at Howard University the School of Communications, headed by Tony Brown, who, for many years, had a show called Black Journal. The good thing about Tony Brown is that he believed in the "Talented Tenth," so he was bringing in some of the finest Black minds in the country. I was an Administrative Secretary. I could type but I didn't file well. But I had a degree. And they liked the idea of having a secretary who had a degree. So I was an administrative secretary to Larry Wills [phonetic]. Mr. Wills had been the D.C. correspondent for Jet magazine. And there was Sam Yette. Mr. Yette wrote a book called "The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America." The Choice was a predictor of what could and probably was happening in this country. I'm sure Alex Haley came through when he was writing "Roots". Robert Johnson came to talk to him when he had the idea of BET [Black Entertainment Television]. Cathy Liggins Hughes is now the head of TV One, this whole conglomerate. I remember when Cathy came to town; she was working up the stairs. She left and went to WHUR and instituted a format called "Quiet Storm," which propelled her career. But the thing is, you got to meet these people. A man named Ofield Dukes was the king of public relations in D.C. He asked, "Miss Hill, don't you want to be a writer? You could work in public relations." I didn't know what public relations was, but it didn't sound interesting. So I said, "No." Ten or fifteen years hence, I was working for a public relations firm. I thought, "Shoot, I should have stayed with Mr. Dukes." A guy named Stan Lathan, a lot of young people would know his daughter, Sanaa Lathan, because she's in

"The Best Man," and many other things. But her father, Stan Lathan, has directed, produced so many things, and he is so fine. He would come through the door. I'd be typing and I would just be, like, "I'm going to have to type this over, because I have no idea what I'm doing." [*Laughs*] But he was with a group of folks from New York, who would come down, like, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, teach classes and then go back. Again, that kind of environment, just seeing all of these achieving Black folks. Wow! That was wonderful.

I worked at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for a while as the administrative assistant to the equal opportunity officer. They had a conference in Atlanta. Meetings were held at Paschal's Restaurant, which had been a meeting place for key Civil Rights Movement leaders, including Dr Martin Luther King. Modern day civil rights strategists attended this conference. Seeing these people confirmed that, you can have a good life doing things of service to your people.

When I left D.C. I went to Michigan and worked for a newspaper called the *Michigan Challenger*. It was a small, Black-owned newspaper that eventually went out of business. But not before we had a chance to interview Billy Dee Williams and James Earl Jones. Billy Dee didn't look as good as he did on screen. I mean, he's still a good-looking man, but that was very interesting. Out of the two of them, James Earl Jones was the one. He was a gentleman. They were in Detroit for the premier of a movie called *Bingo Long*, a Motown-produced film. A reception was held at the Gordy mansion. So, if you're willing to take a chance, you can go to the Gordy mansion. And if you're working for a teeny, tiny little newspaper, then you wear a halter top with the words *Michigan Challenger* glued on your back [*laughs*] so people know who you

are. And you just get to see these fascinating people. As I think about it, I had a lovely life. [*Laughs*] I cannot complain.

I met my husband in Michigan, and I stayed there about fifteen years. He was a Detroit native. Watching the city's decline was painful for him. I, on the other hand, had spent some time working in the city's Department of Public Information and a part of that job is to boost the city. So I'm looking at the gains, no matter how minimal. But after a while, it was his turn. He wanted to live someplace else, and by that time, I'd become a librarian. I'd worked for a public relations firm for about ten years and realized I was not happy. That was not my professional home. And I was meeting people who were actually doing jobs that they wanted to do. That was their profession. And I decided that I wanted what all these other people, someplace that felt like where I was supposed to be.

And miraculously, oh Lord, everywhere I turned, all of a sudden all I saw were librarians, librarians. I would go to the Public Relations Society of America meetings, and I'd be sitting next to a librarian. [*Laughs*] People were, like, "I want you to meet this librarian." And everything fell into line. I was, like, okay, I hear you. Okay. I didn't think that this might be it, but this really is where I'm supposed to be. I'm circling back to where I started. I had planned to be a librarian all through college. But, my "gap year" in DC changed all that. So, I went to library school and I enjoyed it, even though I was driving an hour each way. I came out of school, got a great job at the University of Michigan in this new program, extension services to a group, a network of small libraries around the state, and extending the vast resources of the University of Michigan to these libraries. Not just the holdings of the library system, but access to all the experts. I don't

really think I did any traditional librarian work, or not a lot of it, until I left the University of Michigan and went to Detroit Public. Because at the U of M, if I had a question, I wasn't looking for a book. I called somebody up, said, "What do you know?" It was wonderful to be able to do that and know that you were bringing information to people. And that's basically what attracted me to librarianship. I'm nosy, and I always felt that if you're a librarian, as you're answering other people's questions, you are learning.

So that was good, but it was time to go. We were looking at Atlanta when I saw this job posting from Multnomah County, in Portland. The job sounded wonderful, but I knew I wasn't going to get the job. I said, “Somebody else has that job, they just have to post it.” So that was the perfect job for me to apply for, because I could just practice my interview skills and everything, and there was no emotional investment. I applied, didn't hear from them for a long time. So I thought, wow, I didn't even make the first cut. After they passed the levy in April or May, and they knew they had the money, they started interviewing. So they called, and I did a telephone interview. And my husband kept saying, "You're going to get that job." And I said, "I don't think so." A few days later, they called me back and asked if I would come out for an in-person interview.

At first, I wouldn't even come out. I said, "Uh-uh, somebody else is going to get the job." But, my husband said, "Have you ever been to the Pacific Northwest?" Now that was the way to get me. I had a rental car, so I drove around. I said, “Let me drive by this library and see where it is.” And it was a Sunday afternoon, at twilight. There was a young man waiting for the bus. So he's standing on the library steps, and I just went up and peeked in. At that time, in the vestibule, they had a lot of printed material, a lot of handouts. And then you could look through, and you could

see on the back wall, Black Resource Center. And that was it. I was in love. I went from "ooh dee doo, boo dee doo doo," to, I Want This Job, because I wanted that building. I wanted that library. I had an interview outfit, but I had left my black skirt at home somehow. After I saw that building, I did what I don't do. I went to Nordstrom's. That part would not have been unusual. I don't usually deal with sales people until I have to, because I kind of know what I'm looking for, and I'm probably looking for a sales rack. This sales woman came up to me, and I said, "I'm here for a job interview. This is how I want to look, this is what I have with me"—I mean, I brought the shoes and everything with me. And I said, "If I get this job, I will come back and I will buy something else from you." She hooked me up with this suit. To this day, I don't really want to think about what that suit cost. My sister says, "That's why God made Mastercard." So I thought, this is one time when I will employ Pamela's thought process, which is, "Don't worry about it, give them the card." We walked through the store, she matched this and that, and blah blah blah. I was so overdressed for that interview! [*Laughs*] I mean, this is Portland. Me and a woman from California had on our little suits and our little heels, and I had my hair braided with extensions. I don't know what this hairdresser was thinking. I must have had about seven people's hair on my head! So I had to spend time kind of taming it down, it's, like, I was not not going to the prom. But other than that hair, honey, I was looking good from my black and white tweed shoes to my black portfolio, to this lovely black suit!

I knew what that job needed, and I knew that I could do it. I said "I had a rental car and I'd been driving around," and I said, "I noticed that there was a man from the Nation of Islam on the corner of Killingsworth and MLK [Martin Luther King], and I said, "Quite frankly, that's important to me; one, because I want to see Black people, and two, I really liked bean pies. And I

don't know if I want to live someplace where they don't have them." I said, "I don't think I've lived any place where you have two beauty supply shops right across the street from each other. But that's good, because Black women have to have that hair stuff." And I said, "You have a Saks Fifth Avenue. It's not that I'm going to be shopping there, but I need to know that I'm living in a city that has a Saks Fifth Avenue. So I think, this will be okay."

When I saw the neighborhood, I said “Okay, they need a Black person in here. And they don't need a little shy library lady. They need a Black person who is not afraid to get out and go.” So when the interview was over, I said to my husband, "I think you're right." [*Laughs*] "I think I have this job." And I did. And I've got to tell you, I've had some good jobs, I mean, I worked with a public relations firm, and that also provided me with a number of wonderful life experiences. But to my mind, it all came together, for me to be at the North Portland Library and be a good public servant, and be a good librarian for my community, to be the person who welcomes everybody into the library, that illustrates all of the many, many, many benefits of having a library to everyone, but particularly with Black folks. So to be able to do that, to be able to work with a Black Resource Center collection, the job was a dream come true. And I have to admit, I stayed there, what, twenty-two years, I think. And I have never wavered in that notion. I have always known that was the job that I was supposed to have. Leaving public relations and going into librarianship was the gift I gave to me professionally.

Q: So tell me, what year was this that you moved to Portland?

Welch: Nineteen ninety-six.

Q: Nineteen ninety-six.

Welch: I started October 1st, 1996. November 4th, I think it was, a measure called Measure 47 passed, which could very well have wiped out my job. People didn't understand, really, the impact of that measure, and that it would affect the library. So in May, I think it was, they voted for these two funding measures. November, they wiped them out. There was a lot of crying, a lot of nice people coming up to me saying, "Patricia, you were the one we were waiting for! We are so sorry!" I'm, like, "Not as sorry as I am. You're not the one who drove through all these mountains and deserts to get here." But I went to my supervisor, and I said, "I know I'm the last hire, I know what that means. I will hang in as long as I can, and all I ask of you is, please do not give me two weeks' notice. Just tell me now, if you need to. If not, tell me as far in advance." The woman from California who interviewed when I did, she was also hired. But she had seen similar things in California, so she quit and went on to do very well in Washington State. And ultimately, my supervisor said that they did not have to touch my job family, that they didn't have to cut from that particular group. And that enough people in branches in general were retiring, so they would not have to touch me. And I really appreciated that, especially when one of my coworkers, whose name escapes me but whose face never will, said to me in a meeting, "Oh sorry, Patricia, you won't be here after July." I think she was kind of happy that I wouldn't be there. And I swear to goodness, I had almost a physical reaction. I went to my supervisor and said "I asked you to tell me, and this is how I have to hear this?" And she reassured me. 1996 and early 1997 was kind of a tempestuous time. But still, a good time, because it's always a good

time when you're doing what you're supposed to be doing in life. And that's what I was supposed to be doing.

Q: Can you describe Portland in 1996, '97? What was it like in Northeast Portland especially? And how was that different, if it was different, from where you were coming from?

Welch: Well, the lovely thing is that the North Portland branch at that time was the branch in the hood, such hood as there is in Portland, meaning that it was a predominantly Black neighborhood. We lived across the river at McCormick Pier, but we worked and socialized in North, Northeast Portland. There were many Black people living in those beautiful houses around the library. Reflections Coffee and Books was several blocks down. Reflections was the "Cheers" of near North Portland, everybody knows your name. So people would go in, and Gloria was serving them coffee, or whatever. You could buy cards and gifts and books, and O. B. Hill was there, and O. B. was promoting the books.

And at that time, there were a lot of transplants to Portland. Nike, McDonald's, Intel—they had recruited all these young Black people who were out, say, in Beaverton. Nothing against Beaverton, but these folks would come into North Portland. They organized activities at Reflections. You had card parties, and just all kinds of get-togethers. Let's see, I think the Skanner—if not in 1996, very soon thereafter, The Skanner was across Killingsworth. Of course there was PCC [Portland Community College] Cascade. And they were still in—what do you call them? Quonset huts, or something? A lot of these wonderful buildings that are there now, but this was their temporary housing. And, of course, Jefferson High School, was right down the

street. I used to say I was a part of the North Portland Educational Consortium. What else? The BEC [Black Education Coalition] was still in existence. There were more cultural centers. The Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center was several blocks up the street.

Q: What was that? Like, for people who don't know, what is it [*crosstalk*]?

Welch: Oh, okay. IFCC, the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center was exactly what it says, it was a cultural center. On the main floor, there was and is a theater. I've gone to see more plays by Black playwrights at IFCC. On the second floor, there was an art gallery. So there were exhibits, and people have special programs there. They have a ballet room with a mirrored wall and a bar, so there were classes being taught, dance classes and all kinds of others. So it was a multi-generational arts center. And again, this is the neighborhood with the two major beauty supply shops right across the street from each other. It was just a hub of African American activity.

So yes, in many ways it was very different from Detroit. But again, it was fine by me, because it was something new. It was interesting. And Portland is such a book town that when people came into the library, they were appreciative. I mean, Black or white, I have never felt so welcomed. And I felt welcomed by the whole community. I mean, I do not believe in Baltimore, or in Detroit, the fact that you hired a new library branch manager would be in a major publication. The Oregonian ran my picture, plus a notation, that I was the new branch manager. I'm, like, what is this?

In 1999, the library closed for major renovation, and they had a big reopening thing. Several activities. One of the activities was a free performance by this African American dance troupe.

Many Black people had not seen them, because the only place that they would see them would be downtown, where they'd have to pay. That library was jammed. I mean, the on second floor, every nook, every cranny. I was overwhelmed. I went to my office and I was crying. I couldn't believe it. But how wonderful to have a job that allows you to bring such joy to so many people. And there was Kwanzaa as long as there's a Mama Makini, Joyce Harris, there's going to be Kwanzaa in Portland. But that was during the heyday. There was a group called the Bridge Builders, a coming of age program for young men. The Bridge Builders had this major Kwanzaa event. I was just lucky, Joyce asked if the library wanted to take a day, I was, like, "Yes, we are in."

So we were able to be a good part of an existing tradition. And there were programs at other places. This was all a part of being in that vibrant African American community. It is so interesting, people would say,"You're going to be next to Jefferson [High School]!" I mean, it was wonderful. When I started there, the woman who was the principal, perhaps she was the minister then, and she has become a pastor of her own church, after retiring. But, I went up to introduce myself. She said that she walked throughout that building every day before school. She walked through the halls praying for blessings for that school. I mean, where else do you want to be?

The Black community raised funds for some of the initial books for the Black Resource collection. The Black community, and this is long before I got there, said our neighborhood and our library needs to look like us. So when they got a Black manager, oh my gosh, people were so welcoming. I mean, the Deltas [sorority] gave me an award. I hadn't been there that long. I don't

know what I did, but I'll take an award. But it was just all a part of saying, we see what you're doing, we support you. And, many people that I met professionally have become friends. You know Emma and O. B. Hill of *Black Book Talk* [radio program]. I think that we interviewed you, if not on your first book, one of your first books.

Q: Yes.

Welch: Emma said, "KBOO-FM wants to do this Black History Month program." I was, like, well, Black literature is important all the time. If they could do something Black History Month, we need to have a program every month. We have been on KBOO on a monthly basis, since 1999—over twenty years. We started off as a one-hour program, that was too much. After about a year or so, we happily, comfortably came into our half- hour format. You are a Portland author, but you are not local, you are international. I think we knew you'd win. [*Laughs*] I think we got you before the world got you.

We also interviewed Maya Angelou. Probably not one of our best interviews because we were so starstruck. We asked her one question, and she just talked and talked, and we were like—"Maya Angelou's talking!" And then she stopped. And we were so enthralled, [*laughs*] we didn't say anything.

Q: So I spoke with Emma, and she mentioned that interview, too. Do you remember how it came about?

Welch: I'm pretty sure it was through Emma. Emma had said that when Maya Angela had come to town a few years earlier, and she had come to a writing group. So I feel like whatever way it happened, Emma was the motive force. But I don't think we ever had an interview where the guest said, "Do you have another question for me?" Like, oh, God. [*Laughter*] We should have edited that out, but we have it. We have interviewed Ernest [J.] Gaines and many other very prominent authors, but Maya Angelou was the one. Whoo!

But again, all of that came through that job. I tell everybody, being a librarian in Portland, Oregon is not what you think. Who would have thought that job would lead to so many great things, so many community connections, and just the opportunity to do really creative things?

Q: Can you talk about that in the context of larger Portland, Oregon? You mentioned that when you first moved to Portland, you kind of stayed within Northeast Portland, which is very Black, and, the Black community is there. When did you realize, oh wait, this is actually a very white city? And when did you start—

Welch: Actually, we realized it was a very white city from jump, because as I said, we lived at McCormick Pier, which is right across from the train station, you know, in Northwest Portland. I can remember being in a car and riding around saying, "There's a Black person" and "There's another one," because there weren't that many Black people in that particular community. And when we told Black people where we lived, they would say,"You live over there?" And we'd say, "Well, yes. We had a weekend to find someplace to live, and it's a very nice place." We didn't know there was that big a difference. We didn't know that we could not get certain TV

shows. There was a TV show co-hosted by Joyce Harris and Yolanda Alexander. It was the local Black talk show, but we couldn't get it on our side of the river. But, I've worked around white people before, and I have been in the minority. When I worked at the University of Michigan, there were not a lot of Black people, even Detroit Public Library. So I am used to being in situations where I may be one of a few, sometimes the only, Black person.

But, you know something? There were enough Black people here that it wasn't an issue. And, I met some white people that I liked very much. My horizons broadened in terms of who I socialized with, who I considered a friend. However, my core group was still Black folks. But, I mean, and I know you understand this—Black people have to be able to navigate many worlds. I would tell my friends back East, "We are living in White World. We truly are." And I still say that. And though I met many people that I love in Portland, I have to admit, I don't think I ever had that sense of ownership, of really being a part of the Portland community at large in the way that I did in Detroit. I mean, even now, I love me some Detroit, Michigan. I don't live there, but it's still my city. And when I lived there, I felt very much a part of the city, a part of what made it move. But in Portland, I was involved in a lot of things. But didn't feel quite the same way. And that's probably me, that's my focus. I can't even blame it on Portland. I'm interested in Black people, and quite frankly, being in Portland made me even more interested in Black people. Tyler Perry was probably very popular when I was in Detroit, but I was not interested in his plays. I am still not interested in his plays. I like his movies. But, when I came to Portland, people kept coming in, borrowing Tyler Perry. But by the time I'd been in Portland a while, I was acutely interested in Tyler Perry. Portland made me appreciate Black culture. A lot of things you

take for granted when you live in the Black world. You know they're there, you can get them at any time. And there's so much. But in Portland, there isn't so much.

So, Black History Month is the most wonderful time of the year, because you know these great speakers are coming to town, there'll be great programming. I think being in this area just makes you more acutely aware of being Black. And it makes you value things. It made me even more intentional and determined that there would be Black programming.

It didn't really matter to me if people knew that I was "the boss"—I didn't care. I knew I was. My paycheck should reflect it. But as I saw people coming in, especially children, assuming that my youth librarian was my boss, I knew I had to do something that I don't really think is a good thing, but I needed to do it. People would come in and say, "Do people know? You need to make sure these children know you're the manager. You're the head person." After a while, it was, like, they're right. Representation is everything. So I would say, "I'm Miss Patricia, I'm the head librarian." People don't necessarily understand "Library Administrator." But, if I say, "I'm the Head Librarian." They understand that.

So you know, it gave me power to do that. We did this program called the African American Read-In, which I know that you were familiar with, because you were a reader, and also your books have been read by others, including me. And it was good to be in a position where I could say, "African American literature is not just for Black people, or Black and white people. If you say that African American literature is for everyone, then our readers have to reflect it." And I would start checking off races and other categories of readers. Many white people don't want to

talk about quotas, "Oh, you're doing… "And, I would say, "Yes, actually, we're doing quotas, because if you're not intentional, it will not show up the way you want it to. So I would say, for example, "We don't have any Asians.You need to have Asians. You need to have Native Americans. We need some Latinos in here." I suspect some people thought, "Well, you know, she's from the East Coast…" But still, it was in my library [*laughs*], and, it was an African American event. And sometimes I was working with these all white committees, so I had to be clear that "This is the way it needs to be."

So, I mean, yes, Portland is incredibly white. But if there was anything that I was interested in doing, I was going to do it. I don't know anybody else who likes fireworks. I love fireworks. So I would just drive over to Delta Park, jump on the train, go downtown and be amongst hordes of people, I'm sure they were predominantly white—I don't care. I would go "ooh" and "ah", and get back on the train. But I was such a nerd, growing up. I mean, my friends in junior high and high school, they were not going to see French New Wave films. They were not interested in watching films that had subtitles, you know. And I liked when the Beatles were out, I liked the Beatles. So I have always been willing to cross some cultural zones, and also always been willing to pursue my interests, regardless.

So the things in Portland that I was interested in doing, I did. I realized, though, that there was so much culture that I was missing. I would talk to friends of mine on the East Coast, and they would be talking about things that I just didn't know about. So that, after a while, I mean, you feel the lack, but you have to value what you have, which is why we did the African American Read-In.

Q: Can you talk about—can we pause for a moment?

Welch: Yes, sure.

Q: Can you talk about the African American Read-In, and just, like, what is it? How do you do it—

Welch: Okay, sure.

Q: —should we decide to start it? And I'm curious, too, if you had any—you mentioned a little bit of some of the challenges, or maybe opposition, so I'm just curious if you can talk about what it's like being a Black librarian in a white city, with you trying to do these new initiatives? Yes, let's talk about that a little.

Welch: Okay. All right. The African American Read-In, as is the case of so many things, it came to me. A wonderful woman, the late Chris Poole-Jones, just a tireless worker in the African American community in so many areas. She was a member of the Portland Reading Association. And they wanted to do something in the Black community. So much was timing. If you come in at a time when people want to do something, jump on it, before they change their mind. So Chris brought them over to me and said she found—and I met with a woman named—what's her name? Well, I can't remember her name, it'll come back to me. But anyhow, I said, "You know, we want to do something. We've heard about this African American Read-In." Well, that was

perfect. I think Chris was probably involved in the first year, but either because of illness or other responsibilities, she wasn't after that, so it was basically me and these white women, who wanted to do well. Thank heavens, by the time I got here, I was unafraid of my power. I'm sure that's not always been the case. But I'm, like, you came here, you want to do something in the Black community. I am the only Black person at this table. You want to do something to essentially use my library for your goals—that's fine. We have mutual goals. I found out, these people were relieved, because I had lots of ideas, especially—my years of public relations served me well. I'd done events, I'm not afraid of doing special events. I pretty much know how to publicize things, given the time, and whatever. So, it was just, like, this is what we need to do. But they were just, like, "Well, we could have all Black people." They didn't have the same vision. "Or we could have all white people." But since—and I was probably going to do most of the work—then it was, like, "No no no no no, this is what it means." And actually, these were a bunch of white women, women of goodwill. So when you have people of goodwill, they probably want to learn. So it's your responsibility to help them.

So I helped them. So we had an event where people would read passages of works by their favorite African American author. There was a certain time limit, I don't know, three to five minutes or something, and if people didn't have a favorite African American author, which was frequently the case, then I would work with them and give them options, because I'm a librarian, and I have a lot of books around me. I don't mind getting out of the branch and bringing them to you. So, God, we had everybody. You were there, I had Paul in a cowboy hat. I wanted us to have a very young reader, so usually we had a pretty young reader, anything from four or five years old, no more than elementary school. I wanted to have elder readers. Oh, I remember a

couple, the Jacksons, Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. They must have been in their I don't know, 80s. The youngest, late 70s. And they read poetry to each other. Mrs. Jackson wrote poetry, so she read one of her poems. But just the symbolism, this wonderful octogenarian African American couple, married all these years, raised a family, both of them looking good for whatever age they are, and still in love. You might not get that image on, certainly, not on daytime or nighttime television. You might not get that on the internet. But we need to see that. So to see these lovely elders, oh my gosh, Miss Richardson, Lillian Richardson. Ms. Richardson read, and she said, "Now I'm going to just tell you I'm going to cry." And Ms. Richardson read—I think she read sermons, and she cried. It didn't matter. But again, it was an opportunity to introduce people to works that they might not have known about. It did not have to be highbrow, and it did not have to be something by Martin Luther King. Everybody wanted to read something by Dr. King. There is more to African American literature and elocution than Dr. King. So we had to kind of work on that.

But again, it was an opportunity to introduce people to authors, an opportunity for members of the community who might have been afraid, and might not have wanted to be in front of people, to be in front of people. There was a woman, I can't think of her name, but she was a county chair. And she was dyslexic, so it was very difficult for this woman to do this. But she enlarged the type, and she put it in a book, in a binder, and I think she said right up front, "I'm dyslexic, this may take a minute," but she did it. And so if there's anybody who was out in that audience and had a problem with reading, she did it. And we applauded her.

Intisar Abioto, one of my favorite people in the world, I think Intisar has a slight stutter. But somehow—I don't know how she did it, but she seemed to time that pause so there was a rhythm to it. And the audience was, like, with her—it was just great. And again, she did it! The audience loved her. And anybody young or old who needs to see that, got to see that, and got to be introduced to one of the shining lights in the arts community in Portland. I mean, we had—oh my gosh, we have had everybody in there as a reader. One of my greatest joys is that we had Darcelle, fifteen. Anne Kolibaba was my first partner in this, she was the liaison to the Portland Reading Association and she wanted to have Darcelle. And I don't know why, for some reason we did not get Darcelle, at first. But then I read something about how old Darcelle was—I'm, "Oh, we need to get Darcelle." Darcelle came in full drag! I was, like, this is what I'm talking about! African American literature is for everybody.

I finally went to see her show about five years ago. I did not think she would remember me. She did. She said something from the audience, she's, like, "Yes, blah blah, I tell you, you just got to be a librarian, you just get all the perks." But to be able to, again, make that statement, that our literature is not somehow quaint or so uniquely African American that no one else would understand it or appreciate it—no. It's for everybody. And we want children's books, and whatever. So that's the African American Read-In.

Q: Mmm.

Welch: And there's a story for all the stories that I have to go on.

Q: I remember the one that you're talking about. Yes, they were so powerful to be there and to see all of these very diverse people, reading and celebrating Black literature.

Welch: Yes.

Q: I'm curious if you can talk about, you were in the hub, as you mentioned, of kind of the heartbeat, right, of Black Portland. You were a part of that heartbeat in so many ways. And over the years, from '96 until now, Portland, and that area in particular, has really, really changed. So I think you've kind of had a front row seat to that. Can you talk a little bit about the gentrification, the push-out that you witnessed, and did that impact the library in any way?

Welch: Absolutely. A lot of programming for African Americans, once people saw that it was a branch with a staff that could support programming, then if people wanted to test programs for African Americans, or if I wanted to test something, people knew that was the branch to look at. And we'd have Black people—we'd always have white people, I mean, that's also in the community, but we have a lot of Black people. But what happened over the years, I mean, you could just see the demographics change. So actually, there was a program called—gosh, what was it called? Black Storytime. I think it was just as simple as "Black Storytime." It actually started at the Midland branch, because the librarian who was in charge of it, Kirby McCurtis, had done it someplace else. So when she came to Portland, she would basically introduced the program at the Midland Branch. But of course, that program, once it was tested, it had to be at North Portland. But what was interesting is that the majority of the people coming in to Black Storytime were white families. And I think they were white families who wanted to have an

experience not only of having a Black librarian read them this information, read the stories and everything, but they wanted to be around Black people. But as gentrification set in, it was just, well, white people. I thought, why aren't Black people coming to this? What is going on?

Internally. Okay, this is the home of the Black Resource collection. And I was very sensitive to the fact that Black folks raised money, not for the entire collection, but for a sizeable portion. When Black folks go into our pockets and we raise money, it means it is important, and it needs to be here. And I started getting, you know, inquiries from the selection department from within the library system, asking, “Should the Black Resource collection be there?” And of course, my place was, like, “Yes!” Well, these people are looking at demographics, too. And they're, like, "Your neighborhood is changing." And I said, "You know, that's not really even the point. In the same way that people will go—if you are Asian, you will get on the bus, get in the car or something, and go to those branches that have a larger collection of Asian materials. Historically, this neighborhood has been the heart of the Black community. This branch exemplifies that. There are still many Black people living here. And my position was, “It would be an insult to the Black community, to even think of moving that collection.”

But that began—that was a bigger and harder tug of war with each passing year. I mean, I have to admit, before I left, I talked to some community leaders and said—and then I had already talked to the woman who succeeded me – and I said, "You may get a call at some point about the Black Resource Collection.” I don't think people should have to go down to Central. The whole collection cannot be in this branch, because every year you're buying more books. But, a lot of those materials are, like, first edition. When things aren't circulating, it's like anything like a

bookstore. You go through, and you pull them out. But you don't go through and pull out Black materials in quite the same way. They may not circulate as much. People might not know they're there. There may be reference items that people can only use in the library. But this is a major library system, this is the major library system in this state. But also, really, North Portland is the major branch for Black materials in the library system. It's recognized as such in this region. So you don't just handle these materials in a cavalier way, and you don't get rid of them. But that battle became larger. And I just remember saying to some people, "You may be called upon to speak up. So you know, just get ready."

You know, a part of my job was to recruit new people to the profession. Well, a lot of people are going to come into the profession. But again, my feeling is, I am there to recruit Black people. And I have to admit, one of my joys is that, and one of my greatest achievements is, that the woman who succeeded me was a Black woman, because it would have been very easy for the library system to just put anybody in there, or maybe say, "Well, we'll get another person of color, it doesn't matter what color." But it does matter. It matters. So, let's see, Kirby McCurtis succeeded me. She is now at the executive team level. I'm so proud of her. Let's see, Tamyka Miles succeeded her, and I'm pleased about that because I was on the hiring team for Tamyka. She came into the system and went to Central, but eventually she did what she knew was the right thing, she's like, "Well, I know you're happy, because you always wanted me there." And I said, "Yes, I did." Because Tamyka was good. And I said, "Yes, I don't work there anymore, but it's still my branch, and I want the best for my branch. So yes, I wanted you there." She's great. Perry Gardner [*phonetic*], who is now at Central, headed it. So I feel like—I feel good that three, not one, not two, but three Black people had an opportunity to work at the management level.

And, I mean, Kirby was at the branch as my youth library, so I worked very hard to make sure she had that opportunity. Tamyka, I feel connected to her because I was on the hiring panel for her. And Perry, just because I heard about the great work that he was doing at Central. So I've been on hiring panels with him, and just been very encouraging. I am delighted that Carla Davis, who never worked at North Portland, but substituted there early on when I started working there. I think Black people just came over and subbed just to see who I was. But Carla was either a page or a clerk when I came in. And I have just been—I'm sure I'm not the only one—but I've been very encouraging with her, and made sure to bring her to the attention of people at a higher level in that organization, who could make things happen for her. So I'm just delighted that someone who was a clerk when I got there is now a librarian. And I feel good that I had a part towards encouraging her along the way, and saying, "I know you can do it." And I'm just incredibly proud of her.

And a lot of Black folks have come through North Portland, gone on to do other things—that's fine. That's what you're supposed to do. But that the branch was a part of the upward career mobility of a number of Black people—that's part of why I became a librarian, because I wanted to be somebody who other people could look at and say, “This is what I want to do.” [And now I will just say, you better decide—I got a little notice that my battery's about to go kaput].

Q: Oh, okay.

[INTERRUPTION]

Welch: Okay, here we are. Here we are. Cool. Now you may have to stop me, because, see, I will go off and talk about one thing for twenty minutes—

Q: Well, I'm going to bring this to a close soon.

Welch: Oh, no!

Q: [*Laughs*] I actually want to go back to something.

Welch: Okay.

Q: You mentioned remembering Emmett Till.

Welch: Yes.

Q: And you mentioned—I know that you lived through the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and so—

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: I would like to go back to something you said about remembering the murder of Emmett Till, and that adults were trying to keep it from you, but you saw the picture, you knew what was going on.

Welch: We all knew. All the kids knew.

Q: Do you remember how that felt for you as a kid to be—you know, you had this joyous childhood, there was a lot of love, a lot of great things happening. And yet the backdrop of all of that was this horrific event, and all of the plight of the Civil Rights Movement. What were you feeling at that age? Do you remember at all?

Welch: I am sure that there was sadness and fear, because I know there were moments of that. I just—I remember growing up feeling like, I didn't want to go to the South. We had relatives in Durham, North Carolina. And occasionally we would go down there for the summer, and they would have these signs, "Whites only." And we didn't see that in Baltimore, at least not where it took us. So there was this—I'm sure around the Till event, there was this dread, and I am sure that watching television and seeing the Civil Rights workers and hearing those stories; I just remember clearly, it's like, "I'm not going South, ever." We didn't want to go South. But I think that there was also—when things happened, there was fear. But there was also a sense coming from adults. We had the sense of being protected. Again, I lived in a Black community. Certainly there were white grocers, or whatever, but there were a lot of Black business owners. I mean, you could live your life very fully within the Black community; you could do your shopping. I do recall, though, when you went downtown to some of the big department stores, with some of the stores you couldn't try on clothes, you know? So there was that sense—there was that sense that you knew that some people who were ignorant and racist. Because we were encouraged, I'm sure, to understand that these people who didn't appreciate us were ignorant and racist. But I

know there was a sense of, I don't want to go to the South. And as the news got worse, it was frightening.

You know, as a child, I think there was more of a cocoon. Like I said, with Emmett Till, we saw it, it was horrible. It wasn't—I don't recall it as being something you worried about every day. And, because you didn't see white people—you never worried about white people. And also, it was also during the time, with Dr. King, when at least in terms of lip service, this country was saying that opportunities were opening up. Because in the wake of the Till murder and other things, the bombing of the church in Birmingham, the country was at least giving lip service, even before Kennedy was giving lip service. So we felt that things were getting better. Our lives would be different. And, I mean, Baltimore really is very Southern, I realized as an adult. Now when I'm home, I don't remember going in this neighborhood. And the reason why I didn't go in this neighborhood is because they probably had the equivalent of a sundowner law. I mean, you knew where you would go, and where you weren't. Black people did not go in certain places. But yet in the sixth grade, the school that I went to had very few white students, but it was "integrated," so that was progress. The high school that I went to was very well-integrated.

So I came up during a time when the sense was that our lives were going to be better. But again, we were protected—I'm sure our community protected us. I mean, they told us the truth, you probably have to be twice as good to get half as far. There were some places we knew not to go. I mean, I had a white friend in high school and college, Nancy Quade. And Quade was, like, "I'm sorry, Patricia, you can't visit me." I said, "Honey, I don't want to visit you. I don't want to go into a house where people are racist." But that was seen as, her parents were old and racist, and

that was a different generation. And we were young and bright and Black. And those of us who were Black were Black.

So I think—I came up during that transition period during a—yes, during a period of hope. I did think when this period came, with George Floyd and everything, I thought, "I have seen this before." But this is not exactly the same. Because I think young people coming up now, they don't have that whole—I don't see that real belief that because people say things will be better, they will be better. Wherein at least initially, I think, I and my friends felt like, we go to integrated schools, we're going to go to college, we're going to have the life we want, regardless of these people. So there was more hope.

Q: So what would be your hope for young people now? And in particular, I'm thinking about Black youth in Portland who are living in the community that has been gentrified, and that isn't so much that community of the '90s, but that kind of dispersed, and maybe not feeling like they have that cocoon of Blackness, and then the backdrop of all that's happening politically in our world right now. What is your hope for them? And what would you say to a young person right now, in terms of finding hope?

Welch: First of all, hold on to what you have. I'm a community advisory board for the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, and that is a labor of love. The Center is being renovated, and it is still going to be a center of African American arts and culture. If you have it, you've got to support it, and enjoy it. I mean, just glory in what you have. I hope that young people will learn

as much about our history, not just the sad—not just the struggle of it, because the struggle is always going to be there. But one of the things that I think is, we'll learn that we have endured, and what is so rich and beautiful in our culture. But also, I hope in the midst of this that they will find some joy. I feel like there's sort of this slow movement coming back, and I know that you have addressed this. I do not want this generation to come up thinking to be Black is to be depressed, to be Black is to have no joy. To be Black is only struggle. That is not a life you want to live. In the midst of everything that is going on, young people are still falling in love. I still want to see young people winking and blinking and holding hands, because that's a part of life.tI hope that young people will understand that in the midst of everything that's going on around this, we still have to find joy in life. We have to find joy in each other, that we want to find joy in our culture. And that does not mean to the expense of not knowing anything else.

I hope young people will strive to have as full a life as they can, young Black people. It's important that we know who we are, because that grounds us. But I hope young people coming up now will still see a world of possibility, and understand that we, individually, do have power, that individually there are choices that we can make. There are choices that we can make on how to spend our money, there are choices that we can make on who we live near, there are choices we can make in terms of how we spend our energy. But I hope we can do it with a sense of joy. And that may seem trivial, but I don't think so. I hope that I have been able to inject something positive into other people's lives. And I think the reason that I was able to do that to the extent that I did is because I found what made life joyful for me, and I tried to share it.

So I'm not a big social media person, but I think we're getting on Black Twitter and using that as a means to tear each other down. There's a young woman named Megan Thee Stallion [Megan Jovon Ruth Pete] who was shot in her toe. Now, I don't care what you think about her, I wouldn't know a Megan Stallion song if she came and stood in front of me and sang it. But if there is medical proof that your toe was wounded by a gunshot, and nobody really denies it, and there doesn't really seem to be any provocation, it is hurtful to me to hear the number of people, especially young Black men, who were criticizing this woman all over. I think—I honestly don't know how you get people off of social media, but I think we need to be aware. Young people need to be aware that there are forces and influences that benefit from divisiveness in our community, that it's not an accident that you see certain images, and that after a certain point, we have to choose how we deal with each other, because it's really an expression of how we feel about ourselves.

I also think, for better or worse, in the wake of George Floyd and other things, we're in that period of what I, quite frankly, consider to be [white] guilt. But, you know, if people are guilty, they're guilty. If the opportunity presents itself, take advantage of it. You've got to live your best life for yourself and for your people. And your people could be—your people will be your family, those closest around you. But try to have some joy in the midst of it.

I think being Black is a wonderful thing. I thought it was a wonderful thing when I was growing up. I thought—as soon as I went to a Nina Simone [Eunice Kathleen Waymon] concert at Morgan State College and saw all these young—I was, like, in high school—and saw all these Morgan State sisters who didn't just have un-straightened hair, they had coiffed hair. They were

wearing their African American garb. They looked absolutely glorious. And I was, like, I always wondered why everybody else's hair was okay and ours wasn't, and seeing them, I realized our hair was okay. We just didn't know it. And I'm just hoping that these young people will understand, we are okay, they are okay, but you've got to claim it.

And also, hope they will talk to some older people. I don't know—we may not know everything, but we may be able to give them some advice, or just tell them the story that might help them, or importantly, that we might be able to just share some unconditional love. And I think sometimes, we need to be intentional about that. The older people need to be intentional about letting young people know that we think they are wonderful, that we think they are full of possibilities. There's something on us too—we need to model a certain kind of behavior if we want to see it. And we need to emphasize the possibilities in life. I've always felt the difference between youth—not based on chronological age, but the difference between youth and age is when you suddenly—when you see no more possibilities in life. And I think we need to be out here championing these young people and saying, there are so many possibilities. Figure out what's you, and then go for it. And if you need some help, ask somebody. You'd be amazed at the support you can get.

I have no universal solutions. I just know it's worked for me. So yes, ask somebody, figure out what makes you happy. It's just, I don't know, I just feel like I see so much negative stuff in the media, and I'm like, all the images of who shot who on the news, the first five minutes is always who shot somebody, or something negative, usually Black people. That's not the majority of us, and that is not the story of our life. It's not the story of our reality. There are lot of Black folks out here who actually are doing very well. We lead very good lives, there are actually husbands

and wives who stay together, who raise their children. Their children do well. Just kind of average, normal, happy lives, and that is an option. And I think that's a message we need to emphasize for our young people, because if you can get to that and have the little personal joy in your life, I just think there's no telling what you can do in the world, and how many other people you can help.

Q: Mmh. Well, thank you so much. I tell you, it has been such an honor and a privilege to have this time with you. That library raised me. I am who I am today because of the North Portland Library, so I love that we got to talk and share some of the history of that space, and the programs that you started there. So thank you, thank you. I appreciate you.

Welch: I appreciate you. I am so proud of you. And just knowing you has been a delightful addition to my life.

Q: Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]