I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Velynn Brown

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Velynn Brown conducted by Renée Watson on December 20, 2022. 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.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center | Session Number: 1

Narrator: Velynn Brown | Location: Portland, OR

Interviewer: Renée Watson | Date: December 20, 2022

Q: Thank you so much for joining me today for this conversation, I'm very excited to get to know you more, and to learn more about your story. I would like to start with you just stating your name, where you were born, and what year you were born in.

Brown: Great, yes. My name is Velynn Brown, and I was born December 10, 1972, in Portland, Oregon, at Emmanuel Hospital.

Q: And what was it like, growing up in Portland, Oregon?

Brown: Wow, that's a very big question. I think I'll go back to my origin story, in terms of like how, the growing up pieces. At the center of my Black girl story was community. And that was shaped through church, it was shaped through school, it was shaped through volunteering, but it was all from this remnant of Vanport community that I found out later that really wrapped themselves around me and my family in particular. Pride came in being Joe Frazier's granddaughter, and that's because granddaddy was, he recruited Black families to work in the shipyards, and so being a Frazier meant that we were always an extended family, extended arms, extended heart, because granddaddy wanted us to represent well, and also he took it very, he took a lot of pride in caring for that small community, knowing that folks left the South to come and figure out a new life here.

I didn't know that, but I always thought everybody was my cousin, because [*laughs*] we always, granddaddy had a large porch on Eleventh and Klickitat Street was the street. And that porch has seen many a feat, many a feat, many a laughs, and he would open up the home, so Fridays were fish fries. So as a little girl, throughout all my years, until we lost him in my junior in high school, I would come, and there was always people! I couldn't tell who was mine, and who wasn't mine.

Granddaddy and his brother married sisters, so we were a double set of Fraziers, so I grew up with over two hundred family members, again, so I had this very unique experience, because it was like, this Black, little Black utopia in the whitest city, later I found out, in the country. And I felt that later growing up and going out, when, in dominant culture settings, honors classes, you know, as I later went into high school, college, and different things, and so my orientation to who I was, was very much steeped in Black history, poetry, church, so I kind of always stood out, [laughs] in those settings, because I had a lot of confidence because I was affirmed where I was. And later, that began to erode as I had to meet up against, you know, being the only all the time, that was exhausting at times, but I could always come back to this nucleus.

My dad was a pastor, so I had granddaddy's legacy one generation, then my dad began to pastor a lot of those elders [laughs] that kind of migrated to our church, and that church was Mt. Sinai Community Baptist Church, one of the oldest churches that was around back then as well. And so, a lot of history, a lot of, man, just reverence for one another, in the way that we tended to each other. And so, that's what it meant to be Black to me, that's what it meant to be a Portland

Black girl, was that I knew how to care for my neighbor, care for others, and I brought that same identity even to dominant white spaces. You know, they called me the Mama of everybody, or you know, I was always the sister, and it was again, my orientation to family and community that was really steeped there.

Q: What elementary school did you go to, and what kind of student were you at that age, when you were let's say, seven, eight? Who were you?

Brown: Yes! Okay! Well I was one of the very few that got to go to Kennedy Elementary School, right before it changed, so it's now McMenamins, and I feel old when I say this, but I was like the last class [*laughs*] to go to McMenamins, and, I'm sorry, go to Kennedy School, and then I later went to Sabin. And when I was at Sabin, I was very confident, very intuitive child, took studying serious, you know, I loved to learn, I loved to learn. I loved school! I really did, I liked the smelling of the crayons, I loved the dressing up, I loved my little pleated skirts, my garanimals, you know, I was coordinated. Like I loved school, the whole ceremony of school was just special to me.

And then later, my parents promoted in their work, we bought a home, and unfortunately that elevation, you know, that promotion took me away from that nucleus that I was used to, I went to Meek Elementary School, which was still, I had Black friends, but it was much more diverse. Asian, Vietnamese, Latina, even Indigenous, and so I grew up around all kind of kids, and so I began to really love people, love culture. Yes, and I think that's when I could start numbering how many Black teachers I had, I could tell you like, the concentration of studies, and focus, like

Black history, and things began to kind of be accessory, you know, not the main course, in a sense. And so, even then I began to be kind of an advocate [laughs] for my, for representation and my people. Because it was lonely! I felt kind of out of the water, in a sense. Yes.

Q: Did you ever talk to anyone about that? Were you able to articulate it then?

Brown: Yes, Miss Brandon [*phonetic*] was my fourth-grade teacher at Meek Elementary School. And a particular incident happened on picture day, I'll never forget this, fourth-grade picture day, and I had been, I'd been to Lilian's to get my hair pressed, I had super, super thick hair, my mom spent a fortune to find people that would press my hair. Well it rained during recess, and my little press out became mostly more like a Don King like kind of situation, you know? [*laughs*] And I went in the bathroom, and that's when white girls would like, feather their hair, you know, they'd put their hair all down and like, run their fingers through it, and they'd push it back, and so I was like ooh, if I do that, then my hair will dry too!

And so, I did the whole thing, we were all laughing and, you know, getting dry in the bathroom, and I put my hair back, and literally, they were like, "Oh my God!" They started laughing at me. "Oh my God, you look so ugly, you look like an African!" I mean they just like, totally switched up on me. That was the day I realized I wasn't, you know, I was Black-Black, and I very much did not—I was other, you know, I was other. And so, I remember going back to my class and crying, being very upset, and Miss Brandon of course told me to tighten up my tears, and we would talk about it later, you know, and that was the day I, you know, wanted to find out more

about Africa. I was like well if I'm a slave, and I look like a slave, then where are our people from?

And she was like, you know what? She took the time to kind of talk me through, I remember looking at a map. She just planted that seed that there's nothing wrong with you, you know, there's nothing wrong with your hair, you know, there's nothing wrong with your origin. And I think that's when I really, really began to want to explore my identity, like the roots of where I was from, not just in the States, but more of where I was from in this world, you know? So if I'm going to be African, if I'm going to look like a slave, then I'm about to look like all of it, you know? [laughs] That's kind of how I took ownership of it. [*Laugh*] Yes.

Q: And what was the dynamic in your family? Like was race something you all talked about? Did you bring any of that home, what was happening at school?

Brown: Oh yes, my dad used to pay me good money to read his favorite classics. So I read *Roots*, I read, oh my goodness, what else did he have me read? Oh my goodness! Maya Angelou, who was his person? Richard, hmm! I'm trying to think.

Q: Richard Wright?

Brown: Yes, Richard Wright! Who else did he have me read? He even had me reading African history, Malcolm X, just a lot of the classics. And my mom wasn't much of a reader, but I was a devoted, I devoured books. So, I thought I was just such a big girl to be able to have these

conversations with my dad about my opinion and like, you know, what stood out to me. We'd go on dates and have discussions about books and so that was the backdrop. And you know, Black art was in our home, I remember listening to a lot of music on record players, and just kind of being schooled in the richness and the depth of our culture. And that was the safe place that I could go back home to and again, I was, I later went to Beaumont Middle School, Grant High School, still diverse, but not Afro-centric, you know? [*Laughs*] Not Black-centric at all, so yes.

Q: Let's pause and talk about your family, you've mentioned that your dad was a pastor.

Brown: Yes.

Q: Do you have siblings, can you tell me more about?

Brown: Yes! Yes, so I'm the oldest of four. So there's me, my sister Angela, she's five— I guess I'm going to tell my age, but you know, I'm fifty now, but she's forty-five, she's five years younger than me. I have a brother who's nine years older than me, my brother Ty, and then my adopted brother, AJ, who is about, I think he's like thirty now, he just turned thirty. So yes, that's my family. My mom worked full-time, she worked for OPS Life Insurance Company, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and OPS Life Insurance, and she was, she went from the mailroom to manager, like she really, I saw her in her scrubs, you know, as a little girl, to her heels going downtown Portland. I thought that was so fancy, you know, to see my mom, and you know, the company picnics were so lavish, I remember drinking lemonade at a water fountain, and riding on boats at some fancy park. Yes we have made it, couldn't tell us nothing! [*Laughs*]

And my dad stayed himself closer to the ground of the community, very much advocate, he worked for CSD, but eventually felt really called to do much more intentional work in our community. He felt like on that smaller scale he can make more, you know, long-term change and impact, and so in my mind, he was like little Martin Luther King, Jr. in my mind. So you know, I'd go to these, used to call them wet chicken dinners, all these fancy little banquets and stuff, and I just would, I was so proud to be his daughter. And my mom, her work ethic, and seeing how hard she worked. But that also set me up kind of as the third parent in our family dynamic, and so, because they both worked full-time, I was the one that tended to my younger siblings, cooked dinner, got them ready for school the next day, helped them with homework, things like that.

Q: What was it like being the daughter of a pastor? And can you [*crosstalk*] that? [*Laughter*] And if you have any thoughts about the Black church in Portland's impact in communities, and neighborhoods, especially back in your childhood. [*crosstalk*].

Brown: Yes.

Q: Kind of set the scene for what it was like to be going to church, and how church impacted the Black community.

Brown: Oh my goodness, yes! It was our base, it was our pulpit, it was our, you know, our stage. Church was everything, you know? And being a pastor's daughter, kind of in that fishbowl, there

was a lot, I felt a lot of pressure to, I want to say play the part, but like also, do good, like we, I honored the call, just like my dad, like I took, when he, you know, was, you know, got—what do you call it? It's not oriented, what's the word?

Q: Ordained?

Brown: Ordained! There's this picture of me, you could, it looked like I was saluting too, you know, like I was taking the [*laughs*] same vows that he was. Because I remember helping him with the flashcards, with his Greek and Hebrew, like we, it was a family affair in terms of his leadership, and what that looked like. That's the good part of it. I think the difficult part of it was I took that on, and I didn't allow myself just to be a kid, either, you know, I took the responsibility in a way that I kind of grieve for little Velynn, in terms of how much responsibility she held.

But the outlets were awesome too, because Daddy was very much not, he wasn't [*pause*] egotistic, or chauvinist, or patriarchal type of leader, which was different, I think, in a lot of ways. He gave us, literally he gave us the pulpit, he gave us the stage, as young women, as young people, we wrote plays, we performed poetry, we danced, we was breaking out moves and stuff, and the old folks didn't know what to do with that, but we were tearing stuff up! There were some moves we had to like, cut, like the butterfly and different things, [*laughs*] because we was doing the most.

But from, like church was like, mm, like my, like anything is possible, like my atlas to the world, because there was no, there were no boundaries! And I think that's where I really learned leadership, from being Miss Mt. Sinai, to president of the usher board, to directing the choir.

Q: Wait, hold on what is Miss Mt. Sinai? Like, please tell me more about that! [*Laughs*] What does that mean, how do you, is it something you're chosen for? Do you run? [*Crosstalk*].

Brown: Yes! Yes! It's horrible, it's so good, but like, okay, so we were part of the National Baptist Convention. And so, we had branches, the largest branch was in Seattle, and all the honeys were in Seattle, that's a different story. But, our little church, a part of that was this fundraising event where each church got to, [*laughs*] got to do this whole ceremony, and get to choose, you know, Miss Mt. Sinai, like a coronation of such. And so, one way you won was the bake sales and them chicken dinners, because you had to raise the money, right? So it wasn't just looking cute, you had to bring the money too, you know?

And so, I think we did like some kind of, we had to memorize scripture, we had to do some kind of performance kind of thing, and I believe there was like, some kind of secret ballot, I could be wrong, but there was some way people voted. And you know, our church even then was equitable, before we knew what equitable was, because I realized each year we all rotated as Miss Mt. Sinai, [*Laughs*] everybody basically had a chance! [*Laughs*] We had a little, you know, sash, and you know, and yes, but I think it was also part of your participation, so we did like Black History Month teas, we served a lot in the community, it was like a well rounded way of

kind of really training us to be community leaders, training us to wear our faith outside the four walls. And I loved that, I didn't realize it was so unique in a lot of ways.

And then, another way in which we were kind of steeped in kind of this collective of Baptist churches was fellowship, our fellowship Mass church events, which you were a part of as well. But every first Sunday, this cluster, we weren't very large congregations, but together we were huge, you know, and we would have our fellowship Mass choir practices, we would support each other on Mother's Day, and Youth Day, and Men's Day, it was just again this concentrated effort to, now I realize, pass on the legacy of faith, pass on the legacy of service, be there for each other, like realize how white Portland was, like no wonder they kept us in church all the time. Because racial trauma would have got me a long time ago, right? But we were so like, inundated in our own world, and activities, and events, I didn't even really feel it until much later. So I'm so grateful for that cocoon.

Q: When do you feel like you started coming out of that cocoon? When did you start —

Brown: Oh!

Q: —just how white Portland is, and you know, [*unclear*]—

Brown: Yes.

Q: — within the larger city outside of the Black community?

Brown: Yes. I think I really began to experience it in high school. One, I didn't get to go to Jefferson, so I had a whole attitude about that. And Jefferson was much more predominant Black neighborhoods, community, students, than Grant at the time. Again, we had this kind of little, we had a good percentage, but we weren't like deep, like Jeff. So I was like, I already got to go to this white school, [*laughs*] and the teachers were, I could probably count how many Black teachers were, actually I can count them, I'm counting them in my head now, and yes, I kind of got taken out of that cocoon in high school.

I think being in honors classes, where before, in middle school, and even elementary school, again I could bring my story, I could advocate for myself, what books I wanted to read, like I was a negotiator back then. But in high school they were not playing, they were not, no, they were not having any of that. So that's where I couldn't, I felt like I began to get silenced, and even how I wrote, which was more poetic in prose, and they wanted more structure, and even, yes it just became really narrow for me in a lot of ways. And so, I found my way in theater and different things, kind of again, outside of it, but I loved to learn, and so my learning kind of, the way I wanted to be focused, and I feel kind of reached a standstill there, and it really kind of began to close my world down, in terms of how I thought, you know, how I was, you know, aligning my life against the world, you know? It became very white and lonely. Lonely in a lot of ways.

But I wasn't about to let nobody beat me, so I was like, you get an A, I'm getting an A. So you know, it's like [*laughs*] I'm just as good as you, don't think because I have to now do it a

different way, I can't, I'm not capable. So that strong Black girl kind of began to come alive there in a lot of ways. Yes, and then I became Rose Festival Princess at Grant High School, which is a whole nother thing. That's a big, big, [*laughs*].

Q: [*unclear*] talk about it as if I don't know what Rose Festival Princess is.

Brown: Right, right, right! [*laughs*]

Q: What is Rose Festival—

Brown: So yes, well the Rose Festival, yes, so in high school, PIL [Portland Interscholastic League], which is all of the high schools in the Portland metropolitan area, the student body chooses a court, and then the school chooses the princess, and now listen to this, now I found out, well if you do the statistics, if Black people voted for me, I was good, because [*laughs*] the rest of the court was like, four white girls. So I, the reason why I went for it was because like, hmm, statistically, I should come out okay! [*laughs*] So, my people came through! And, but that was some, that was an eye opener.

So yes, like the makeup, I can't wear pale color beige, I'm chocolate, you know? And so I had to advocate to get, oh my gosh, what was the name of that makeup? It was that Maya Frank, oh, I'm dating myself! But yes, there was only one, Fashion Fair, Fashion Fair makeup. And I had to go before the Rose Festival board and advocate for makeup and stockings that looked like me.

And I think from that point on in the competition, they were done with me, because I was like, this is not fair.

But yes, just the world became very much more narrow, and I think that's where I began to journal more, write more, write my feelings out. But it was lonely! It began to become, it can be lonely out here, and I began to refer to myself as the only chocolate chip [*laughs*] in a lot of settings. There's always one of us, you know? And white folks be happy, well we, here's the representation, here's the diversity, we have one, you know? And part of me felt like I had to educate—oh, go ahead.

Q: Were you the only Black girl on the court that year? On the, once all the high schools chose their representative, you were the Black girl from Grant, were there any other Black girls?

Brown: Black girl from Grant, and there was one more sister, [unclear] from Jeff. The other Shawanda Brown, from Jeff. And we rode it out, yes, we were thick as thieves during that time! [*laughs*] Yes.

Q: Did you all get to go to Pendleton, do you remember—

Brown: Yes, that Pendleton roundup?

Q: Yes, what was that, like talk about like, where is Pendleton, what is that city like?

Brown: Oh my goodness.

Q: And then what was, you know, what was it like for you all to be going there? What was your experience?

Brown: Yes, well as a Black person, as a Black child growing up, my parents always told me, when I was outside of the, there were particular corners, usually kind of like past Eighty-Second back in the day, you know, between Eighty-Second and downtown, be on alert. Be on alert, white folks are not for you, [*laughs*] you know, there was just this hyper awareness of being safe, even when we used to take trips to the beach as a family, we fried chicken and, you know, kind of like the Green Book days, and made poundcake, and we couldn't go to the restroom until we got all the way to the place, so you know, empty your bladder. There was just ways in which we had to prepare to go in those outskirts of Oregon, because historically it's a super racist state, and they're not for us. So there's always that kind of trepidation when you're going out.

I think dressed like all the other princesses, and being in this privileged state and, you know, I had my own chauffeur, you know, all the care of a princess, in terms of aesthetics, felt very special and elevated, and I took a lot of pride in representing my school. But me being able to be my full self, and in particular in Pendleton, you know, I never rode a horse like that before, I think that was interesting. Now we did get down on the line dance, they couldn't mess with the line dance, me and Shawanda tore it up, that was the best part was the line dance. But you know, I just felt different.

And oh my gosh, the Pendleton, Pendleton is very famous for their flannel wear, like there's a particular style, it's so itchy. It's so itchy! And I was like, why, this thing is like two, three hundred dollars, and it's so itchy! So yes, I was saying about the Pendleton attire, that wool was itchy, okay? And so, you're sucking it up, you have to, you know, have the poise, have the, you know, you're representing, and trying not to itch at the same time! [*Laughs*]

But you know, on the other end, one of the things I do love about being from this particular part of the world is the adventure, the outdoors, the beauty, the mountains, the trees. And so, there was a time where I felt like I had to choose between either being a Black girl and what that meant, and getting your hair wet, and being out in the rain, according to my Mama, that's not what Black girls do, right? And so there was this tension between me wanting to experience the whole world at times, and then what it meant to be confined to some of the particular rules and expectations, and what it means to keep pressed hair, and to, yes, and to be safe, right? Part of, I found out now, my mom was like you were always trying to go somewhere, and I was just trying to keep you close, right?

And so, I saw my friends, I saw white folks' privilege, going places, doing things with that freedom, and I wanted the same thing. And that's not how we rolled, you know? And so there was that tension at times.

Q: Yes. I'd love to know more about the landscape of Portland. Like you mentioned, you know, there's the outdoors, but can you talk about what it is like to grow up in a place that is so much a

city, but also very much surrounded by nature, even when you're just driving down the regular street? Can you describe what you're seeing and what it, when did you realize, or come to appreciate that?

Brown: Yes, I love that question. I told you about us moving on up, we moved, my parents got, were going higher in their careers, and my bedroom in particular was painted by an artist, and it literally was nature, so you go up the stairs, there was the ocean, you hit the floors there were trees, flowers, birds, rainbows, mountains, very much a mirror of the Pacific Northwest in my own room. So that's what I fell asleep looking at, right? And so, I told my mom, you should have had a plain purple or orange bedroom if you didn't want me, you know, out here, but that's what I went to sleep to every night, right? Staring at a bird or a flower.

And so I looked for those things, and it was a way in which I felt God spoke to me, it was a way that I meditated, there's so many lessons that you can just learn from watching rain fall, or watching a bird fly. And so I think having so much of that diversity made me a very observant and curious young person, even an adult, even to this day, I love going for walks, I love the smell of fresh rain. I'm always looking for the lines and colors in the sky, waking up, being able to see Mount Hood, and Mount St. Helens. It, yes they call it God country for a reason, and that was one thing I felt, even as we were navigating coming from low class to middle class, we would—my mom says we was broke middle class, but that was one thing I felt that white folks couldn't take from me, that my Creator made this, it's equitable, it's available to all of us. And so that was a leveling ground for me.

So later in college, I'd go on those hikes, I'd do all the things they were doing, you know? [*Laughs*] And my mom wasn't there to fuss at me about my perm getting, or my press getting messed up. I could be free that way. And even, Renée, I would say there was still that underlying fear. So even though, and even now, even though I do those things, and I push myself to do those things, there's always kind of this backdrop of like, be cautious, beware, you know, how free can I be? How many Black people are in the room? Yes. Yes. That's real. That's part of living Black in Oregon. You have to always have those antennas up. That's unfortunate, but it's a reality, and I teach my own kids the same thing. It could cost you your life, or even your peace, your mental health. So yes.

Q: Do you have any favorite Portland spots that, with speaking of nature, like where do you go, and what do you like to visit and walk through here?

Brown: Yes! Wow, it's so interesting you asked me this question. In my adult years, I now live in Vancouver, right at the cusp of where Vanport used to be, like across from Vanport. I walk there every Sunday, my two-hour walk. It's so interesting, because that's where my grandfather worked, that's where we originated from as a family, as a community. So that feels very sacred to me, that water from both sides of the Columbia right there. I love the coast, of course everybody loves the coast, but, and I know it's cold, and I know it's, everybody ain't for cold, the cold ocean! But listen, I've jumped some, you know, jumped over some deep waves, almost lost my life up in that water, you know? But all of it, the salty water, the foam of the water, the waves, just the vastness, you can just get lost in it.

And then in terms of like, trees, I love trees. I really do love trees, and I think scouting out parks, I'm trying to think of a particular place. Yes, I just—oh the zoo, up on top of the zoo is a beautiful area, there's a lot of trees that you can kind of circle around. But yes ocean, the river, on a weekly, and then you can just get out, put your shoes on, and get moving, you'll find beauty, you know? You'll find beauty.

Q: You've mentioned Vanport a few times. Can you talk about what Vanport was, and its impact on Black Portland today?

Brown: Yes. Yes. So Vanport was a manmade city that was created to help, it was where Henry Kaiser ordered World War II ships to be made. And I talked a lot about my grandfather who helped recruit Black families in particular, but there were a lot of, it wasn't just Black folks that came to Vanport, but definitely the poor, the poorest. Portland State University originated out of Vanport Community College.

And again, I would say the nucleus of Black, historical Black Portland, was birthed after the flood that happened there, and it was Memorial Day, and the sirens went off, and there was, there should have been notice given to families to be prepared, but they waited until the very last minute, some say, you know, the bow broke, and they knew that they were going to break, some say it was intentionally done, there's all, there's a lot of mystery behind Vanport in a lot of ways. But our my family's story is that once my grandfather heard the sirens, he ran back home to my grandmother, and she wasn't going to leave until she took down her yellow curtains. She had just finished sewing them, [*laughs*] and she was like, "I hear that, and I'm going to get my curtains,

and I'm going to get my roast." We laugh about this as a family to this day! But Cecil Mae was not playing.

Now my grandfather had a car, my Aunt Jean was still alive then, and my grandfather had to have three men help push him up out of the water, his car was actually going down. And so, and it wasn't just Black men that helped him. There were all people that kind of helped pull him out. And that's kind of also part of our orientation to white folks, or other folks. You know, you can know a man by his character, you know? And you can know someone in your most vulnerable hour, how they will respond to you. And so even my grandfather, after being displaced, a lot of Black families had to be moved to Red Cross during that time, because Oregon still was an exclusionary state, it was illegal to be Black while in Oregon. And they were not happy about having to welcome this new, basically immigrant community, if we want to be honest, we were basically immigrants.

And that home I talk about on Eleventh and Klickitat was actually sold under the rug, under the carpet, my grandfather's Jewish boss took that loan out, and they were friends, and my grandfather stayed with, his family stayed with his boss for several months until he was able to get on his feet, and you know, he saw him as a man, as an equal, he also saw the discrimination that he was up against. And so he said, you know, Joe, as long as you pay me when you get settled, I got you. And so, that home, I think it's been about four years now, sold for a million dollars. [*Laughs*] Right?

And so just, I say that story because the power of relationship, the power of being seen as a whole person, and that there are people, there are allies that can be trusted. They're far and few, but there's some real ones, and he never made my grandfather feel any less of a man, you know, he kept his dignity, he continued to pay on time.

So Vanport is very special in my family history, because not only did Granddaddy survive and thrive, we were able to extend that privilege to other community members, and that home I talk about where folks would come and, on fish fries on Fridays, barbecues, Sunday dinners, everyone didn't get that same type of access to creating a new life. And my grandfather felt, again, that held responsibility, so whatever he could do. He even opened up businesses, things he didn't even, really wasn't even interested in. [*Laughs*] Like we had a restaurant, he had another business, we were like, "what"? I found out later he just did things to help again share the resource and the opportunity for folks.

So now, fast forward, my grandmother passed last year at almost 102. And so, five generations later here I sit, servicing the remnant of that community through Black Parent Initiative as my day work. And still trying to leave that legacy and leave that love, extend that arm to others, because it's just who I am and how I'm made. And I, we desperately need it now. I mean, now than ever before, you know, predatory displacement, gentrification, all of these things continue to come like that flood and like, wash us away. And it can be exhausting, sis, it can be discouraging, and I always talk about this, like preserving the remnant, I'm here still preserving the remnant, we're still the same small percentage, but dammit, we're still here! Like we're still here, and, but it never has been easy for us, it never has been easy.

So I, yes, I'm here. I'm here trying to make space, opportunity through, for our families here at Black Parent Initiative, we have a doula program, home visiting program, a school-based program, all these programs are centered on racial identity, they're all centered on education and our history, and our brilliance, our Blackness. Still trying to create that space, you know? It's interesting, as I'm saying it, like wow, I'm still trying to do the same thing, just a different time, and a different level, different impact.

Q: You talked about there being a remnant. What was lost? Like how have things changed since you were, I don't know, maybe in high school, Black Portland, the community that you grew up in, lived in, until now, that area? Like where your church, where your dad's church was, can you talk about that neighborhood, and maybe start with what it used to be, and then how it's changed over the years?

Brown: Yes, yes. Wow, that's a big question, and I've been there watching it change along the way. So when I was in high school, you know, there was still a much more concentrated presence of Black folks. You would see my grandmother and her friends on their porches, you would see, you would be able to talk and run into family members, community members at the store, at the movie theater, passing by in the Popeye's line, you know [*laugh*] while I'm at Fred Meyer's. There was always like this ebb and flow of being seen and reaching out, you know, we are cultural people, that goes back to Africa. And so, you know, relationship is our highest value, and to be seen is like, the highest esteem. And so, that was on the daily, you know?

If I was doing something wrong and with some boo I wasn't supposed to be with past my curfew, some sister mother, [*laughs*] from church, before I could get home, I would be busted! You know, like there was just this catching and this caring of one another. I was Northeast Portland's Black girl, and everybody had the, could speak correct, and [*laughs*] you know, they could parent me, they could, they were responsible for me, right? That's how, it was the orientation of it.

Fast forward, because of all of those waves, because of being pushed out, we're not there. We couldn't afford all of the tax increases, you know, oh it's just painful! Like now there's, you know, condos, and dog parks, and pubs, and instead of seeing people at parks, and oh my gosh, we would have like, Black softball—my mom was the pitcher for Ebony softball team, right? And so, I go to that same park now and all I see is dogs. I don't see kids, I don't hear kids laughing, I don't see families congregating, picnicking. That's hard, even yes, the like, Williams and Killingsworth, Alberta, Irving Park, again, these places where you could always roll up and know, you would know one somebody, and if you didn't know them, you keep talking, be careful because they might be your cousin, or you might be related, you know, there was always this circling back to one another, and we're now just completely dispersed, more out into the numbers, or to Gresham, Vancouver, Beaverton area, but not that central location.

And as a result of that, you know, violence has increased as a result of that. The children are not okay, you know, because there is not the stabilization of the root of who we are as a people. It's, the root has been chopped and tossed. So that's, you know, again that's why I love doing what I do, we're trying to create that virtually, we're trying to create that, like a commute kind of

village, a commute neighborhood. Thank God for social media in that way we're able to kind of get things out, and our families are coming to our events and different things, and we do our best to pass, you know, until the next event, but it's not the same as every day knowing that you could see Pastor Howard next door to my grandfather, that you could, you looked for them, and they looked for you, you know?

We don't look for each other anymore, because we don't expect to see each other there, you know? And so, we're kind of like nomads, we're kind of just passing in a lot of ways here. We do our best when we can, but it's different, it's very different.

Q: When you were in high school, like could you see yourself doing the type of work that you're doing now? What were your dreams back then, and who was that, I don't know, maybe sixteen-year-old Velynn, compared to who you've become? And what were some of your goals and dreams? And how have they changed over the years?

Brown: Yes, they've really changed! I was going to be a journalist, I wanted to be a writer, I wanted, I love poetry, I love Black literature. I felt like I had to put those things aside, because I saw the disparity of my community and thought that felt like such a privileged path in life, to kind of do what you want, and I just had this profound sense of responsibility to take care of mine. Take care of my people. Because I look around, and everybody's leaving. You know, who's going to be left to kind of hold that up. So yes, that career path, but I knew I would always be for Black folks, about justice, like listen, yes, I wanted to be Angela Davis in my time. I just

liked shaking things up. I liked checking power and making it hold responsibility, and that has not changed, and probably won't ever change.

Q: What have been some of the obstacles to being that change maker, and the person that's nurturing and loving the community? What have you had to sacrifice for that to happen?

Brown: Oh man. I think part of the sacrifice, not knowing when to turn it off, oftentimes, because community life and personal life are so integrated, intertwined. That was one of our reasons, well first of all, we couldn't afford to live in Portland when we were ready to, but what really sent us back over the bridge was my husband was like, you need a separation, I'm sorry. [*Laughs*] Like we need you to ourselves, like you're going to see a need, you're going to always run into somebody you know, always run into somebody I know. [*Laughs*]

So the clock's never turned off, you know? Again, kind of my DNA. And so, I'm relearning how to care for myself, I'm relearning how that part of our liberation is also tied to my wellbeing, and me being able to model that, and equipping people to, you know, advocate for themselves, not taking on the responsibility, like I have to save it, I can't save everybody, but you know, yes. Part of me feels like, or felt like I can change the world, I can help whoever needs help, you know? So relearning that, and giving people the opportunities and the resources to create their own life, because it is different, right? So I can't recreate what was, there's this acceptance now of okay, then this is what it is, so what do I do with it?

I think, yes, I've been privileged to work alongside a major justice advocate, Dr. Joy DeGruy is, I call it, she's a mentor to me, she's also our advisor here at Black Parent Initiative, and someone who is very much radical in speaking truth about generational trauma, also loves to go fishing in Alaska. She likes to catch huge fish! She, and me as well, I'm learning that even while serving my community, and even while trying to, you know, they talk about this whole long arc of justice, because it just doesn't feel like it's ever going to end, you have to find ways to refill your cup, you have to find ways to reimagine what liberation looks like, and part of that liberation is peace, Renée, having peace, and having joy, like deep joy, regardless of what's happening to my people in the world. I'm grateful for my faith that anchors me back to be still and rest in that place, because my tendency is to pop back up and go fighting again. Yes.

Q: As you're working with Black families, and mentoring folks, and offering programs for them, what impacts your own family? I know you're a mom, you're a wife, how are you thinking about that in relationship to your Blackness, and the intersections of your womanhood, and just all of that? Can you talk about raising Black children in Portland, and how those two may be, I don't know, maybe are in conversation with each other in some type of push-pull?

Brown: Yes, that's a really good question. And I think me and my kids would have two different answers, but I'll try to answer for the both of us. So what that looks like in terms of protection was me leaving my career a couple years after me and my husband got married. We decided to sacrifice and live on one income while all our friends were moving on up, and doing all of the things, for our peace, for that impartation of Blackness, for history, for our kids to be, feel

comfortable in their own skin, and knowing what it would require to nurture that, and to center that, I needed to be a full-time mommy.

So I was able to do that, and I'm grateful for that time, like planting those seeds deep. And so that looked like doing all the research on Black books, and you know, getting them accolade [*phonetic*] to the only, well actually, I ran on the same track club, Albina Roadrunners, so you know, finding that legacy again, so I was able to tap back into that same community in that way. World Stage Theater was another way, finding theater, finding that same remnant to tap back into. And that became kind of our—oh of course, Black church, of course Black church—and so passing on that legacy was so important to me. My Frazier family, actually we were a full committee, and so we did scholarships for our young people in our family. We rented out skating rinks, and we rented out bowling rinks, and again we would make this affinity space that once existed, we were intentional about creating it with our family.

And so, it was beautiful, but my kids ran into the same thing as I did. They were too Black for the white spaces. So much so, they were like, we don't—thank you for the house in Vancouver, like we get that we have all these things, but we want to go be with the people. We want to go be with this last kind of, you know, it was like the last years of that remnant community. We could see it Renée, like dispersing. We could see it, folks slowly going on, and so I was like okay, well this is the time to catch it. So we ended up selling our home, moving back into a townhouse, [*laughs*] and going right back to the hood, on Dekum. Well actually, Seventeenth and Liberty, where we lived.

And it was that last handoff, I believe, and my kids are so grateful, even my daughter now, my youngest, goes to Jeff— all my kids got to go to Jeff, I didn't get to go to Jeff. See? I still wasn't over it! [*Laughs*] But all my, and my husband is a Demo [Democrats, mascot for Jefferson High School], he graduated from Jeff, so my daughter now is a Jefferson dancer there, and it looks different, but there's a pride of that legacy, of being able to know that that's where that nucleus of a community came from. But I still can't protect them from dominant white culture and spaces, I still can't. I remember shortly after Arbery was—Arbery, he was running, the young man that was running, what was his name?

Q: Ahmaud.

Brown: Ahmaud, yes. My son's an athlete, he's a junior now at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, he was home on break during that time, and I remember when we heard about it, he jumped up, put on the sneakers, and was ready to run outside, and I'm like, what are you doing? Like you cannot go outside. And he looked at me and he said, "Mommy, if I don't run, if I don't leave this house now, I will never leave home, I will never want to leave. So I have to go. And if I don't make it back, then at least, at least I died on my terms. They're not going to take away my choice. I can't, I can't predict what they'll do to me, but I still have choice, and I'm going to use that, you always told me I had choice, Mommy." And so I remember just like, begging him to stay, I was just like, no, but there was some truth to it, right?

And the same thing when George Floyd was murdered, all the things, I found myself as a mama wanting to protect my children! And they're like, yo, you're an activist, what are we doing? You

can go, but we can't? So they were like, Mom, listen, this is what our people do. So, it's a different thing, you know, when you're reading it in books and like, you can, I'll take the risk for myself, but my kids wanting to be on the front lines? Wow. And they did it! And they still do it. And I'm proud of them for that, and I'm proud that choice is liberating for them, but I also, I'm a mama! [*Laughs*] You know? And I worry about them.

I work for a Black organization on purpose. I go to a Black church on purpose. I travel a lot to Black spaces on purpose. Because I can't just see this place day in and day out, it's, it can be sobering. So that's kind of how I kind of fill my cup. I don't know if I'll stay here forever, part of me wants to be released and free to like, can I leave? [*Laughs*] But for now, you know, we're trying to make the best of it. I think my kids would say, you know, I think I do promote a lot of self-care, and doing you, and other things. So they're like Mom, it's time for you to practice what you preach, you know?

And during, I recently had COVID, and I was recovering and trying to pop up, and cook, and clean, and my daughter was like, "Mom, I'm going to call your therapist, because you ain't listening to nobody but her. Because there you go, going again," you know? And so they're watching, they're watching how my practice imitates real life, and so that's my new, I'm learning from them to do that better. Yes.

Q: Can you talk about Black love, and how you met your husband, and how has love also been, I don't know, healing and revolutionary for you in your work, as well?

Brown: Oh my goodness, I can talk about Black love, because I have an amazing partner and soulmate, I feel so fortunate, so fortunate. And the fact that he's not from Portland, I think, has been another central place for me to call home. He's from Chicago, Illinois, the South Side, and always knew he was going to marry a Black queen, according to him, and that's all he was ever really attracted to and desired.

And so, having the experience of like, being too sister girl for my homies, for the brothers, didn't want to date me, and like, too Black for the white boys or other, to have a Black man so enamored and just, you know, he just could hold all of my identities, of me being smart, of me being adventurous, of me being a church girl, like all of these things where I could sometimes fit in some buckets, but not all of them, he could hold all of them, because he came from a place that Black folks were diverse, you know, they were—he saw [*laughs*] a little bit of everything so they weren't monolithic, they weren't just one type of particular way. And so, that was liberating.

I think too, him being steeped in, like me, in his culture, in his history, really allowed me to flourish in our love. We met at Timothy's nightclub, the first time, and man, talk, dark, handsome, blue suit, you know, it was my twenty-first birthday, I was out with my church girlfriends, I had to be ready for church the next day, but I did go out on my twenty-first birthday, yes I did. And we met dancing on the dance floor. I was engaged to somebody else at the time, but he wasn't really being very—I knew he wasn't being faithful, but I didn't know how to cut the relationship off.

So I met this guy, and I'm like oh my gosh, is this real? Like I didn't even think he was like, I was like, you know, you don't have kids, you ain't got no STDs, like I just went down the list! [*Laughs*] Like are you a real Black man? And he thought that was hilarious, you know? We, I gave him my phone number, he called, and my dad fussed me out, because this wasn't the person that I was engaged to at the time, so he was like, who are you, you know, what are you doing, Velynn? So I got on the phone and he was like wow, you know, you sisters always talk about how Black men are dogs, and you're a church girl, lying to me? Like what's this about? I was like, oh my God, well I didn't lie, I just didn't tell you the whole truth, you know?

So that was the end of him, and then three years later, we're at a mutual friend's barbecue, that community again, he had cut his hair off, I had dyed my hair like this brownish red, so we didn't even look like the same people. He walks up to me again, and he's like, how are you doing? And I'm like, I'm fine. He's like, that you are. I was like, oh my God, well how corny, you're so corny! That's such a corny line! [*Laughs*] But it's cute! And so he's like, "well wait a minute, I know that name, he's like oh you're Velynn!" And he was like, "I can't believe I'm doing this again", I'm like, "what do you mean?" He was like, "you don't remember me?" And I'm like, [*gasps*] "oh you're the one that got away! You're the one that actually got away!" You know?

And you know, twenty-seven years later, we're still choosing each other, and, but I remember dating him, and being able to talk about being our ancestors' wildest dreams, like being, the fact that we get to choose Black love, and it was denied to so many of our ancestors. Like that itself was just so revolutionary to us, and we wanted to protect it, like in their honor. Like we got to get this right, even on our hard days, but we don't have to be, we're not forced to separate from

one another, we're not forced to give our children away. So it makes Black marriage feel holy, like sacred in a way, because we get to do some things that they never got to do, and I really do cherish that. Yes, he's smart, he's handsome, he's just yummy! I just love that man. And very grateful to have him in my life, very, very much so.

Q: I'd like to circle back a little bit and ask about your father's church, and what happened to it. Is it—

Brown: Oh yes, yes!

Q: Or has it moved somewhere else?

Brown: Yes, this is a story. So now, Mt. Sinai Community Baptist Church is now Portland Stage Theater, and so it's an interesting phenomena, in some ways. And painful, right? So, the owner now, he did reach back out to my dad and to community members before they did the full transformation of the building, and asked if we wanted to come and see, and if there was anything we wanted to kind of leave behind, in a sense, kind of a legacy of that church. The church was sold on its own terms, I mean my dad at the time was trying to build a larger church, and kind of with real estate, he felt it was a good move, the elders were very upset about that choice, because again, they understood the importance of keeping space. And I would say also, not ready to move on, like very, like we fought so long to have this for ourselves, why would you ever want to leave this?

And so the church split as a result of that, to be honest. And we were, my dad was moving much more to the Promise Keeper movement, and racial reconciliation, and that's what he felt that he was called to do. And there was this very big tension of well what does that mean for us as Black people, as Black church, as this being our place of healing and wholeness? Yes. So that was hard. So part of that move was getting to a larger building.

I did get an opportunity to go back to Portland Stage Theater, and I write about it, I've written about it, and it felt like there were still prayers in the walls, you know? They did not disrupt the architecture in terms of the pillars where I used to usher. Renée, I used to have the church memorized by steps, that's how much I remember being in that church, I could literally, with my eyes closed, walk through the sanctuary, down the stairs, take a left, I could walk four steps right in front of the Coke machine, come back a couple steps, walk around, and go into the kitchen, that's how much I was in that space. And so, I remember doing that, walking through, and I really, I felt like I could literally feel people's footprints still grooved in the space.

And there was a play, *Fences*, that I was invited to go in and see the performance. I couldn't do it. It was just like having like, an out of body experience of being able to, you know, this was a sacred place for us! And like, we're no longer here, and I'm supposed to just like, enjoy this play, all at the same time, like I didn't know what to do with that. It's still painful to drive by. And again, Brian, the owner, has reached out to me on several occasions to, I did do a poetry night there one night. He's tried to reach out and be a good neighbor in a sense, but to me it feels so, it's like walking through a grave in a lot of ways. It's just too much. And Portland feels like that a lot right now. [*Laughs*] Because of all of the changes, you know?

But that used to be our block, I mean, oh my goodness, from Easter egg hunts, you know, and baby showers, and yes, all of those special occasions. You know, the beauty of memory is that, you know, I can go down that lane every now and then, and I do have those flashbacks of what things used to be, that's the beauty about being an artist, that you can create things like this, even through theater, to kind of work though the grief, and also to still honor and celebrate the memories, and who I am because of those, that space in particular. But it is really, really still hard for me. I don't know if I'll ever get used to it.

Q: Grief has come up a lot, this is the first time you've said the word, but in listening to you, I've been thinking a lot about loss, and change, and this kind of perpetual state of the Black community, as you describe it, in Portland, and constant remembrance of what was, in this way that sometimes feels great, and nostalgic, but also was traumatic and painful as well. How do you hold that, and still have joy, and still remain hopeful? What are some practical things you do to just exist, and be, and be comfortable with all of that? You talk about it so openly, and honestly, so I'm just curious how that lives, it feels very palpable as you're talking about it, that it's not something you are over, you're, you carry it with you. So I'm just curious how that feels.

Brown: Yes. Yes, I do carry it, and I have to be careful, because I do want to live in the present, I think it's important that I live in the present for this, for my current generation, for again, embracing what is now. But there was an injury done here, there's been an injury, an assault, done to Black people over, and over, and over again, that I will always carry, you know? And so, it makes me, it makes me dig deeper to find soft landings and sacred spaces for my people, for

myself. I got a therapist now, I'm messing with some therapy. [laughs] To, you know, kind of sort through what's mine, what's not mine, and then also to reimagine and live my life to the fullest. I really, really—I'm going to be going on sabbatical to tend to this, as well.

I'm calling it my Sancofa [*phonetic*] sabbath, going back and getting it, right? I want to capture the stories and the joy, and the memories, in a really in-depth way that I haven't been able, I haven't allowed myself to, or haven't been able to. So that's a way that I'm going to tend to it. Making home Blackity-Black [*laughs*] is very important! So, that's all we watch is Black TV, you know, all I got is Black books, threw out all the white theologians, like it's just Black up in there right now. [*Laughs*] That's how I'm getting to it! Man! And I think again, I get to come back to the village every day, so I see Black people every day, and it is like mental wellness for me, it's mental health for me, because I wasn't so well working in dominant spaces where I wasn't able to center, be centered, love on my folks. So I think that's really, I know that's really keeping me right now.

And being a student and being open to Blackness across the world is another way, another form of self-care and replenishing. I'm working on it, sis, because it just may be my plot in life, you know, there were the prophets, there were those that spoke of future times and past times, and you know, this might just be my lane that I can hold that remembrance, and I will call people to remember. So I'm sitting with all of it, you know? There's a reason why I was supposed to stay, and I take that assignment seriously, some of us don't get to choose our assignments, so when God sometimes chooses our assignments for us, so I'm sorting through it all.

But I'm good! Like, my Frazier family is still intact, we still have, it's been on Zoom for a while, but we still celebrate, we still come together, we will continue to reserve and Black out spaces, movie theaters, like all the things to be together, we will do what it takes, as best we can to leave that legacy for the next generation.

Q: And what do you want your legacy to be?

Brown: [*pause*] Oh wow, that's a deep question. [*pause*] I want my legacy to be one of belonging. I want my legacy to be one of community and healing, of justice, of dignity. I want my legacy to be, you know, she was the one that came back for the onlys. She was the one that preserved the remnant. And she was the one who allowed herself to be free. You know? To be free. And again, I'm working on that free part, but for the time now, I think it's important for there to be folks that are devoted, and that are willing to stay back, that are willing to get in the trenches and hold the line for the forgotten ones, for the ones that, yes, that have been, you know, threatened, erased, marginalized. There have to be some of us that go back into the fire and pull some out. Yes. I think that's what I want my legacy to be.

Q: Well thank you, thank you so much for sharing your story, for talking with me, it's an honor to be able to have this time together, so I appreciate you. Thank you.

Brown: Appreciate you too, thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]