

I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elder
Oral History Interview with
Tressa Gunnels

Columbia Center for Oral History Research
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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Tressa Gunnels conducted by Robin Coste Lewis on June 23, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elder 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: Tressa Gunnels

Location: Los Angeles, CA; New York, NY

Interviewer: Robin Coste Lewis

Date: June 23, 2023

Q: Okay, it's recording. Good morning.

Gunnels: Good morning to you.

Q: Okay. Tressa, I'm so honored to be able to talk to you for this project. And I'm so honored that you agreed to do it. As you know, we've talked about it a few times, I just want to repeat again, just to help us get our conversation off to a good start—let me turn off my phone—that this project that's focused on elders around the country, and particularly Black elders, but elders of color, too, are trying to offer the world a different version of history, or a better version of history is how I look at it. And so, when you think about Great Migrations, and Black people migrating in the country, everybody always wants to talk about Chicago [Illinois] and New York [City, New York] and Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and Boston [Massachusetts], right, that Black people left the South and went there. And, you know, for us, out West, it always seems a little bit of a misnomer to think of the Great Migration going that way. And so, my focus has been to study in Southern California and just pick people whose stories I find incredibly inspiring and fascinating, and the kind of stories that you don't often see in history books, but should be, you know?

So, that's why I wanted to interview you. And as far as the interview going, there won't be any video. The video is just for us to see each other now, it's just complete audio. So, the video is just for us to help us talk. And it will be edited. So, if there's anything that you say that you don't—that you go, oops, actually, I don't want that to be in the audio, or even if you say, like, a week from now or a month from now, because we're going to be editing it for the next few months, "I take that back. I don't want that in the video or audio," just send me an email or text and let me know. And if at any point—I don't really ask any probing, intense questions, but often people do end up really being vulnerable about their lives, and that's most appropriate, if you'd like to be as vulnerable or not vulnerable as you like, we're just trying to rethink history, basically. And, you know, instead of Napoleon [Bonaparte], I'm interviewing you because your my Napoleon kind of a thing. Well, that's not true, because I can't stand Napoleon. But, you know, you're my historical hero, so I wanted to just do that. And before we begin, I often, Tressa, ask people to tell us their names, their birth date, and year, and where they were born.

Gunnels: Okay. My name is Tressa Gunnels. My birth date is August 29, 1965. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri.

Q: You were. I did see—this is what's so great about doing this because I feel like I get to know people so much better. Kansas City, Missouri. That's incredible. And is all your family from Kansas City, too?

Gunnels: Yes, yes. All of my aunts and uncles and stuff. My grandmother. She was. She moved there around when she was a teenager.

Q: Your grandmother moved to Kansas City when she was a teenager from where?

Gunnels: Yeah, like early teens or something, from Tennessee.

Q: From Tennessee.

Gunnels: Yes, she's from Memphis [Tennessee].

Q: Okay, this is fantastic. Let's back up a little bit. Which states in the South do you have family from?

Gunnels: My grandmother was born and raised up until thirteen, fourteen years old in Memphis, Tennessee. And then she and her family, for whatever reason, I don't know, they moved to Kansas City. And so, I still have family in Memphis, or in Tennessee, I should say, and some neighboring states. I got some family in Alabama. I think Alabama, Tennessee, yeah, that's it.

Q: That's amazing. Okay, fantastic. And so, what's the relationship—well, tell me, do you mind sharing, one of the things—excuse me, hold on. One of the things, one of the ways I like to think about these interviews, is that because they will be recorded and stored in Columbia University's Oral History Project in perpetuity, so like, your grandkids' grandkids' grandkids' grandkids' grandkids, can one day come in here, Granny Tressa talking.

Gunnels: All right.

Q: I know I love this. This is one of my favorite parts. Excuse me. God, I'm so sorry. [*Coughs*]

Gunnels: You're all right.

Q: Okay. I like to think about it as also a map for our children to come. So, if you don't mind if you know any of the names of your grandparents, and where they were born, I would love for you to record them.

Gunnels: Oh, yeah. Okay. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, her name is Mary Elder, Mary Estelle Elder [*phonetic*], but that's her married name, Elder. Her maiden name was Jones. So, Mary Estelle Jones. And like I said she was born in Tennessee, like 1920-something, I don't know. I'll have to look to remember her exact birth date but—and then she was the third oldest child. She had—oh, let me count. It was a whole bunch of them. Uncle Joe. So, Joe, Joseph Jones, was the eldest. And then, Charlie Jones was the second, and then my grandmother, Mary Jones. And then after my grandmother, my aunt, Leanna Smith, so she had a different father, Leanna Smith. And I think Amy Anna was born in, I think she was still born in Tennessee, also, Leanna Smith. And then after Amy Anna, it was Uncle Sonny, so it was Norman Smith. And then after Uncle Sonny, it was, I think, Uncle Jackie [*phonetic*], so it was John Smith. And then, after Uncle Jackie, it was Uncle Herman, so Herman Smith. So, that's seven, and somewhere in there, there was one that died. I don't know where. So, it was seven that lived. It was eight that was born, and the other one died early on. So.

Q: So beautiful. And I love all the nicknames. They're so beautiful.

Gunnels: Yeah, I got to get this in the record. Uncle Sonny's nickname was Life. And they called Uncle Sonny Life, because Uncle Sonny was back there doing bootleg and all that kind of stuff, and got shot and stabbed so many times, and he still survived. He went to prison, shot and stabbed, and he still survived.

Q: And he was shot and stabbed because he was running liquor?

Gunnels: And was probably doing a whole bunch of other things, too. But I know he was running liquor. So, yeah.

Q: And also probably during the Prohibition. That's amazing. So, they called him Life because he kept surviving?

Gunnels: Because he kept surviving. I know he was shot twice. I know he was stabbed once or twice. I know he went to prison at least once because I remember one time he came home, and he stayed with us in Kansas City. So, yeah.

Q: Wow. So, do you remember, how old were you when you left Kansas City?

Gunnels: I left Kansas City when I was in the sixth or seventh grade, sixth grade. So, I don't know how old that makes me.

Q: I don't know, I think ten or eleven? I don't know.

Gunnels: Okay, yes.

Q: I might be getting that wrong.

Gunnels: [*Crosstalk*] When I was seventeen, so yeah, nine or ten, something like that.

Q: Did you move immediately to Los Angeles [LA, California]?

Gunnels: Yes. My grandmother raised me. So, my mother was already here in California. She left Kansas City trying to find a better life. She was a teenage mother, she had me when she graduated high school in June. She was pregnant with me. I was born in August; she had graduated in June. And so, she came to California to try to find a better life because industries were dying in Kansas City. Kansas City was a great city at one time for Blacks. They have the Negro League Hall of Fame Museum, known for our barbecue. We have the Jazz Museum, it was back in the heyday, Black people flourished. And that was really the place. But then, you know, all the stuff happened with allowing Blacks—the segregation ended, and Blacks were allowed to go and do other things and Kansas City slowly started to die. And one of the big industries there was General Motors, and they pulled out and so it was just slowly dying. So, my

mother left there, and came to California trying to find a better way. And I stayed there with my grandmother up until sixth grade when my grandma told me that it was time for me to come and be with my mother. I would have stayed in Kansas City.

Q: Why?

Gunnels: I was comfortable.

Q: You were comfortable?

Gunnels: All my family was there.

Q: Yeah. So, you saw your relatives all the time.

Gunnels: Oh, yeah. My grandmother was one of eight. My grandmother had eight herself. And then, all my uncles, all their friends and stuff were always over there. So, we always had a house full of people.

Q: That sounds like fun, Tressa. Which part of town or neighborhood did you live in? And what was it like?

Gunnels: I grew up in, it's now called Lincoln Academy, the high school there that my mother and her siblings went to, but at the time it was called Lincoln High School. And it's down

towards, like, the bottoms area. No, that's wrong. It's not near the bottoms. It's not far from the Negro League Hall of Fame and stuff, which is on 12th Street. So, we lived off of 24th Street. So, we were kind of down in that area. I don't know what they actually call it now.

Q: Do you go back, still?

Gunnels: Yeah, the last time I went back was in March, as a matter of fact, March of—was it March? No, it was March of last year. No, it was March of this year. It was March of this year, we went back, because I still have family that lives there. And my cousin, he turned fifty. And so, we went back for his fiftieth birthday celebration.

Q: Wow. Excuse me, I have the hiccups. I didn't know this part of your life. This is great. This is why I love doing these interviews. I mean, there's so many reasons, but you just find out so much incredibly interesting information. Also, it sounds like Jim Crow, or defeating segregation wiped out the industry, which is fascinating, right? And I think it sounds like Kansas City is one of these cities that proves just how dependent upon American capitalism was on the cheap labor and the segregated labor of Black people.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: Wow, that's incredible.

Gunnels: So, it died. And it was bad for a long time with nothing going on there. And then, I don't know when, but then, eventually, some entity saw fit to try to revitalize that area around, it's not considered downtown, because where the Negro League Hall of Fame and the Jazz Museum, which are in the same building, you just go left—you go inside the building, and you go to the left to go to the Jazz Museum, you go to the right to go to the Negro League Hall of Fame Museum. But somebody, some entity saw fit. I want to say it's been there for at least thirty-five, forty years to finally try to revitalize that area down there. So, yeah. It's kind of like near, I don't know if you know, but it's like Airy Park [*phonetic*] Ray Park [*phonetic*], kind of down near that area.

Q: Wow, incredible. Tressa, I just realized that I forgot to ask you tell us what you did for a living, or do for a living, when you first introduced yourself. I haven't been doing that. I usually wait till we get up to your life to do that, but I think I'm going to start asking people, so can you tell us, well, just a brief sketch of your career? And I know you've retired now, congratulations, so many congratulations, so huge. But how about you tell us what you do? What was your last job? And then we'll get through your entire work career later.

Gunnels: Okay. My last job that I retired from was from Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. I retired as a lieutenant from the Sheriff's Department.

Q: Unbelievable. A Black woman was a lieutenant at the Sheriff's Department of Los Angeles County.

Gunnels: The largest sheriff's department in the world.

Q: Tressa how many Black women lieutenants have there been?

Gunnels: Oh, I don't know how many there have been. But the numbers are low. Every year, the sheriff's department does this annual recap of the department. And from the time I joined in 1990, up until I retired in 2022, the percentage of Blacks has gone down. I think the highest of my thirty-two-year career, the highest percentage of sworn Black members, because we have civilians that work, but sworn badge and gun carrying, the highest that I've ever known to be in my time on department was ten percent. Ten, maybe eleven, I want to say like ten point something maybe eleven. That was the highest I've ever known to be on the department. Up until the last few years, I don't remember exactly, the largest percentage was of whites. But up until the last few years right before retiring, the Hispanic community started to—those numbers were greater. In any case, any case, we had over ten thousand sworn members, just gun carrying alone. And of that, like I said the largest percentage was a little over ten percent. But when I retired, it was less than that. I want to say when I retired, it was right around eight percent or something like that.

Q: All those people were lieutenants; ten thousand people were lieutenants?

Gunnels: No, sworn. That's deputies, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, sworn, just those who are able to carry a gun and affect the power of arrest.

Q: I see. Wow, see? I know nothing about this.

Gunnels: Of course, because we have jailers. You know, people that work in jails. They're civilians. They have a badge, but it says they're custody, but they do not have the power of arrest. They don't carry a gun, so they're not sworn. They're civilians.

Q: So, then, tell me your rank again? I'm writing it down for my purposes right now.

Gunnels: Lieutenant. And so, of lieutenants, like I said—

Q: Of the Los Angeles Sheriff?

Gunnels: Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. So, we had about eight percent Blacks out of the ten thousand. And so, you can imagine that only a smaller—I want to say, if memory serves me, correct, I'm sure my numbers are not super accurate. I want to say that when I was promoted to lieutenant, and when I retired, I'd been a lieutenant for eight or nine years. But I want to say that when I was promoted to lieutenant, it was around 140, 145 Black lieutenants.

Q: In the history of Los Angeles County Sheriff?

Gunnels: Well, I don't know about the history, but I know, I would say that when I was promoted, our numbers for Blacks have gone down. So, I would say that that would probably be around the highest number of Black lieutenants on the department. Out of over ten thousand.

Yeah. And then when you dwindle it down even more so with how many are females?

Obviously, it's lower than that.

Q: Yeah. Well, I'm so proud of you. And I just feel like it's an honor to talk to you. We're going to get all into your career later on in the interview, but I just wanted to let our listeners know who we were speaking with. So, when you came out to Los Angeles, to be with your mom, well, do you remember the trip?

Gunnels: No, I don't remember the trip. But I'm sure my grandmother came with me. Every summer, I would come to Kansas City, my grandmother and I, because my mother was working so my grandmother would come so she could obviously watch me during the day. And I don't know, I don't remember how long she would stay or any of that kind of stuff. But I know that she would always come and—

Q: Wait, do you mean your grandmother would come to Los Angeles?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Okay. You said Kansas City. Okay. Oh, she would come every summer?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: That is so sweet, Tressa. God really?

Gunnels: Well, I'm sure it was probably because my mother didn't have any childcare and it was probably [*crosstalk*] at the time—

Q: Of course, in the summer, sure. But still, it's so—you know, that's just, wow.

Gunnels: Yeah, for the transition.

Q: Sure. That's amazing. So, you came to Los Angeles with your grandma, probably. And where did you and your mom live?

Gunnels: I remember us living, I remember my mother lived over on Gramercy Place. My mother lived, at least when I came out here to live with her, she lived on Gramercy Place in LA, and her and another friend that she had met through her friends here in California—actually, I think she was my aunt's friend, because my aunt, my youngest aunt, came to California first. So, so my mother, the three girls are first, my mother's the oldest, and then my two aunts, and then, all the boys are last. So, my youngest aunt, the third one, Laraine, she came to California first.

Q: Okay, let's slow down, then. This is great. Okay, let's slow down. What was her name?

Gunnels: Her name is Laraine, and no middle name, Elder. Now, she's Humphrey. But Laraine Elder. My mother's maiden name is Elder. No S on the end, Elder.

Q: That is such a great last name. So, do you know why your aunt first came to Los Angeles?

Gunnels: My aunt was—in my aunt’s words, “she was a bad bitch.” Those are my aunt’s words.

Q: [*Laughs*] Okay, Aunt Laraine.

Gunnels: My aunt was trying to get out Kansas City. So, she hooked up, she had a boyfriend back there, back in the day, Carl Green and he was part of the Black Panthers. And so, she moved around, moved around, pro Black Panther, she was pro Angela [Yvonne] Davis and all that kind of stuff.

Q: So, she was an activist, and she was moving around for activist activities?

Gunnels: Yeah, and probably some not so activist activities, too. [*Laughter*] No, I ain’t going to sugar coat it, but yeah.

Q: Please don’t sugar coat it. The parts without the sugar are the best part.

Gunnels: Yeah. So, you know, she saw the inside of a jail cell.

Q: What did she get arrested for?

Gunnels: Well, you know, I don't know everything. I know she was for fighting in, what was it? Alabama? I don't remember. And the only reason why I know—

Q: Hold on a sec, you glitched when you said what she was arrested for. I think what you said that she was arrested for fighting, is that what you said?

Gunnels: One time for fighting, yes. And then she was arrested, while she was with Carl Green, she was arrested in Arkansas for a gun charge. And nothing ever came with that. And the only reason why I know that is because just recently I was helping her get her Global Entry Card, so she can skip the lines and stuff. And I was helping her with that process, and something came up on her criminal record about an arrest in Fort Smith, Fort Collins, Fort something, Arkansas. And she was like, "I don't even know nothing about this," because she retired from the school district up in Oakland [California] herself, she lives in Oakland, she worked for Oakland Unified [School District]. She's like, "I passed a background check and everything and I don't know nothing about this. They didn't bring this up." Because she's retired at this point. And then, when looking through the records, found out there was some charge back in Arkansas and that from her days—and she was like, "Yeah, because, you know, I used to be a bad bitch back then." And I was like, "Okay." [*Laughter*]

Q: Oh my god. Also, gun possession was such a common thing at the time. So, many people had guns, you know?

Gunnels: Yeah. So, she came to California first. And then, my mother and my other aunt came, Rose came. And then, for whatever reason, I don't know, because my aunt was a bad bitch, she left California. My Aunt Rose, my second oldest aunt, she left California, but my mother stayed. And then, eventually, the other two came back. But my mother has been the longest continuous one here.

Q: Oh, wow. Why did your other two aunts leave? And where'd they go? It sounds like one went to Oakland, maybe?

Gunnels: Well, Laraine, no. She went back to Kansas City and got married and had children. And then her job moved her. She worked for General Motors. And then General Motors moved her to Baltimore, Maryland. And then she met her second husband there. He was working for General Motors also. And then when that assignment was over, or General Motors closed, I don't know the situation, but he's from Oakland. They moved back to California. That's when she moved to Oakland.

Q: I see. But let me just get clear on her name, because at first, I thought you said her name was Laraine, and then just now you said Larraine. And I wanted to know how she spelled it.

Gunnels: L-A-R-A-I-N-E.

Q: Oh, that's great. Beautiful name. Okay, and then your other aunt?

Gunnels: Aunt Rose came here. And I don't know why Rose went back. She probably—because Rose was like a little model in Kansas City, so she did like local stuff, nothing world famous or nothing. And I don't know why. She was very pretty, desired by lots. And so, I don't know why she went back to Kansas City. But I know she got married. And so, maybe that's what took her, she was married. They moved from Kansas City to Colorado. And then I think she was married—well, I think she lived with Donnie, Donnie Stewart was her husband. And that's her last name, Stewart. I think they were married for a long time. I don't know. But they had a Black person's divorce, where you just leave, and you never officially get divorced. That's the Black people's divorce.

Q: [*Laughs*] Tressa, you are hilarious.

Gunnels: So, she had one of those. And so, she lived with him as husband and wife in Colorado because we went to Colorado, in Denver. And I think they lived there for a month together. And then she had a Black person's divorce, and there you go. She went back to Kansas City. And then eventually she came back to California.

Q: And do you know what was attractive to your aunts about California?

Gunnels: No.

Q: Or why they chose Los Angeles.

Gunnels: No, I'd have to ask my Aunt Laraine, because like I said, Laraine was the first one to come. And I don't know why. Probably because Oakland, even though she came to Los Angeles, but she was all into the Black Panther movement and stuff. And I remember she loved Angela Davis. I remember posters of Angela Davis. So, I don't know, I would only assume it would be something like that. But I'd have to ask her. Out of all my aunts and uncles, it's only three children left, my mother, her youngest sister Laraine, the bad bitch, and then her oldest brother, Charlie. They're the only three that's left out of all eight.

Q: Tressa. Just as a side note, do you think she would allow me to interview her?

Gunnels: Yeah, I'm sure she would.

Q: Would you ask her today? I have to finish these interviews up in the next week. And wow, I would love to interview her. That's great. I'm trying to interview older people most of all, as you know. Our generation are elders.

Gunnels: Oh, you can talk to my mom, then.

Q: Oh, really? I want to talk to both. That would be great. I would love that. Will you ask both of them? I've been interviewing a lot of people's parents or grandparents, it's just been amazing, and really truly, really truly, like, wow, you know? So, I just feel so lucky to do this. Okay, I think I'm getting the picture now. So, three sisters in Los Angeles from Kansas City.

Gunnels: Yes, and then—

Q: Not all at the same time, but—

Gunnels: —the boys came later. You know, they would come and stay for a little bit and then go back. But like I said, my mother's the only one who stayed continuously. And then my two aunts, they came back eventually and stayed. My Aunt Rose, she died here. She settled in Long Beach [California], died in Long Beach as a model. Laraine, she lives up in Oakland.

Q: I'm sorry about your auntie. Thank you. Thank you. It's interesting because Kansas City, Alabama, Tennessee, those people, it seems like the migrations went everywhere in the country, West, South, North, Northwest, right? And I'm really happy to have someone in this project who's coming from those areas, because you're the first person I've had who came from Kansas, or Tennessee, and it's just great, and Alabama roots, too, so I'm happy.

Gunnels: Get it right, I didn't come from Kansas, because we city folks, we bigger than Kansas. I came from Missouri, [*laughs*].

Q: I see. Thank you. But did you say it was Kansas City?

Gunnels: There's a Kansas City, Missouri. And there's a Kansas City, Kansas.

Q: Oh, thank you, darling. Yes, I know the difference. Excuse me. Yes. So, you're coming from Kansas City, Missouri, not Kansas City, Kansas.

Gunnels: That's right.

Q: Indeed. Well, that's even better. Thank you for the clarification. But that's even better, because I don't think I have anybody from—I don't know anybody from Missouri. That's excellent. That's excellent. What's Missouri like?

Gunnels: [*Laughs*] You ask Felicia, she says there was no reason to go there. Yeah, yeah. She's been with me. She's been back there several times with me. And I was like, "Babe, you ever thought about going to Kansas City?" She's like, "Why?" You know, because that's my home, you know me, babe. Anyway. What's it like? Well, I grew up in—

Q: What was it like growing up for you there?

Gunnels: For me growing up, it was great, because that's all I knew. And we didn't know that we were poor, we didn't know—or I didn't know. Because like I said, we always had a house full of people. Always. Neighborhood, family, neighborhood kids and stuff that have become family. And so, for me, it was great, because it was lots of family. We had a house. We lived on 24th [Street] and Montgall [Avenue], that house is no longer standing. There's just grass there now. But it was our house. And then, right next to our house on one side was like a long driveway, if you would, but it was dirt, no concrete, like dirt, pebbled, and then next to that driveway was a

vacant lot. I guess there used to be a house there. But as far back as I can remember—no, actually, it was a house there. There was a house there, but it was like a condemned house. And the man, my grandma—I don't really know the man's name. My grandmother called him shit pot.

Q: [*Laughs*] Wait, can you say that again?

Gunnels: Shit pot? So, I called him Mr. Shitpot. He lived in that house. He was homeless. But he had that house that was boarded up and stuff. So, Shitpot lived in that house next door to us. And he never ever bothered us or bothered me, because my grandmother was a bad woman herself. I mean, she had risen all these eight kids by herself, because she had to put my grandfather out. The story I got, he tried to put his hands on her one time, and she threw some hot grits on him and beat him up with a skillet. And then her brothers kicked ass. And so, my grandfather, whose name—well, I can give you his name, I'll try to give you, his name. His name was Charlie Maurice Elder, who was from Tennessee, where my grandma was born and raised. He left Kansas City and went on back to Tennessee, because my uncles, from what I'm told, kicked his ass so bad because he was trying to put his hands on my grandmother. So, she was left to raise all these kids by herself. So, yes, so my grandmother—

Q: Wait, hold on one sec, Tressa, because this is so important, what you're saying. And you might be the first interview that brings it up, and I'm so happy that you did. First of all, the expression put your hands on somebody. Can you tell for our listeners who aren't from our part of town, can you tell our listeners what that means?

Gunnels: Oh, when you put your hands on somebody, it means you're physically abusive. You're fighting them.

Q: Okay, thank you. And also, what I find interesting about what you said, is that how intolerable a thing physical abuse was for many families, particularly for a woman's brothers or uncles. And it sounds like, you know, there was a code of—there was an unspoken code that I noticed growing up of honor and respect that was carried out by a woman's brothers and uncles, male relatives, that if any man ever even thought of touching her, that the uncles and brothers would stand in and let it be known that, on a point of death, or you know, exile, you would never touch a female relative. It's not something you hear about so much anymore, but it was very common when I was growing up, right?

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: And it sounds like this was something that was also common for your family.

Gunnels: Yes, yes. Because, you know, back in the day, this was way before O.J. [Orenthal James Simpson] put his hands on a white woman and there was a criminal case. And speaking from a law enforcement point of view, look, you'll find all these stories, but I worked in law enforcement, I'm going to tell you, when O.J., when he was convicted of killing his wife, the laws for domestic violence changed. And I can certify that coming from a law enforcement background. Because all of our laws and the ways that we handled domestic violence and

responded to those crimes, all that stuff changed at that time, and how we dealt with it. So, yeah, so back in my grandmother's day, there was no courts involved to my knowledge. Family handled it.

Q: Yes. And handled it well, in my envelope. You know, like, I just felt like there was just this code that you just knew that if you hurt a female relative, that you had to contend with that woman or girl's entire male relative population, and that you didn't want that because it could be anywhere from five to twenty men coming after you.

Gunnels: Yeah, yeah.

Q: And I felt more safe then than I do now, you know? But what do you mean about the laws changed under O.J., just so we'll all understand?

Gunnels: Well, I can't speak from all law enforcement, but I can tell you as far as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department work was concerned, and like I said, we are the largest sheriff's department in the entire world, because like I say, we have over ten thousand just sworn, not even counting the civilians, so when you factor that in—but so we tend to be trendsetters, bad or not so good, whatever the case, we tend to be trendsetters, because we are so large, and so our litigious butt was hanging out, if you would. And so, when O.J. was convicted, the way that we responded to domestic violence, it changed. I remember, around some time, because I was out on patrol, I hadn't been on patrol very long at that point, because for us, for the Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, we are responsible for the jails,

as well as the unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. And we also have the courts, and like I said, we're the largest. And so, for us when we graduate the Academy, we have to go to the jails first. And so, I started off with the jails, in the female jail, Sybil Brand [Institute for Women].

Q: Oh my god, are you serious?

Gunnels: Yeah. I started off working at Sybil Brand.

Q: Girl, growing up, Sybil Brand was where nobody wanted to end up.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: That jail's notorious.

Gunnels: Yes. And it's still standing, but it's no longer being used as a jail because it can't pass the codes and titles that's required now. So, now, the department, they do a lot of filming there for movies and TV shows and that kind of stuff. But that's where I started. And then I went to patrol. I went to patrol around '94, 1994. And I don't remember when exactly O.J. was convicted or any of that stuff. But I know it was while I was out on patrol, that the way that we handled—you know, we'd normally we'd go to a domestic violence situation and it was kind of like, hey, in the traditional sense of speaking the man and the wife, even though we know there's no such thing as a traditional family now, but you know, you'd go to these calls, and if the wife was

roughed up or whatever, that was usually the case more times than not, then you go there and you talk to them and you tell them, “Okay, well look, you got to straighten it out and don’t kill nobody,” and you go about your merry way. So, you had married folks handle married business. But then—unless it was bad. But then after the O.J. thing came up, it was like, oh, no, domestic violence was real. We had to go out there, we had to have a supervisor sometimes and record our interactions, the way you interacted with them, because at first, we would just go, and the man and the woman in that traditional family, you know, we talked to both of them together, “Hey, what went on?” And of course, if you just got your ass kicked, you ain’t going—and you’re talking to your abuser right there in front of them, you’re not going to be honest and say everything. Because more times than not, he was the one paying the bills and all this kind of stuff. So, you just said, “Oh, it was a misunderstanding,” or you fell, or whatever lie you could to minimize the situation.

Well, when O.J. came, the way we handled that was then we started separating. So, one deputy would take the male and talk to him over here, away, out of view from the female, and the other partner would take the female, and then we’d get the story, and then the two deputies would get together and compare the story and determine if we had a crime and who was the primary aggressor. Like I said, more times than not it was the male, but no, there’s been times when that wasn’t the case. And then, we would go ahead and arrest accordingly. But what I also found was that those fucking domestic violence calls, those were the fucking worst calls to go on, because I would always tell people, we’ve met people on the worst days of their lives. And so, you weren’t calling me if it was your birthday, and you was happy. You was calling me because some shit went down. And so, you call us, and we go out there, and we separated you, and we’re following

the new policies and procedures because of O.J. and stuff. And then we decide, okay, we going to take the—like I said, and more times than not, it was the male, and we put the handcuffs on him. And then next thing you know, the woman is fighting you and, “Don’t take my man in jail,” because, you know, ain’t going to pay the bills, he ain’t going to have no money. And so, I found that those were oftentimes the most volatile calls because you didn’t know. You went into it thinking you’re helping somebody. And then you come out and you go arrest her because she’s assaulting you.

I left out one of my uncles, too, one of my favorite uncles, great uncles. Uncle Arthur James, my grandmother’s brother.

Q: Tell me about Uncle Arthur James, absolutely.

Gunnels: Uncle Arthur James was an artist. And he had his own art shop upon Crenshaw in LA. Uncle Arthur James was married. He has one child. But Uncle Arthur James was married. His wife was—as a matter of fact, Marian was the head dietician out at the Long Beach VA [Veteran’s Affairs]. But they divorced because Uncle Arthur James, he had an issue with alcohol. He was an alcoholic. And so, he died out here, cirrhosis of the liver. So, we would always go and stay, they lived in Gardena [California]. And I remember when I moved out here, we would go into their house because they had a big house with a pool over in Gardena. We would always go over there, slide down the slide and play in the pool.

Q: Oh my god. Tell me more about him. So, you said he had an art shop? What do you mean, like, art supplies or a shop to buy art?

Gunnels: Yeah, he was an artist. He painted. He had a studio. He had an art studio. And yeah, he did—

Q: Tell me his first and last name again.

Gunnels: Arthur James Smith. Uncle Arthur James.

Q: So, one of the people I'm interviewing is in her nineties and she's an art historian. She knows the LA art scene really well, those people that nobody knows about. So, I'll ask her about him.

Gunnels: Oh, maybe she'll know Arthur James Smith.

Q: Wow. That's incredible. And then, the house in Gardena is showing up a lot in these interviews, too. I went to high school there. I've interviewed several people who went to high school there, but like a generation above or two us, you know? And also how, what was— Gardena became Carson, right? Because a lot of Gardena that butted Compton [California] then became Carson. Right? So, it's just interesting. I'm glad you remembered to include your uncle. Anything else you want to include about him?

Gunnels: No, that was it.

Q: Why was he your favorite uncle?

Gunnels: Probably because, listen, the tape, the reasons I don't know, because I was young. But my grandmother, it was only two girls in the family, my grandmother's siblings, my grandmother, she was the third born and she was a Jones. And then the rest of my great grandmother's children, my grandmother's siblings, they were Smiths. They were by Big Daddy. That was his name, Big Daddy. His name was John Smith, but we called him Big Daddy and he died when I was two. And all I know I don't have any memory of him, but all I was told was that when I first said Big Daddy, he hugged me to death and my grandmother thought he was going to kill me. So, that's the only story I know of him. He worked for General Motors. And my grandmother's mother died first. Her name was Jeanette Smith. Jeanette Harris was her maiden name. And that's how my mother got her name.

But in any case, it was basically my great grandmother, my grandmother, it was two sets of children, it was kind of, sort of. Well, I say kind of sort of, because I mean, I can get real with you, or I can keep it PC [political correct]. But there was the Jones, and then there was the Smith. But technically, my grandmother, we don't know who her father was. He was a white man. We don't know the story. He was never around. She never had any interactions with him. My mother does not know the story because I've asked my mother, I've asked my grandmother, it was something that she would not talk about. So, I do not know anything about her father. But he was white. That's all I know. And my grandmother, out of all her siblings, she's the only one who looks different than them because she's half white. But her maiden name is Jones, but Jones was

not her father. And then, right before her was Uncle Charlie. You know, Charlie had his last name was Jones also, but he was not a Jones either, from what I understand. I don't know the circumstances, the only one that was Jones with the daddy was Uncle Joe, the firstborn. But you know, back in the day, whoever your mama's named with, I mean, that's what the name you took, right?

Q: This is what I—wait, slow down. That's what I was going to say. It was such, in my opinion, a beautiful, common practice that Black people would claim everyone, regardless of how you got into the family, you were whatever the family's name was, period, period. Because it was so understood that white supremacy and white racism, was so—and the wakes of slavery and politics, and just human beings being human beings, it was so complicated that all I knew, all I saw around me was people going, you know, we will love each other as family, period. I had some relatives who, there's an old story in my family, and this is just somebody having a good time and had some kids on the side, right? A second family, right? And when the uncle found out that his wife had done that, he was like, "It doesn't matter. Everybody's in my net," that's the story. And I just think it's so interesting listening to you and other people I've interviewed keep talking about this practice of embracing people, including people, this practice of inclusivity into family identity, as opposed to shunning people. It's just beautiful. So, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but what you just said was really powerful, historically, and philosophically. And I just wanted to, just to pause and really appreciate the magnitude of the thing that you just said.

Gunnels: That's all we know. That's all we know. And that's how my grandmother was, but my grandmother had two sets of kids, but they all had same last name, Elder. And then, my

grandmother welcomed everybody into her home. And that's how I am, you know? I have no birth children my own, but you know, my grandchildren, I welcome, folks. That's just how we were raised.

Q: Absolutely. The other thing that I wanted to highlight that other people have been talking about, is that back in Kansas City, Missouri—I'll go back with you to Kansas City, Missouri. I love to go see where people were born. I love that—but that the house was always full of people. People keep saying that expression. I keep hearing that expression, the house was always full of people, right? Another thing, another practice that doesn't seem to be as common anymore, you know? So, I just wanted to point that out, too. Okay, I'm sorry for interrupting. Go ahead, Tressa.

Gunnels: So, it was only two girls, my grandmother and her sister Leanna, Leanna Smith. We called her Amy Anna. Anyway, and for whatever reason they did not get along. They feuded did up until their death. They became a little closer. But I don't know the reasons, my mother don't know the reasons. I don't know what happened. But based on that, because your original question was why Uncle Arthur James your favorite, was because I saw him more. But also, he was in my grandmother's camp. Because you had the girls, and you had the brothers that was all one side with one sister and the other brothers that were on the other side with the other sisters. And so, in my grandmother's camp, so my grandmother, she had Uncle Sonny, Life, he was in both because he was, you know. But the baby uncle, Uncle Harmon and my baby uncle, he was only like eight or nine years older than my mother. But Uncle Herman was in my grandmother's camp. Uncle Charlie was in my grandmother's camp. Uncle Arthur James was in my grandmother's camp. Like I said, Uncle Sonny, he went back and forth. But Uncle Joe, the

oldest, and Uncle Jackie, they were in my aunt's camp, in Amy Anna's camp. And so, because that's just how it split amongst party lines, there. So, when we came to California and Uncle Arthur James lived here, we would see him more.

Q: I see, I see. Okay, thank you for that. I just wanted to get a little bit more background before we talk about you, trying to imagine you as a middle school or elementary school or moving to California. And so, where did you live and what school did you go to when you arrived?

Gunnels: So, when I came here, I went to—and first let me tell you this part. You know what? And I told Felicia this. I'm not going to say we weren't civilized and stuff, because I mean, we were, but we were from Kansas City. We were from Missouri, and my people was from the South. And I didn't know—I mean, I like to say Kansas City was a big city, but I mean, I'm going to keep—I always tell Felicia that but the real truth is, you know, it wasn't nothing compared to California, Los Angeles. And so, when we first came here, I was used to eating—I always tell people, I was used to eating with my fingers and stuff.

Q: Sure.

Gunnels: And that's how we ate our greens and our cornbread. My grandmother would make her hot water cornbread, and we'd mix it up with some hot sauce and that pepper sauce and stuff you got in a jar, and you ate it with your fingers.

Q: Oh, that sounds delicious.

Gunnels: You ate with your fingers. And so, that's how we ate. And when I came here, I don't know, at some point, because I was, what, I was nine, ten years old, something like that, at some point, it clicked and it was like, oh, everybody don't eat with their fingers. And I mean, we have silverware. Don't get me wrong. I used it. But it wasn't the first go to, to grab your silverware. And so, that was one thing I definitely remember about coming here.

Q: This is really interesting. It's so interesting, because so many cultures eat with their hands all over the world, right? And forks and knives and all that are a sign of colonialism, right? And so, it's just interesting, because what I hear when you're saying this is that, you know, your family practiced a more traditional form of eating. And we know that now, right? We know what that is now, like it's, you know, ancestral practices from generations before, people we never knew, never will know because of slavery. And—my computer's doing something weird. That was weird. Please don't die. Okay. Anyway. It's just fascinating. That's all, you know? You travel all around the world, now. You and I both love travel, excuse me, and I just think it's interesting how just what you're saying is like, yeah, just like, they eat fufu in, you know, West Africa. You know, like, of course you mix that and that, right? So, thank you for that. That's a great detail. So, suddenly you were like, maybe I should start—once you got to LA, you started eating with silverware more?

Gunnels: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And so, we moved, the first place that I can remember us living is, I know we lived—we lived in LA, we lived on Arlington. I don't know exactly where in LA. And we lived on Gramercy Place in LA and my mother lived in Gramercy Place, because as I was

telling you before, my aunt was the first one to come here, so one of my aunt's friends, May, and May was a single mother also, May had one daughter, Karen, and May came here from Mississippi, Greenwood, Mississippi, and I don't know when they came here, but she had a brother that's here. They're both here now, still. But Jean was an attorney, Black guy. He's an attorney here now. But in any case, Laraine met May first, or one of my aunts—anyway, my aunts left, and my mother stayed. And I think when one of my aunts left, whether it was Rose or Laraine, but one of my aunts, and they moved out of the apartment with May. And my mother was like, "Well, I need a place to stay with my daughter." And so, it was a two-bedroom apartment. And so, me and my mother had a bedroom, and May and Karen, they had a bedroom, and that was on Gramercy Place. And so, Gramercy Place, I remember—

Q: I love that. I love that collective living, mothers banding together, you know? That's amazing.

Gunnels: Yeah. So, that's where we lived.

Q: And where'd you go to school then?

Gunnels: I went to—I went to one year at Shenandoah Elementary, or something like that. It was over there, over on the West Side. I remember it was over there where we lived on Gramercy. It was near that area, Gramercy Place. So, I went to Shenandoah for one year. And I remember and I went to a Catholic school right there, matter of fact, I think it's still standing. It's up off of Slauson and Crenshaw, where Slauson and Crenshaw crosses. If you go west, on Slauson, there's a barbecue joint. But anyway, it used to be a Pup 'n' Taco right there. And it was a little Catholic

school right over there off of Slauson. And so, I went there, and I remember the Pup ‘n’ Taco because my mom would take me there, I think after school. She used to pick me up. I don’t know the name of it, but I went there one year. We’re not Catholic. I don’t know why I went there. But I went there one year. I went to that school, Shenandoah Elementary, for one year. And then I went to school in Long Beach. And that’s where I graduated from high school, in Long Beach.

Q: Tressa, what was it like for you to come from Missouri and then be in LA, and not have this huge family, and be with two mothers and two daughters, and you guys being your own little community and you going to school? What was that like for you?

Gunnels: That’s exactly it. It was a change. It was a culture shock, because of like you said, I’m used to having all my family around, me and all my uncles, because then I got to see all kinds of crazy stuff because my grandmother, she was a cleaning lady, she cleaned office buildings at night. So, at night, when she would go to work, and we didn’t have a car and nothing like that. It wasn’t until my uncles became adults that we had a car, or young adults that we had a car, so we would get around on the bus and stuff. And so, they’d have to pick me up, they’d have to walk out. When we get out of school, they’d have to pass by the school I went to, and we’d walk home together. And they had to take care of me while my grandmother was at work at night. And so, they were young men, you know, out there and handsome, playing football and all that kind of stuff. And we were the big family. Everybody knew the Elders in Kansas City. And so, you know, all the little girlfriends, or wanna be girlfriends, they tried to get close to me because of my uncles. And so, I was always the center. Everybody, even now when I go back to Kansas City for functions, everybody knows little Tressa, because I’m the oldest grandchild. And so, that

was great. Everybody knew me, I was like the center of attention because they had to come through me to get to my uncles and stuff. And my uncles had to take care of me. And then, I come out here to California, because I'm my mother's only child. It's like, I come out here to California. It's like, oh, man, I got nobody around me. I'm a latchkey kid, I'm home by myself and all that kind of stuff. And so, it was a change. It was a change.

Q: How long did it take you to kind of feel settled in? Like, a few years, maybe Long Beach? Or no?

Gunnels: I don't even know. I don't even know.

Q: Or maybe do we ever even settle for those kinds of things? Who knows?

Gunnels: I don't even know. I know when I got to high school is when I started playing sports and stuff. And so, that got me out. Because other than that, I would come home. I literally had the key around my neck on the string and come home and you don't open the door for nobody, and all that kind of stuff.

Q: That's right. Can you explain to our listeners what a latchkey kid means?

Gunnels: Oh, latchkey kid is the child, the parents—there are no adults, I should say, that are at home during the day when the kid gets out of school. And so, the kid comes home from school, whether one or two however many children there are, and you have a key that's tied to a string

around your neck, and it was the latchkey. And then when you get out of school, you go home, use that key, go inside the house and close the door, you don't let nobody in, you know, you don't open the door for nobody. And that's what you do. And so, that's what I did.

Q: Thank you. What would you do when you were at home after school?

Gunnels: I would do my homework. I would watch TV. I was a pretty decent student. I didn't really get into much trouble or anything like that. It seems like I can remember at that point, I remember having more imaginary friends or stuff, at that point—

Q: [*Laughs*] Yes, totally.

Gunnels: —versus when I was in Kansas City. I didn't have time for that. So, I had more imaginary friends, because you can't let nobody in the house with you during the day. I remember my mother got me a magic set because that was like my—and the magic set really worked because the ball disappeared. You know, I was a kid [*crosstalk*]. But that's what I would do to entertain myself.

Q: Love it. [*Laughs*] Love it.

Gunnels: So, that's what I did. I don't know what I did.

Q: So, why did you guys move to Long Beach?

Gunnels: I know I sneaked some alcohol one time. My mother had some alcohol up in the cabinet, and I remember one time—this is when we lived on Arlington—and I remember I climbed up, climbed up on a chair in the cabinet where she kept the alcohol, and I got it, and I tried it. I was like, “Oh.”

Q: [*Laughs*] Oh my god, did you get busted? Did you ever tell her?

Gunnels: No, no, no, no, never told her, but I didn't mess with that no more.

Q: That's right. Yeah, that's funny. And then when you guys moved to Long Beach, which is further into the South Bay, why did your mom decide to move to Long Beach?

Gunnels: So, my mother, she worked for Texaco Oil Company. And my mother, that's where she met my dad at, that's who I call my dad, Elmer Robinson, Elmer Gene Robinson. He from Arkansas. And he came to California, and he worked at Texaco Oil Company in the oil fields. And so, they got together. And he had a house. And he ended up having—he had several houses. And so, they moved in together. And it was a little one-bedroom house. And I slept, I had, it was a hide a bed, it was like a big old square box, and inside of it, you had the bed that you would open up the two cabinet doors and a little twin-sized bed would pull out. That was in the dining room area. And so, that's where I slept. But she moved with my dad. And so, that's what brought her to Long Beach. And then from there—

Q: That's fantastic. Wait, slow down. Wait, slow down. I want to ask some questions. This is fantastic. Where were the Texaco oil fields?

Gunnels: He worked in Signal Hill [California]. Signal Hill, that's where they had a lot of the oil fields at, so he worked in Signal Hill, which is probably why he lived in Long Beach because Signal Hill was a city within Long Beach, basically.

Q: Yeah, I'm asking you to slow down a little bit because for people who aren't from this part of the country, can't imagine that there are oil fields and Texaco, and people are finding oil and drilling oil, and oil was a big industry for a while, still is in LA, but there was a time, and their oil refineries dotted along the coast. So, I just wonder if you could explain a little bit more for your listeners what that means.

Gunnels: Yeah, yeah, that's what he did. I don't know exactly what he did because I was too young. But yeah, he worked in the oil fields. And my mother, she worked in human resources. So, she worked in the office up on Wilshire.

Q: You mean Texaco?

Gunnels: Yeah. She worked in Human Resources at Texaco. That's where she retired from. And then she worked up in in LA on Wilshire, right, like down the street, not far from the—what was the hotel that—the only reason I remember is because Robert F. [Francis] Kennedy, that's where he was shot and killed at, at the hotel there.

Q: I don't remember. But my God, but she commuted from Long Beach to Wilshire every day?

For how many years?

Gunnels: Forever, because before her job—before she worked on Wilsher forever, and I went there with her several times because like, if I was sick, or it was a holiday, or whatever the case and she didn't have daycare, I would go to work with her. And I know she started off on the switchboard. And that was back in the day when they had the switchboards where you had to unplug something to plug it into the other one to make calls? I would sit with her on the switchboard and watch her do the unplugging and plugging thing. So, I guess that's what she started off at Texaco. And then I remember I went to work with her—and I guess this was when she was in personnel—and she worked for this guy, his name was Cal Bein, B-I-E-N, or B-U-I-E-N, Cal Bien, but he was a white gay male. And he was her boss up at Texaco. And so, Cal, he liked me, so he would let me fill out job applications, teach me how to fill them out. He would give me a—he used to go to Las Vegas a lot. He died, but he was an openly gay man. And he would give me like note paper, but it would be stacked from like—I don't—I just recently got rid of it, I should have saved it—from the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas [*crosstalk*].

Q: Oh my God, you should have saved it. Really?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: How exciting.

Gunnels: Yeah, so that's where—so I went to work with my mother several times and Cal liked me. And he would let me work in his office. But anyway, but yeah, he was a white man, openly gay white man. I don't know if he was openly, but I knew he was gay. And I was young. So, if I knew he was gay, my mama knew he was gay.

Q: Also, I think it's interesting for the listeners—we'll get into this in a little bit—Tressa is married to Felicia Anderson, who is another narrator in this project, Tressa is Felicia's wife. And right now, what I'm thinking of is, didn't Felicia's mother, when the American Cancer Society was also in Wilshire?

Gunnels: Yeah.

Q: So, both of your mothers, years before you guys met, decades before you guys met, were commuting to the same area for work. How fascinating. That's great. I love when adults—

Gunnels: Claremont, the Biltmore, it was some big hotel right there on Wilshire where Robert Kennedy was shot. [Ambassador Hotel]

Q: I'm embarrassed to say I can't remember. I'm a historian, but I can't remember. Wow. Okay, so you guys moved to Long Beach and your family, both of your parents, your mom fell in love, and both your parents worked for Texaco. And which school did you go to?

Gunnels: I went to one year at Marshall Middle School, because I think Marshall only went up to the ninth—well, no. I went to Newcomb, Newcomb Elementary in Long Beach. But Newcomb only went up to the eighth grade or something like that. And this was before high school started with the tenth. High school to start with the tenth grade only. Now they've changed it to the ninth grade. So, yeah, so junior high school was the ninth grade, so I went to Newcomb for a year. And then, I went to Marshall Middle School in Long Beach because they had a ninth grade. And then from there, for high school, my first year I was at this PACE program, because my scores were high or whatever. And so, my home school was Milliken High School, but I would go to Poly in the morning, Poly High School, Polytechnic. So, I would go to Poly in the mornings and in the afternoon, I would go back to my home school, which was Milliken.

Q: Sorry, can you explain to the listeners what the PACE program was?

Gunnels: It was an accelerated program, if your test scores were whatever they needed to be at the time. I really don't know. Felicia could probably tell you since she's an educator and they still have it. But my test scores were high, and I was in an accelerated program or whatever. So, it was an accelerated program. And I did that for my first year of school. And honestly, I didn't like it. My grades were great. I think I graduated like a B average. So, it wasn't the grades. But what I didn't like was because that's when I started getting into sports and started—I wasn't a latchkey kid no more. Well, I still was, but I was older. And so, I had other activities and other interests. And I was old enough to do stuff. And so, I started playing sports. And it was just real hard, to be honest, to be in this PACE program and go to one school in the morning one school in the afternoon, have tons of homework because they think you smart, and then still try to do

practice and play sports and all that kind of stuff. I found it was hard. So, I didn't like it. So, I told my mother, so she took me out.

Q: What kind of sports did you like to play, Tres?

Gunnels: I played basketball for Milliken's basketball team. And I ran track. But unfortunately, I wish I could say that I was fast. But I had some aerodynamic issues having a big ass, and so that slowed me down a lot.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Gunnels: And I was short. So, I started off running hurdles. But being short and running hurdles with a big ass, it kind of deflates—it makes it real difficult. So, I ended up just doing track and field stuff. I did the long jump, the triple jump, and the shotput.

Q: Nice. What attracted you about track? Track was such a great, great sport for our generation. So, many girls did track. I just loved it. My sister was a high jumper. She loved it. I love to go—I mean, there were all these Black girls all over LA County, you know, in track, and track meets. It was just so much fun. What attracted you about track?

Gunnels: I don't even know.

Q: I know, right? I know. Like how do you explain it?

Gunnels: I think I was just recruited by the track coach. And I don't even know. I don't know because by no means was I fast.

Q: You just liked it.

Gunnels: Yeah, yeah.

Q: I love that. I love that. And had you been interested in basketball at any point? Like did you like to watch basketball or anything before you started playing?

Gunnels: I grew up, I grew up as a sports—my family was a sports family. We would listen to the boxing matches on the radio, this is back in the day before we had a TV [television]. So, your listeners, they're going to hear this in twenty years, they're going to know everybody didn't have no TVs.

Q: Yes, ma'am. We didn't. I remember when we got our TV. I remember to this day. It was a big deal.

Gunnels: Yeah, we would listen to stuff on the radio.

Q: Yeah. I love the radio. Did you like listening to stuff on the radio?

Gunnels: Yeah, we would all be gathered around the radio in the front room. And there's a bunch of dialect differences, because we used to call it the front room, and I guess that's like the living room. But we called it the front room. And I remember it, because didn't call our couches a couch, or sofa, we call it divans. And I didn't know why.

Q: I didn't know that. That's interesting.

Gunnels: Yeah, we called it a divan, and then I came to California, and everybody called them sofas or couches. We call them divans.

Q: Wow. Oh, God, that's so fascinating. Wow, I very much miss sitting around listening to the radio together with other people. Like I can do it by myself. And now we have podcasts and all of that, and that's all very interesting. But I mean, like, especially listening to a game, right, of some kind, basketball, baseball, boxing, whatever, listening with family on the radio to a sport event is a pretty special thing.

Gunnels: Yeah. Yeah, that's what we do. My grandmother sitting in the front room, next to the radio, listening to the baseball games, and we played a lot of cards. That's where I learned how to play—I was playing cards and dominoes by the age of four, because—

Q: Totally. What kind of card games did you play?

Gunnels: Speed, Whisk. Spades was a fall back. But Speed, Whisk, Tonk, Gin rummy.

Q: Okay, Tressa. I didn't know you knew how to play Tonk. I am a Tonk demon! And when I see you again, we are sitting down—but do you know, for our listeners, Tonk, from what I understand, is a Black military game that the Black soldiers used to play in World War I and World War II.

Gunnels: I didn't know this.

Q: And the only reason why I know how to play is that my dad, out of pure boredom once he became a father, didn't have any buddies to play with. So, he taught all the kids how to play Tonk, so we could play Tonk around the dining table late at night. Who taught you how to play Tonk?

Gunnels: My grandmother, my uncles, they taught me everything. They taught me how to play all those card games. And that's what I miss, because now like, I'm trying to teach my grandkids how to play cards and stuff, and how to play dominoes, because I was playing at the age of four. And now, you know, they've got all these devices and stuff they're interested in. So, I'm slowly trying to introduce it. So, right now, I got a bunch of colored dominoes. And so, I tell them, Okay, make all the yellows match, make all the blues match. But I was playing. And so, my family, that's what we would do. In the summertime, you know, it's a hundred-plus degrees with a hundred percent humidity in Kansas City, Missouri in the summertime. And so, you'd be inside with the—we had an air conditioning, but it was just like a window air conditioner and you had to put water in it, so I guess that's actually like a swamp cooler or something because we had to

put water in it. And it was only one in the house. It was downstairs. And so, you kept all the windows and doors closed in the summer so to keep the house cool. And so, that's what we did in the summertime. And in the wintertime, there was snow on the ground; it was too cold, so you played cards some more.

Q: Totally. Oh my god, I miss playing cards so much. Also, I'm convinced the reason why I did so well in math, I want to know if this is true for you, is because my father started us playing dominoes when we were like four and five. And so, I knew about adding and subtracting and multiplying, at least by fives and tens, right, really well by the time I got to school. It was like it was a breeze.

Gunnels: Yeah, yeah. So, yeah, that's what we did.

Q: Wow. Okay, so then you joined the track team in Long Beach, and the basketball team. That's fantastic. And did you start making friends then? Or were you still feeling like you were alone?

Gunnels: No. No, no, no. No, I remember, because I remember having—that's where I remember the friends at in high school. I'm thinking in junior high, since I went to one school for one year, and then went to another school for another year, even though those schools were feeder schools into the high school that I went to, I don't really remember my friends from there, or any—And then you know, as a single—as an only child, I wasn't really raised as an only child until I came to California. And so, I guess I was still learning those skills or whatever. I don't know. So, I

don't remember many friends from that. But the friends I do remember were from high school. And so, yeah, because it was part of my team, you know? I was on the basketball—

Q: What did you guys do for fun? What did you do for fun when you were at school?

Gunnels: What do you mean, my team or—

Q: Anybody, you or your team, like what would you do for fun outside of school?

Gunnels: Oh, outside of school. I don't know, what did we do for fun outside of school? I don't know. I played basketball, went to practice, played track, and went to practice. My mom would pick me up, you know, she's working, driving from LA and having to pick me up, or I'd get on the bus, because at this point in high school, I guess I was still a latchkey kid because I could take the—but this time I could ride the bus home, the public bus not the school bus. And so, I don't know. Homework, I don't know what I did for fun. And then my aunt—

Q: Did you go on any dances or anything?

Gunnels: I remember going to, I think I went to one dance. I remember one, the Sadie Hawkins dance, or something. I remember that.

Q: Oh my god. *[Laughs]* I forgot about those.

Gunnels: Yeah, I remember that. But I didn't really do a lot. I didn't really do a lot of that stuff, because my aunts were out here. And so, like my Aunt Rose, she at that point, she had come out here to California and settled. And so, I know I would go with her a lot. And what I didn't like about going with her, she was a shopper, Aunt Rose. And that's why I dislike shopping to this day. My Aunt Rose would shop. We would always go to the Fox Hills Mall, [*unclear*] and she would shop. And she would go to one store to buy the pants and one store to buy the shirt, and one store to buy the handkerchief, and one store to buy the shoes, and I was like, oh god. I hated shopping. I hate shopping to this day for that reason.

Q: It's exhausting.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Especially if you were dragged around by a high femme who just loved to shop nonstop. My mom was a shopper. We'd be like, "Can we go home now? Can we go play?" Wow. So, you had some family, that's nice, some of your family were around, from Missouri.

Gunnels: Yes, at that point. Because like I said, at one point, all of them except for two came out, two or three came out to stay. Well, my baby uncle, who's ten years older than me, he came out. He was going to live with us, but he died on the train on the way out here.

Q: Oh my god. Tressa, I'm so sorry.

Gunnels: Well, they think somebody gave him a speedball, or some kind of drug, because when he left Kansas City—he was an artist, also, Mickey. He was an artist. He designed clothes and stuff in Kansas City. And he did art, too. And then he was moving to California to live with us so he can expand his art career, and like I said, Uncle Arthur James was out here as an artist. And on the train ride out here, Mickey got here, and they had to take him to the hospital, something was different. And so, my mother thinks somebody, they slipped him a Mickey and after that, he was never the same. And he ended up dying. But yeah. They think they slipped him some drugs or something, because he came out here, and he was in the hospital, and he couldn't function mentally. And so, they think somebody gave him some drugs—

Q: Yeah, poor baby.

Gunnels: —and he had to go back to Kansas City, and he ended up dying Kansas City of, like, organ failure. So. This is what's interesting. All my mother's siblings, with the exception of my Aunt Rose, my Aunt Rose was the second, all my mother's siblings died in reverse order.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: So, the baby, he died first. And then Mickey died next. They died in reverse order. And then, Rose died. Rose was the second oldest, but she died out of order. But the three, my mother's the oldest, and then, it would have been Rose, and then Laraine, who's still alive, and then, my oldest Uncle Charlie, all the others—and my Uncle Charlie, he should be dead himself because he's homeless, living on the street drug addict, and he should be dead, himself.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: But they all died in reverse order.

Q: That's fascinating. I'm so sorry. Wow.

Gunnels: You know, death is a part of life.

Q: It's so true. Okay. And so, then, after—when it was time to start thinking about what you're going to do after high school, what were you thinking about?

Gunnels: So, my mom and my dad broke up. And my mother, we were living in an apartment in Long Beach. And I know now, but I didn't know then, I guess my dad, he had another woman on the side. And I heard stories about my mother, how that woman put sugar in my mother's gas tank.

Q: Oh, Lord.

Gunnels: Yeah. And so, you know, I don't know. I know my mother would tell me that, "He loved me more than he loved her." And so, I don't know, they broke up. And all I know is I didn't see my dad no more. And so, obviously I missed him. And so, it was while I was—no, it was after high school. It was after high school that, for whatever reason, I went back to that same

house that we lived in together, and my dad was there, and he was with another lady. And she had two children of her own. My dad only had one biological child. Freddy was her name. So, she had two biological children of her own, who were right around the same age as me. And they ended up going to Long Beach Jordan High School, and I went to Milliken. And so, I reconnected with my dad.

Q: What was that like, Tressa? What did you do? You just knocked on the door?

Gunnels: Yes. Yes.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: Like I said, at this point, I think—was I—I think I was back from the military at that point. I think. Because I left. So, you asked what did I do? So, I joined the military when I was seventeen years old, because I didn't know, my mother told me she didn't have any money to pay for college, and I went to get a job that summer—or one summer, I went to get a job as working in a warehouse or whatever. And they told me I didn't have any skills. And I was like, Well, yeah, I shouldn't, because I'm in high school. And so, I figured, so to me as an only child, and as an only child, you know, you want to make your own way. You don't want to be dependent on nobody. And so, she said she couldn't afford to send me to college. She didn't have the money. I couldn't get a job because, hell, I tried to get a job at the warehouse, and they said I didn't have the skills. And so, I didn't know what I was going to do. So, I joined the service, because I figured that would give me some skills.

Q: Wow. Which branch did you join?

Gunnels: Army.

Q: Where did you join? You walked into like a recruiting office in downtown Long Beach or something? What did you do?

Gunnels: No, at the high schools, they had the Army recruit, they had the military recruiters at the high schools. And so, one of them was an Army recruiter there at Milliken High School, Billy Swain [*phonetic*], white guy, little thin white guy from the South someplace, with a southern drawl. He was a recruiter. And so, he recruited me and so, I was like, yeah, because I don't have anything else to do. I can't do nothing else.

Q: Wow. And okay, we're going to slow down and hear this in slow motion. This is incredible. So, you got recruited into the army. And where did you go to bootcamp? And wait, wait. What were you feeling? What were you thinking? And where did you go to bootcamp?

Gunnels: Okay, so what was I feeling? I felt like I needed to do something because I didn't want to be a burden. I didn't want to be a burden on my mother. So, I knew it was hard for her. And that's what I was feeling. And then, like I said, when I came out here, I realized our family that we grew up, and we were poor. And so, I didn't want to go back to that. I didn't want to go back to empty refrigerators and that kind of stuff. Because we had food in California. So, I didn't want

to go back to that. So, it was like, well, I got to do something. And since I didn't have no skills, I figured the Army was a great place to start. Because my uncles, my mother's brothers, two of them, they were in the military. They were in the Air Force.

A matter of fact, there was a picture of me as a kid dressed up in an all-green uniform. At that point, when I was a child, the military uniform was all over green, it wasn't the fatigue stuff. I was wearing the cap, standing up and to saluting like this.

Q: Oh my god.

Gunnels: Anyway. Who would know that I would join the army later? But anyway, so I didn't want to be a burden. I had to figure things out. I didn't want to be poor again. So, I joined the military. And so, I was seventeen years old. My mother had to sign my contract because I graduated high school when I was seventeen. And so, she had to sign my contract for me to go in because I wasn't an adult to sign the contract. And so, I remember Billy Swain come into our house in Compton, because my mother was able to buy a house, eventually she bought a house in Compton over off of Atlantic [Avenue] and Rosecrans [Avenue]. And so, he came there and that's because I would ride the bus from there to Long Beach to Milliken to go to school. And so, that's what I did. That's what I felt. I felt like I didn't want to be a burden. I was a little scared because I didn't know what the Army would bring, but I knew I had to do something because I couldn't be a burden. And so, I joined. So, a week after I graduated high school, a week later, they picked me up at oh dark thirty in a van in my house in Compton, and we drove to MEPS [military entry processing], down in LA in that station, that was a processing station, military

entry processing, I forgot what the other P was for, station. And then from there, we got on the bus, went to the airport, and got on a plane. And so, I did my basic training in Fort McClellan, Alabama. So, a week out of high school, I was in basic training.

Q: Oh my god, Tressa! Wow. And were you in shock? Had you been on a plane before?

Gunnels: Oh, yeah. Because remember, when I was a kid, I was flying on a plane when I was four years old, because I would go back and forth to Kansas City and California.

Q: Oh, okay. I didn't know if you guys took the train or the bus. So, you guys took the plane.

Gunnels: Yeah, I flew, and I flew lots of times by myself, also, when my grandmother didn't come. I remember having a seat by myself, and the stewardess—well, they were stewardesses at the time, they're flight attendants now, but they had to watch me, or whatever. Yeah.

Q: Okay. Wow. And so, a week after school, you landed your ass in bootcamp.

Gunnels: Fort McClellan, Alabama, in Anniston, Alabama.

Q: Tressa, were you exhausted? Did they kick your butt? Because my brothers and friends in the military all talk about how bootcamp is like—

Gunnels: Yeah, but you want to know? I'm going to tell you the truth. For me, it wasn't so much physical, because remember, I ran track in high school and played sports in high school. And so, the physical part I could handle. I mean, yeah, don't get me wrong, when we do our bivouacs, when we'd go out for those thirty-mile marches, with all the gear on your back, yeah, I mean, that was physically taxing. But the everyday PT [physical training] and running and all that kind of stuff? It was—I don't want to make it sound like it was easy. I mean, yeah, you get out of breath, and you do enough push-ups, enough sit-ups, you get out of breath. But I didn't find that to be the hardest. That was okay. I could handle the physical parts. You know, they want to play the mental games with you.

Q: Like, what?

Gunnels: Well, the whole part. You know, the whole part of the military basic training, in my opinion, is to tear you down as an individual, and then build you up as a team. Because in the military, and even to this day, that's my mindset where we will leave nobody behind. We leave nobody behind. And so, they tear you down as an individual. And it's not me, me, me, or I, I, I, it's for the betterment of the team. And then, if there's somebody who's weak on your team, in terms of running, or in terms of shooting, or in terms of whatever the task is, you may excel in that, but your whole squad, your whole platoon, you still are not successful. And so, you work with them. You know, you have your buddies and stuff. And so, that's what that was about. So, for me, like I said, it wasn't the physical part. That was fine. Like I said, yeah, they run you. But that wasn't the hard part for me. The hard part was the mental part. Because as an only child, I went from just being able to do my own thing and only having to worry about myself, and now

I'm part of a team. And they weren't always up to par with me. And I'm sure I had my shortcomings in some areas that they were strong in. And so, that was the hardest part.

Q: Wow, wow. And how long is bootcamp? Was it like six weeks or eight weeks or something? I can't remember.

Gunnels: I think it was two months.

Q: Wow. How did you feel at the end of it? Did you feel like you had some skills?

Gunnels: I felt proud.

Q: Oh, Tressa. That warms my heart.

Gunnels: I felt proud. Yeah. I mean, you know, the skills that they teach you in bootcamp and basic training, that's basic soldiering skills. After basic training, you go to your—they called it at that time, I don't know what they call it now—they called it AIT, which stands for Advanced Individual Training, so whatever your job was in the military, you go to school for that. So, basic training was basic soldiering skills that every soldier had to know, like how to shoot, how to do a clay mine, how to shoot compasses, map reading. So, yeah, that was fine.

Q: That's amazing, though, because you said you felt like a burden. You kept saying, "I felt like a burden," or, "I didn't want to feel like a burden," and that you wanted some skills.

Gunnels: Right. Well, because [*unclear*]

Q: I understand. I think it's a noble feeling that you don't hear people talking about much anymore, about not wanting to burden one's family, and having to figure out a way to get some skills to make a contribution to yourself and take care of yourself at the very least. And so, I just think it's beautiful that in two months, that feeling was starting to dissipate. So, where did you do your AIT, then? And why?

Gunnels: So, my job in the military, I was a food inspector. And people, actually, they think, "Oh, so you cooked food and stuff." I did not cook food. I did not work in a kitchen or mess hall. That was not my job. My job was so we would have vendors to the government, vendors would want to sell the government the slab of meat to feed the troops, or the water so the troops to drink it, or the dairy products. And then on the bases, you know, we had commissaries, grocery stores, the commissaries. And so, my job as a food inspector was, we worked in warehouses, whether it was a dry warehouse where, you know, nonperishables were, or whether it was a perishable warehouse, like, where the meat were in a freezer, or that kind of stuff. So, we worked in those facilities or in the commissary, where we'd inspect the shipments that would come in.

So, basically, what we did was, whoever the vendors for the government was, that would bring us the sides of cow and the sides of pig, and all that kind of stuff, we worked in those and when the deliveries would come, we would inspect it to make sure that it met military standards, it met the contract. In the dry storages, we would do random sampling of the foods to make sure, you

know, in the grains, you're allowed to have so many dead bugs and body parts of bugs and stuff, just as long as it doesn't exceed whatever the military standards were. We did sampling of that kind of stuff. So, that's the job that I did. And so, as a result, we fell under the medical arena for the military, because our mission was to preserve the fighting strength, because if the food and the water is bad, then the soldiers ain't going to be able to function. It becomes a medical issue. So, we were considered medical, even though I had nothing to do with sticking needles in nobody's arms and nothing like that. And so, that was what my job was, a food inspector.

And I wanted the job, and the reason why I chose that because when I took my test, you take the ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test, and I tested well. I had a choice where I could choose between a lot of stuff. But I wanted a job that translated into the real world because, the everyday world, they're not looking for nobody to drive a tank, or to do all that kind of stuff. So, I wanted a job that could translate into the real world. And so, what I learned was that when I was selecting my jobs was there a lot of people who were food inspectors they went on to work as food inspectors. So, a lot of people in my unit, my reserve unit, that retired from reserved—

Q: Tressa? Tressa? Uh-oh. Tressa? [*Pause*] Hey, Tres. Can you hear me? It's glitching a little bit. You're frozen. You're frozen. Oh, there you are.

Gunnels: Okay, okay.

Q: Okay, so we were talking about—

Gunnels: Yeah, the jobs and why I chose the food inspection.

Q: Why you chose the food inspection. Okay.

Gunnels: Yes. And so, yeah, like I said, you said it was for strategic reasons, and yeah. Because I wanted to make sure I had a skill to fall back on in the real world. Oh, your mic is—

Q: Yeah, there is. Okay, good. And did you learn those skills? Did you learn skills that could translate into the real world?

Gunnels: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. My job, yes, many of the people in my unit, that's what they did. But what I ended up doing was when I came back from the military is, I went to school. And I was always a fiddler. And I was good at math. And so, I went into engineering, electrical engineering, and ended up going to work for Hughes Aircraft [Company]. And I really liked that job. I worked on different—I worked on the Bradley—what was that? The first job I got there was working on the Bradley Fighting Vehicle system. So, the Bradley system, it's a sight unit, it's a big sight unit that's inside of tanks. And that's what the people that are in tanks can use to see what's going on outside of the tank. And so, I worked on the Bradley Fighting Vehicle system. And then, from there, I went, and I worked on another system, which was ISU [*phonetic*], that was a secret mission.

But anyway, so I worked on that for a while. And so, I got into that versus my training, because I always felt like I had the food inspector thing in the back pocket if all else didn't fail. Because while it was great to know that kind of stuff, it was great to know that you cut the rear between the twelfth and thirteenth to give you a certain cut of meat or whatever, that wasn't really my passion, what I enjoyed doing. I enjoyed tinkering and being strategic and planning, and the math side of things. And so, I got into Hughes Aircraft. But I left that job because, like with a lot of aerospace, and this was before [40th President Ronald Wilson] Reagan was president, and we still had our Cold War with Russia, you know, the military defense system, I mean, they had outrageous, they had very high budgets and stuff.

And then, well, what happened is with, you know, Hughes Aircraft might have the contract for this particular item. And then when that contract was over, then Rockwell might get the contract for the next item. And so, I found that a lot of people in the aerospace industry, they would get laid off from one job and go apply at the other military defense contractor, rather. And so, that's how you kind of bounced around. And I didn't like that. I didn't like that instability. And so, it was during that time, I was laid off from Hughes, and I was using my electrical engineering, my electrical skills to where I was working for this medical company in Torrance [California], repairing their medical devices.

And it was during that time that I was like, "Oh, you know, this ain't stable. I don't like this," and, you know. And so, that was when I applied for the Sheriff's Department and the honest to goodness truth, the only reason why I applied for that job, it wasn't so much because I wanted to carry a gun and be a cop. What I wanted to do was, I was like, "Oh yeah, I can be a cop and help

people. That's great. But I can also get on their surveillance team and do the surveillance equipment." Because I liked that kind of stuff.

But, you know, unbeknownst to me, before you can get to that specialized kind of stuff, you got to first do the groundwork stuff, work in the jails, work patrol, before you can go to specialized units doing that kind of stuff. But that was my initial reason for wanting to join the Sheriff's Department.

Q: Wow. Who did you want to survey? What about surveillance attracted you?

Gunnels: I just liked it. Again, it wasn't necessarily the surveillance, it was the equipment. I wanted to—I was hands on. I was a tinkerer, so I wanted to work with electrical equipment and do all that kind of stuff. And the fact that I could carry a gun and arrest people, that was just a bonus.

Q: [*Laughs*] Yeah, like the technological part of it.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Did you feel a sense of, when you said so you could carry a gun and arrest people, did you feel a sense of justice and just wanting to help out and keeping people safe on the streets, civilians safe?

Okay. So, then let's talk about, so you started getting all these jobs, and then you joined the force, and it was really about technology and the desire to be of service to help people.

Gunnels: Yes. And I said that was interesting, because I was the first person my family to be a cop, and especially coming from my family background with crime and stuff as it was, yeah.

Q: [*Laughs*] How did your family feel about you becoming a cop?

Gunnels: Well, I'm sure they all felt some kind of way.

Q: Did they stop telling you shit?

Gunnels: Yeah. And, you know, stopped doing stuff around me. Yeah, I mean, look, I got—so, my great uncle, I told you Uncle Sonny ran numbers off of—Jickie, my grandmother's brother, he was doing some illegal stuff. I don't know what he was doing, a little bit of everything. And then my uncle, he was a big-time drug dealer and then, Rose, my aunt, her baby's daddy, Cuz, he was a big-time drug dealer in California, big time. So, yeah, you know, I was around that kind of stuff, and I saw that kind of stuff. And so, it was interesting that I chose the field that I chose.

Q: Wow. Wow. How long were you—okay, so tell us, I know you have to go soon. I want to hear both about your career life from becoming just a rookie and to becoming a lieutenant, but also about your personal life. Because now you're married and, retired, to Felicia, who was one of the other people we've interviewed, and you guys have such a beautiful life. So, I'm just

wondering if you could talk us through like, so you liked being a cop, but your first jobs were in the jail, you said, right?

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: What was that like?

Gunnels: So, yeah, so one of my first assignments was—because then you go to the academy and all this kind of stuff, and then you go to jail training, but anyway, I worked in the courts, and then I worked in the jails. And then I went to patrol. But anyway, so my first exposure—so I was not unfamiliar, I felt comfortable being around folks in the jails. And what I mean by that is because of the Sheriff's Department, there were many people that I met that had never—believe it or not, in that day, back in 1990, when I joined the department, I was talking to this one guy, who ended up marrying a Black woman, he's a white guy, but he said up until he joined the Sheriff's Department, he didn't grow up around any Black people. And so, he ended up marrying a Black woman and his family, you know, didn't want to have anything to do with him and stuff. They had children, they're still married to this day.

Q: When you say his family didn't have anything to do with him, you mean his family stopped being in his life?

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: Yes. And then, there were many other stories where people would tell me that, you know, they thought—white people would tell me that they thought all Black people were bad because the only time they interacted with them, or they saw anything was when we were on TV and we were oftentimes, back in the '70s, you know that blaxploitation stuff, we were often perceived as bad people, or crime ridden people. And so, my exposure, so when I went and started working in the jails, and being around a bunch of people who were majority—I mean, I'm be real, majority of the people that are in our jails, that were in our jail systems at that time in the '90s, and probably still to this day, the majority are minorities, Black and Hispanics. And we can get into the whole reason as to the why of that. But in any case, so I felt comfortable enough—I mean, not comfortable enough, because I understood my boundaries and stuff because being in the military, you know, I learned boundaries, because in the military, I retired as a First Sergeant, which means I was, they call us top. The first sergeant is the top, you're the top NCO [non-commissioned officer] of the unit. So, you're the top dog, so they call you top. And so, and I learned as I went up the ranks in the military became a supervisor, and no longer a worker bee, but a supervisor, you have to learn, you have to have boundaries, because the things that you were doing when you were just one of them you couldn't do when you weren't one of them. You had to have boundaries.

And so, in the military, so I learned in the military, so when I went to work for the Sheriff's Department, it was easy for me to keep my boundaries in terms of, okay, I worked in the jails, even though I knew some of the people in the jails or I could identify with their situations, Black

females, working in female jails, and some of the conditions that got them there. I understood all that. But so, I could empathize and sympathize with them. However, I also knew that I still had a job to do. And so, I never ever, ever crossed the lines, and became too friendly or any romantic relationships, although we had many people where that was the case.

Matter of fact, when I worked in the female jails, there was one of our female deputies, white deputies, who was shot and killed by a girl that she had fallen for in jail.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: And so, yeah, so I didn't have any of those issues. I understood my boundaries. I never crossed those lines. But it was easier for me to assimilate and to do that job and not disrespect people because some of these people were not unlike many people in my family, with the criminal backgrounds and stuff and their upbringing and where they came from. And they looked like me. So, I did not disrespect them. I was fair but firm.

And this is how I know that, because there was one time when I was up on Crenshaw, it was Wheels [*phonetic*] Barbecue up on Crenshaw, up off the—excuse me, yeah, it was Crenshaw, up off of the 10 freeway. I was there at a gas station, a Shell gas station, I was up there getting some gas one evening by myself. And this guy comes up to me, one of those window washer kind of people, want to wash your windows or something. And he said, “Hey, hey, deputy, you remember me?” And I'm like, “Oh, no, man.” And so, when somebody comes—he didn't even say deputy, senior. “Hey Senior, hey Senior, remember me?” See, senior, that's a jail term.

Because in the jails, you had your two-strike deputies, and they're call senior deputies, so like your seasoned deputies, your training officers. They're your senior deputies. And so, when somebody says senior, you know, that's a jail thing, they know you either from the jails, or they're real closely involved with law enforcement, but they know to call you a senior.

And so, when he said that, and I was like, "No, man. I don't remember you." So, he told me his name, which I don't remember now. And so, you know, off duty. I always carried a gun. And I'm thinking "Oh, shit. I'm at a gas station, I'm going to have to handle some business here."

Q: Wait, Tressa, just so I understand, were you off duty in plainclothes at that moment?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Okay, wow.

Gunnels: Yeah, I was at the gas station, getting gas.

Q: It's your own car, not a patrol car, your own car.

Gunnels: Right, right. And the guy comes up to me. "Hey, Senior." Oh, first, he came up, "Hey, do you want your windows washed," or whatever. And he's like, "Hey, hey, deputy. Hey, Senior. You remember me?" I was like, "Oh, shit. Senior. Okay." So, I was like, "No, man." He was like, "Yeah, I'm so-and-so. I was your trustee over in this," and trustee is a jail thing. In

jails, you have what we call trustees, which you don't trust them. But they're your more trusted jail inmate, and you use them as workers to clean the jails and the crews, so you call them trustees.

And he was like, "Yeah, I was your trustee." And I was like, "Oh, okay, man." And so, I'm thinking to myself as he's talking like, "Oh, shit, where's my gun? I might have to handle some business." But then I said, "Hey, man," I said, "How you doing?" or whatever. And he's like, "Oh, you know, I'm staying out of trouble." I was like, "All right. Did I treat you right." And he's like, "Yeah, man, you was fair with me, you know, you know the game. But you was fair." And that's what I like, because I was firm but fair with my workers, with my subordinates, with the people that were in jail, and the people with the cause of service that I would go to, I liked the fact that I was fair, but firm.

And so, when he told me that, and like he said, it's a game. He knows you're a criminal, and you've worked in the jails you know the game. And so, you just abide by the game. And so, those are the rules of the game. And so, I was fair and firm, so he didn't give me no shit and I think I gave him a couple bucks and I moved on about my day.

Q: That's amazing. Okay. So, you just tell me whenever you want to stop or just say let's finish later, and we can do it. So, there's no stress whatsoever. And so, how long did you work in the jails?

Gunnels: Well, off and on, because you know, your career, you start off and then you end and then you go back. So, I was in the jails for a year. I went down when—I was in courts. And then I went to patrol because I joined in 1990. So, I lovingly say I joined with the riots, and I ended with the riots.

Q: What do you mean by that?

Gunnels: So, I joined the department in February of 1990. And in 1991, we had the LA riots with Rodney [Glen] King, and that whole decision, and all that kind of stuff. So, even though I joined in 1990, but that was right around the beginning of my career. So, I joined with the LA riots, and I retired during the [COVID-19] pandemic and we were having the riots from that, because I joined—I retired in 2023, but I was off work and had have surgeries and stuff for injuries sustained while working in 2020, 2021. And so, that was while the—because the pandemic hit like March of 2020. And by September, I was out with injuries and stuff and had to have surgery. So, I lovingly say—and then I was off for surgeries and stuff. And then I officially retired in 2022. So, I started with the riots, and I ended with the riots.

Q: I think it's profound what you're saying. You mean the George [Perry] Floyd [Jr.]—all the protests that broke out over George Floyd's murder?

Gunnels: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Q: Oh, my God. And then the protests that broke out when we were younger, from the Rodney King verdict and murder. Not murder, but verdict.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: My Lord, Tressa. That's the span of your career in service. Wow. Wow, Tressa. You've seen a lot of that, huh?

Gunnels: Saw a lot of shit. A lot of good, a whole lot of bad unfortunately.

Q: Tell me about some of the lot of good that you saw.

Gunnels: So, some of the good that I saw is that, you know, in some of the poor communities, in some cases, rightfully so, but law enforcement cops, they're not perceived very well. They weren't then, and they're definitely not now with the way the world is now. But the good is that I was in different programs and stuff through the department, where I interacted with children, and I interacted with the community. I was on the cops team where we interacted with the community and we went out because law enforcement started learning—you know, it's an ever-changing industry field to be in. Excuse me, Robin. Felicia, I'm doing my interview with Robin now, and little man is down here. So, just so you know. He's eating his cereal right now. Okay. Good morning, dear.

So, yeah, so what they came to learn with law enforcement was that the ways that they handled business in this, you know, in the 1960s with the water hoses, and the dogs, siccing the dogs on the protesters and stuff, and the way that the cops interacted with the Black community in the 1970s and the 1980s, it was not a best way to practice. Because you would have your informants, your victims of crimes, they wouldn't want to tell you who was responsible for this for fear of retribution, and then knowing that the cops weren't going to protect them. But then as law enforcement, the job became more difficult because we can't—look, it's only ten thousand of us that's sworn, and I know that sounds like a lot, but in a population of what we had in LA County, that's nothing. That's minuscule. And so, you need—

Q: That's right. That's right, Tressa, because I just want to remind the listeners that Los Angeles is the second largest city in the country. So, ten thousand, that's nothing.

Gunnels: Is New York the first?

Q: And do you think—yeah, New York is the first. And do you think that—

Gunnels: And you know what's interesting? I mean, you know what's interesting, we have the largest sheriff's department in the world in LA County, and New York PD [Police Department] is the largest police department in the world.

Q: Yes. And I wonder about that too, where the imbalance in population is so high, how that affects—we'll talk to some of the ways in which things go bad. But when I see police brutality

stuff happening, I often think and I would love to hear from you, if you feel comfortable talking about it, not enough training and too much fear, you know, about situations escalating?

Grunnels: Yes.

Q: You know, and then when you think that these officers on the street are thinking, you know, we're outnumbered, how quickly that can go. And even when they're not thinking, you know— anyway, so we can talk about that too. But please continue.

Gunnels: So, oh, I don't even know what I was talking about, because I just get to talking.

Q: Good. Get to talking. I had asked you about what were some of the good things that you had seen.

Gunnels: Oh, yeah, the good things. So, yeah, I was part of the COPS program. It was called the COPS Team. It stands for Community-Oriented Policing. And so, like I said, law enforcement they had learned that they needed to change the way they were doing business because that old business model was no longer working in the 1990s. And we needed to make the community a part of what we did, because we could not be everywhere all the time. It's just physically impossible. And so, the COPS program was formed to start community involvement, interact with community, programs, get them involved, let them go for ride alongs with you so they can see what we go through. And so, that was the good, because getting out there, and being a part of the COPS program, and having ride alongs is what we called them, ride alongs, which was

people from the community wanted to come and ride with you for a shift, or half a shift however long they want to stay with you—

Q: Wow, Tressa.

Gunnels: —so they could see. They would go on the calls for service when you have those domestic violence calls, and they go and see how, you know, the man usually just kicked the woman's ass, but now you go in there, you're going to arrest him, and now she wants to fight you. So, they would see that and all that, so they could take that, "Well, why did they have to respond like that? They didn't have to do that." Well, when you go for a ride with a ride along with us, and you go on these calls for service, because they are actually going in there with us unless we tell them that it's a man with a gun call or something that is potentially life-threatening, we tell them, "Hey, maybe you need to stay back in the car or whatever," like that, but we will let them go in there so they can see, it ain't all black and white. And we make these split-second decisions that could mean life or death. And for you to say, "Well, why didn't they—they the cops, they should have just known that that was not a real gun."

Well, no, how will we know that? Because the gangsters, the criminals, they evolved, and they knew that, hey, the pink guns, or the orange guns, that those were usually training guns, and it was not—so they started painting their real guns those colors, so that we would think that that was not a real gun, and then they would shoot us and kill us instead.

And so, the community got to start seeing that. And so, I got to interact with them. And I felt like people riding with me and learning my story as a Black female, because you know, it's one thing to be a cop. But then when you are a Black cop, and then a female on top of that in this male dominated white world, then they're like, "Oh, sister, oh, okay, now we know. Okay." And so, I made some good that way and changed people's perspectives on things and why I made the decision. And even my own family. I mean, when the whole George Floyd thing happened, and before that we had the one in Missouri, I can't remember the gentleman's name.

Q: Michael Brown.

Gunnels: Okay. Because I was working in IRC, Inmate Reception Center.

Q: I mean, I think you're talking about Michael Brown. I'm not sure. But go ahead. You're talking about the gentleman who was left in the street for three days dead? Or no, someone else?

Gunnels: No, this is the one where the young man, the white cop shot and killed him. And he had broken into a store or something.

Q: Oh, I don't know about this.

Gunnels: Yeah, I'll have to look at the name. But it was in Missouri. It was actually in Missouri, not in Kansas City. It was in one of those small towns in Missouri. And when that happened, I was working as a relatively new lieutenant working in inmate reception center, IRC, down in LA

County, by the Twin Towers area where the Twin Towers Men's Central Jail is. And I remember my mother calling me. And I remember my mother telling me how that cop should have known better, because basically, this Black male, who was a big Black male, and he had broken into a liquor store, or pharmacy or something like that, it was after hours. And there was a call for service, and then this white cop spotted him, and the white cop was in his car, and the suspect, or the Black male approached him, and the backup had not arrived yet.

And the white cop ended up shooting and killing him because the Black man was reaching through the car, and they have evidence, they've proven all this stuff, and started to grab the cop through the car window, was beating him and stuff. And so, the cop shot and killed him. And it was the whole thing about well, why did he have to do that, and didn't have to do that. He should have used his training. And I've had these conversations with my own family and even my own mother. And even Felicia. And she was like, "Well, baby," and my mother was like, "But he should have known better." And I was like, "Mom, didn't that cop have the right to go home at night?" I was like, "Mom, what if that was me in the car by myself? Would you want me to come home at night?" And she was like, "Yeah." I was like, "So, if somebody pulled me to the car window and started beating on me, wouldn't you want me to defend myself? He had the right to defend himself."

And that officer was not found guilty of murder. He was not. But of course, this was at the beginning of all this stuff going on with the protests and stuff. But he was not found guilty, there were no criminal charges, because we have a right to protect ourselves. But because it was, again, another Black man killed in the hands of cops, and a white cop in this case, you know, it

was obviously, it was a big deal. And so, I told my mother from the cop point of view, first of all, his tactics were bad. Because my tactics taught me, I would not let anybody get up to me, like approach me like that. I would back up and wait for backup, or keep backing up the car, whatever. But again, like I said in this county we have, for better or for worse, we are one of the better train departments in the world, even though we still fuck up. But being so big, we're one of the better trained. So, my tactics would have taught me to not let that man approach me like that.

But it happened. And so, this cop was grabbed, and he was being beaten, and he shot and killed this man. And he had a right to protect himself. But my family, Felicia, we argued about that, because they saw it from another Black man dying at the hand of a white cop. And I saw it as, but this cop had a right to live. If that were me, you all would want me to come home, wouldn't you? And so, I found myself as a Black female as a cop, and you've asked about the community, and that's why, when I interact with people in the community, they saw things from a totally different perspective. Because, yeah, I'm a cop, but I'm Black, I'm a female from the hood. And but yet, and still, I want to go home, too. And I saw things from all these different points of views, and often differed from my family and loved ones, about our opinions on these things.

And Felicia and I still to this day, we still have disagreements about situations that happened on the news. And I'm like, "They got a right." And unfortunately, I've been in some situations where people have died as a result of their actions. The calls that I was involved in, a young man died, but he was running from us. He was on a motorcycle. And I told Felicia, all he had to do was to stop. That was all he had to do. Just stop, motherfucker, just stop. But no. He had just—

earlier that day, they showed me he had just gotten his license reinstated from a drunk driving charge. And he was on his motorcycle. And the deputies went to pull him over, light him up. And he took off running. And so, it was a pursuit, vehicle pursuit. He was on his motorcycle. And we get disengaged from the pursuit, but he was going so fast and he clipped the end of a car and ended up crashing on his motorcycle and crashing through one of those cement bus benches and ended up dying. He had internal bleeding. They took him to the hospital, St. Francis Hospital with trauma, but he had so much internal bleeding and stuff. And so, we were sued.

But we were not found, because it's like we had disengaged. We were no longer even behind him. But he was going so fast he didn't realize that we had disengaged from the pursuit. But we have the deep pockets. And so, the family sued us, and I'm sure they didn't get as much as they probably could have if we had been engaged, because like I said, we had disengaged. But Felicia and I had a discussion. I was like, "But how are we responsible for killing him when all he had to do was stop? He had a responsibility in that, pullover. And he didn't because earlier that day, he just got his license reinstated from drunk driving. And he was drunk driving on his motorcycle and led to his death." But we got sued, and I'm named in a lawsuit that will forever be in perpetuity related to killing this man. But, you know, motherfucker, you had some liabilities in it, too. Just stop. What's the most you were going to get, a ticket for drunk driving or something?

Q: It's really profound to listen to talk from the other point of view, because one of the things—well, several things. So, when I was asking you was the other death you were talking about was about Mike Brown, that was the young kid who was killed in Ferguson by those cops and left in the street.

Gunnels: That's from Missouri, yeah.

Q: Yeah. But no, it's a different case than what you were talking about, though. There's a few things that happened in Ferguson. But what I want to say too, is having grown up in LA, when the LAPD—this is before you moved there in the 1960s, were there were a lot of [Ku Klux] Klan in the LAPD. It was just a known thing, right? And they harassed a lot of people in LA based purely on race, and killed people based purely on race. Now, when I lived in LA, and when I was the poet laureate of Los Angeles, and I would get pulled over for speeding or something, my heart rate would always go up, right? Because I was afraid. But what's interesting to me is how diverse the force—now I'm not talking about the Sheriff's Department necessarily, LAPD is different—how diverse so many different law enforcement departments units have become.

So, that I felt like—one time I got pulled over because this guy hit me, Tressa, this guy was drunk, and he hit me. I was at a stoplight; he literally just came in from behind me and smashed in my mother's car. I mean, totaled my mother's car because he was drunk. And it was a little funny if it hadn't been so, you know, damaging. But all the cops that showed up were like young Black men under twenty-five or something. And the amount of love and care that I felt in that moment from these officers healed a lifetime of this other experience that I had growing up, right, where I had a police put a gun to my head when I was four. Right? Different.

And so, I think what you're also voicing and articulating is how much different police forces and sheriff's departments have begun to change from an earlier culture, and especially forces in big

metropolis, big cities, where I just—I can't tell you how many times I actually feel good approaching female cops for something. All the time. I find a female cop if I can, and say, "Officer, this, this and that," right? And it's what I always would have hoped for. And now it's happening more and more. So, I understand what you're saying, I guess, is what I'm saying, you know? And it's unfortunate that it all gets collapsed into one story that you know, and people do perpetrate crimes. That's what I'm trying to say. And those stories that you're talking about, you know, get lost. And I understand and I feel for you.

So, how long, I'm aware that you need to go. So, I want to talk about, can you talk about your career rise in the department, and then also your beautiful life that you have been building within that? Because it's really interesting—to the listeners, I know Tressa that because she's married to a dear old friend of mine. And it's really—and we haven't ever really sat down and talked this deeply. And it's really interesting to think about you saying that you were raised poor in Missouri, because I know you as an incredibly astute, very talented financial planner, who you and your wife were able to retire, in my opinion earlier, retire early, and Felicia was a school principal and a teacher, because of some kind of acumen, financial acumen you learned along the way.

And you also raised your kids, grandkids, you have this huge extended family and community of queer positive people of color, just there's just so much love and celebration and joy and community and allyship all around you. And I'm just wondering if you could walk us through how you got there.

Gunnels: Okay. All right. Where do you want me to start?

Q: Anywhere you want, anywhere you want. I'm just aware that time is running out and I want you to be able to tell this these other parts of your life, too.

Gunnels: Okay, so I told you about my reasons for joining the Sheriff's Department and my rise through the Sheriff's Department. We all start off as deputy sheriffs, if you start off as a sworn member, you start off as a deputy sheriff, everybody's considered a deputy, because you've been deputized. There's only one sheriff in the county, and everybody else is that sheriff's deputies, no matter what your rank is, sergeant, lieutenant commander, captain, chief, but you're still a deputy of the sheriff of the county. So, that's that. So, I started off as a deputy sheriff. Let's see, I started off working the jails, Sybil Brand, worked the courts, went to patrol. I worked "the ghetto station;" I worked the fast station. My rationale for that was because I figured it was always better to start off fast and then slow down versus going to a slower station, a slower station, something like Lomita [California] where they don't have the activity that you do at station that services the Compton and Lynwood areas, unincorporated LA, the Firestone areas, that station is called Century Station, which is more minorities, more densely populated than, like, a Lomita Station, where Lomita, and palace thirties [*phonetic*] and all that. So, anyway, so worked there, I was there for four years, worked all the different—worked the crime car, worked the traffic car, where my primary responsibility was traffic enforcement. I excelled in that, got many awards, got the MADD [Mothers Against Drunk Driving] award of the year for making the most arrests of drunk drivers, got some acclimates from the city council members and that kind of stuff.

And then from there, I went on and I worked as a detective, as an auto theft detective for this unit called TRAP, it was a multi-jurisdictional, multi-agency taskforce, and the unit was called TRAP, Taskforce for Regional Auto theft Prevention was that. Worked for that for a while.

Q: Tressa, what did that taskforce do?

Gunnels: TRAP was the Taskforce, that was the T. The T stood for Taskforce. The R was for Regional, the A was for Auto theft, P was for Prevention. So, we called it TRAP. So, that was where I went after I worked at Century Station. But while I was at Century Station, I worked some great assignments there. Like I said, traffic car, crime car, and then also did some stuff where I did some undercover stuff with prostitution, with drugs. So, that was pretty fun. Felicia likes to hear those stories when I was telling her about when I was working as a little low cost [*phonetic*] as a hoe up in Moby's Boulevard up in Lynwood.

Q: What did you say? You worked undercover as a what?

Gunnels: As a hoe.

Q: As a sex worker?

Gunnels: As a prostitute, I'm sorry, I'll be—as a prostitute, as a hoe.

Q: [*Unclear*]?

Gunnels: I was a Long Beach Boulevard hoe.

Q: Oh my God, what were you guys taught? Okay, amazing.

Gunnels: Yes. So, what we did was, so a lot of the—so again, this was in Lynwood, on Long Beach Boulevard, which is where they had a major problem with prostitution. So, a lot of the local businesses on Long Beach Boulevard in Lynwood, this is where we got into, this was a part of that community outreach stuff. And so, the businesses, their business would dry up or people would not come to the businesses because of the prostitution and the crime surrounding prostitution in their city, in front of their businesses and the drugs and stuff. And so, this was part of that community outreach where we would sit up, we would listen to these business owners and community members complain about activity. And so, we would do these stings. And we would do drugs stings, we would do prostitution stings, because that was the big thing on Long Beach Boulevard. Long Beach Boulevard, you can go in the back in the day, it was well known you can go there, get your hooker, you know, you pay twenty, twenty-five dollars, you know, I was charging twenty-five for a fuck and a suck, and I mean that's where you went to get it. And like I said, this wasn't Beverly Hills or something where you was paying hundreds of dollars, this was twenty-five dollars for a fuck and a suck. I mean, come on.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: So, yeah, so I did that. Had a great time with that. Just a side note, never went to court on any of those cases.

Q: Okay, back up. When you say you had a great time, what do you mean? And when you say you never went to court, why is that significant?

Gunnels: Well, I had a great time because it was fun. I had a great time, because what I would do is I'd wear my little beat-up little shoes, and I'd wear my little, short skirt set that make it look like a little Coolock set or whatever. And I'd have a cigarette in my mouth, unlit cigarette because I don't smoke. But I'd have an unlit cigarette in my mouth. And I was wired. And the reason why I was wired was because our guys would record it so that when we went to court, that would be our evidence. And so, the reason why I would have the cigarette in my mouth is so while I was walking up and down Long Beach Boulevard, I would have a reason to move my lips, and so that way the guys would know the mic was still good and that kind of stuff. And nobody would just think I was just crazy walking up and down the street talking to myself.

Q: Tressa, what kind of johns were trying to get sex work on Long Beach Boulevard?

Gunnels: You know what? You want to know the truth? So, I worked Long Beach Boulevard. And then I worked our unincorporated area over on Figueroa. I was also a Figueroa hoe. And so, yeah, you know, you would be surprised. I had an old Black man, old—well, I'm going to be honest. I don't remember what age he was now, but I want to say he was at least in his sixties and had a wife and family and children and grandchildren and stuff and had some dope and he

wanted to go and have a little fun. I had twosomes, I had these two young Black men. I had white guys, I had Hispanic guys, you know, people who—so, it ran the gamut.

Q: And what class were they? Were they all kind of middle class or working class?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Middle class.

Gunnels: Yes, working class, working to middle, yes, yes.

Q: So, you worked for the johns, too, or primarily.

Gunnels: No, no, I did not have a pimp because—

Q: No, no, no, I mean, were you primarily trying to—you guys tried to catch the people soliciting sex work, or sex workers, too?

Gunnels: No, solicitors. Yes, and so because you know, what we found was my partner was shot and killed in Lynwood. And our best informant was a prostitute. Another guy that worked out of Century Station, Steve Blair [*phonetic*], he worked out of Lynwood actually, but we took over their area. But anyway, Steve Blair was shot and killed in Lynwood. And it was a prostitute who was the key witness on that case. And so, I had a healthy respect for prostitutes because even

though they did, that's the oldest profession in the world. But they also, they would give us information and they were key witnesses on two murders of deputy sheriffs.

And so, I didn't really fuck with them a whole lot. You know, I'd check on them and if they was wrong, they was wrong, and I'd take them in. But a lot of times, I would not always arrest them for the stuff. You know, they had a little dope, and I'd be like, "Look," because there was no rules to say that if you have—now, back in the day drugs was a big deal, but now you know marijuana is legal and all that kind of stuff, but back in the day, girl, you got your weed, you got your little pipe, you got your little rock, girl, throw that shit out. Don't be using this shit. I'm not going to take you to jail for this this time, you know, you factor goodwill there. There was no rules that said you had to arrest them. You had the option that you could, or you could not.

And so, you know, sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't. It just depended, because they know it's a game, they know it's a game, law enforcement, the criminals, they know it's a game. You play by the rules, and you step outside the rules of the game you get to assaulting me or whatever, then we're going to handle business. But, you know, you keep it one hundred and you're respectful to me, I'll be respectful to you. I was never disrespectful. I'm sure people who I've arrested wouldn't say they were sure I was, but I never called anybody bitches. I got called so many bitches and hoes when sucking a white man's dick, and I got called so many things because of the fact of the Black female arresting a Black community member. But, you know, that was that was my job. So, yes, so we were not after the prostitutes. We were after the johns because we were trying to get rid of them coming into the area and disrupting the business on

Long Beach Boulevard in Lynwood, and on Figueroa Street, on the incorporated part of LA. And so, yes.

Q: Incredible, Tressa. I had no idea, after years of knowing you, I did not know this about you.

Gunnels: Oh, yeah. That I was a hoe and selling drugs, yes. So, yeah, so that's what we'd do. So, what I'd do is, I'd be wired and so I'd be walking the streets and you know, somebody would approach me in the car, a male would approach me in the car. And I'd stop and talk, and we would discuss a price and what I would do for them. And all this was being recorded. And so, that was one of the elements of the crime of solicitation, was the contract. And so, that would be our verbal contract.

And then the furtherance of the crime would be when they would follow me to the hotel room. So, we've agreed to a price. And then I'd say, "All right, fucker, my room was up here in this motel," we had a motel up on Long Beach Boulevard that I had a room in, technically, I had a contract, I had a room, but the room adjacent right next door to it was where all of our guys were, where the recording was. And so, when the solicitors would follow, drive their car into the parking lot of the hotel, at the motel, rather, and then come inside the room that was the furtherance of the act. And so, now we've met the legal elements of the crime of solicitation.

And again, it was all being recorded. And so, what would happen, they would come into the room, and then I would slam the door, and whenever I would slam the door, that would be my guys' key to come and bum rush the guys. And so, that was what we would do. And so, I never

went to court on any of those, one, because people was probably embarrassed by the fact, because like I said, it was older me with families and stuff and had drugs. And then some of it was just so ironclad. I mean, I got you on tape agreeing that you're going to fuck me for twenty-five dollars, and if I give you a blow job, it'll be an extra five dollars, or whatever. And you're coming into the room. So, I mean, where's the defense that?

Q: Wow. Wow, Tressa I just had no idea. I'm kind of in shock and I don't know what to say. It's amazing.

Gunnels: And then the drugs, and then again, drugs, you know, a big-time problem then and now. And so, you know, the saying back in the day was you take, you know, a drug user off the streets, you're also going to take a burglar off the streets because they're breaking into these businesses at nights to get the money for the drugs and stuff. And a lot of prostitutes were on drugs and stuff. And so, drugs was also an issue. And so, we would set up drugs, things and stuff. And so, I was doing my first—well, no, that wasn't my first one. One of my drug deals that I remember, my first one was over in Compton. But one of the ones that I remember was in Ujima Village [California]. I don't know if you're familiar with the Ujima Village.

Q: Absolutely.

Gunnels: Okay, it's been torn down because it was on a landfill or whatever over there by Magic Johnson Park. But anyway, so that was one of my more memorable drug deals. And what we would do is we would arrest these prostitutes, or a drug user, who would have a lot of drugs on

them, and we would tell them, “Look we’re going to let you work off your case, we won’t prosecute you for this case if you agree to be an informant and take us to where you got the drugs from,” or whatever. And so, they would take me with—and if it was usually a female, and I would go with them, as a girl to buy some drugs there from this place. And then, you know, I’d get a mental note on things and buy drugs and give him marked money and marked bills and all this kind of stuff. So, when we would later go and do a search for it or whatever, we would find those serialized bills and whatever kind of stuff. And so, yeah, that was one of my moments.

And the reason why that one in Ujima Village was the most memorable for me was because on that particular one, I don’t even remember who the drug dealer was, but drug dealers are paranoid. And I remember this particular apartment that we went to up there Ujima Village, he wanted to take off my clothes, and wanted to make sure I had no wires on me. And I did not have any wires because we would not wear wires on these drug dealers because drug dealers are just so paranoid. But as a result, I mean my guys were nearby, but they wouldn’t be able to get a signal nothing because I wasn’t wired. And so, the drug dealer was just so paranoid. So, he wanted to do all this crazy stuff to make sure I wasn’t wired, make sure I wasn’t a cop, and make sure all this shit, because he didn’t know who I was, and he was bitching about this house, and all this kind of stuff to buy some dope. And I just remember that, and I was like, oh man, these motherfucking drug dealers are crazy. So, that’s why I remember that one, because he was the one who was the most paranoid.

Q: Tressa. How—okay, we have to start wrapping it up, but I don’t want to. How many years did you serve in the force?

Gunnels: Thirty-two years.

Q: And you mentioned that you had some health issues. Can you talk more?

Gunnels: So, I was a deputy sheriff, and then I made sergeant. When I was sergeant, my first assignment was West Hollywood Station, absolutely positively loved West Hollywood Station.

Q: Okay, wait, hold on. I don't want you to rush. I don't want you to rush. You can slow down, and we can do another hour another time, because you're starting to talk more quickly, and I don't want you to rush anything. So, you transferred to the West Hollywood Station and what happened then? You can go slower.

Gunnels: After I was a deputy sheriff, I was promoted, passed the test, went to West Hollywood Station, I was a field sergeant at West Hollywood Station. Absolutely loved it.

Q: What did that mean, a field sergeant, Tressa? Hold on, hold on. Let's just stop. I'm going to definitely interview a little bit longer on another date for another hour. So, let's just go for another ten, fifteen minutes, or twenty minutes or whatever. But I just don't want you to rush. But tell me what does it mean to be a field sergeant?

Gunnels: So, when you have your patrol deputies, the deputies that work with the field, they work patrol at the stations, they have to have a supervisor, and that supervisor is a sergeant,

that's the first line supervisor is a sergeant. And when I say a field sergeant, that means I work in the field because you have some sergeants that worked, like you'll have a detective sergeant, so they're going to work in the office in the detective bureau, or you have a sergeant that works administrative duties or something. But I worked in the field. So, when I say a field sergeant, I was the first line supervisor for our deputies in patrol at West Hollywood Station.

Q: Wow. And how long were you at West Hollywood Station?

Gunnels: I was at West Hollywood Station for a total of ten years. I mean, I was there. And then I left because 9/11 [terrorist attacks, September 11, 2001]. And so, I was over in Afghanistan, that beautiful country of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, living in a tent for a whole year.

Q: Okay. I'm so glad I said we're slowing down. Before we get to that, you left West Hollywood for the war in Afghanistan?

Gunnels: For 9/11, yes.

Q: Did you volunteer to do that or where you called in?

Gunnels: Well, see, I was a reservist at that point of my military career.

Q: Okay. We are so going to slow down, because this is incredible. So, save that. I want to hear about that. Let's go back to West Hollywood. That's incredible. What was it like to serve in West Hollywood for a decade?

Gunnels: I absolutely loved West Hollywood.

Q: Why?

Gunnels: And the reason I loved West Hollywood was because you had different—s up until that point in time, I had worked all these “ghetto stations,” where the primary population was Hispanic or Black, very few whites. And those whites, they were usually in the cities because they were working there. And they were also doing their dirt there, too, let's not get it wrong, get it twisted. But in any case, but when I went to work for West Hollywood Station, it was, you had whites, Blacks, you had all races, you had very well to do people, because West Hollywood is a very expensive city to live in, but then you had a different element that would come in there because West Hollywood had all the nightclubs on Santa Monica Boulevard, and on Sunset Boulevard. And so, we would get all the gangsters that will come into West Hollywood to party. And so, you also got that element of people.

And then, of course, then, West Hollywood is known for being a big gay city. But believe it or not, the gay population was not the largest population there. That was the most vocal population there. West Hollywood has a very large Russian population on the east side of town. So, you got this melting pot of Russians, and of well-to-do yuppies in the entertainment industry, and wanna-

be actors and actresses. And then you got these gangsters coming in to party and cause trouble and do criminal-ridden shit. So, I loved it because you got a little bit of everything in West Hollywood. And so, it was no longer me just dealing with people from this lower socioeconomic field. Now I'm pulling over people who are driving Lamborghinis, and "Well, do you know who my father is? Do you know who—my friend is the sheriff, my so and so." And celebrities. We've arrested so many celebrities up in West Hollywood. I mean, it used to be pictures. I pulled Britney Spears over, and people.

I mean, and then you know, you had the gay pride parade up there. And so, we have a lot of that. So, I loved West Hollywood, because you got a little bit of everything there.

Q: Wow. What was it like to be, I don't know how you identify, queer, or whatever, but what was it like to be—

Gunnels: Lesbian.

Q: Yeah, what was it like for you to be queer and working in West Hollywood? Because West Hollywood is also like you said, celebrated for being a safe queer.

Gunnels: So, I absolutely loved it. So, I was never on the department, my sexuality, I was never hidden, or in the closet. But when I worked in jails, or when I worked the "ghetto stations," it just wasn't anything that was talked about, but like my radio car partners who I sat in the car

with, and the people I worked with, they knew that I was a lesbian. But in West Hollywood, it was like, it was just to the next level.

Q: How so? I can't imagine. I just can't imagine. How so?

Gunnels: I loved it. And then they loved us there. The community loved us because we protected them from all the atrocities that the gay community faced and stuff, the backlashing, and the gay bashing, and all that kind of stuff. And West Hollywood, they loved us. The community on the holidays, because you know, law enforcement is twenty-four-seven, 365. So, on the holidays, the community, they would bring us turkey dinners for the holidays, and cakes and pies and stuff. Whereas when I worked in Compton, and in Lynwood, that wasn't so much the case.

I mean, my belief is that no matter what your socio-economic level is, all parents want the very best for their children. They just happen to live in these, in Compton or Lynwood or whatever, because that's what their money can afford. But that doesn't mean they want any less for their children. And they appreciated us being in there and protecting their communities as well. But they couldn't express it as much as it was expressed in West Hollywood because for fear of retribution. And you got the gang problem that in some of those inner city, those faster stations. So, yeah, the folks, the community, they really loved us there. And I enjoyed being there.

Q: Wow. And ten whole years.

Gunnels: Yeah, off and on. Like I said, I was there, and then I took a break because of 9/11. And then I came back. After I came back from 9/11, I was there for another six to nine months. And then they pulled me for a special program, I went down and ran a gang team, and that's when I worked at East LA Station, Compton Station, Lennox Station. And so, this gang team for, and that's why I said we had some deaths, we had another shooting there where we killed this guy. And so, I was technically still a West Hollywood body, because I was on loan to this gang team. And that gang team, that team was established—Serena Williams and Venus Williams, they had a sister, her name was Yetunde, or something like that.

Q: Yes, I remember when she was killed.

Gunnels: She was shot and killed in Compton, in the car with somebody. And when that happened, that sparked, and they wanted more stuff done in Compton. Because at that point, Compton was then the Sheriff's Department area. Compton used to have their own PD. But the Compton PD disbanded because of financial reasons. They weren't able to support and show what they were doing the money the federal government was giving them. The Sheriff's Department had taken over. And when her sister was shot and killed in that car there, that's when they started throwing all this money and all these resources towards Compton Station to address the problems that Compton Station had. And that was when this team formed, and I was on this this gang team. And so, yeah.

Q: Incredible. And so, in the middle of your service for West Hollywood, the war in Afghanistan broke out, and 9/11 happened, and you were a reservist still, you said.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: What does it mean to be—for people who don't know, what does it mean to be a reservist?

Gunnels: So, military reservist, you go one weekend a month to whatever your reserved duty station is, one weekend, a month. And then two weeks every year, you go away for training. That was the basis. That's what it used to be. It's now much more than that, because when 9/11 happened, we had Daddy [George Walker] Bush and we had Son [George Herbert Walker] Bush.

And when Daddy Bush was in power, and we had the situation, the Kuwaiti, it was a one-day war over there. And we bombed the hell out of them, and it was over in one day. But in that instance, that was not a sustained war, a sustained effort. It was literally one day, and it was over. When 9//11 happened, it was sustained. I mean, as history now shows, it went on for twenty years. And some say we still pulled out too soon.

And so, with that situation, we could not only rely on our active-duty troops to be over there because that was an extended campaign. And so, we had to rely more heavily on our reserve troops, our reserve fighting force. And so, it used to be the reserves would go one weekend, a month to their reserve duties and two weeks a year for training and all this kind of stuff. And then that was the end of it. But when 9/11 happened, you had reservists that were that were deployed over there many more times than the active duty soldiers. Because, you know, the

reservists would go over there, and their jobs would not be waiting for them when they would come back in some cases. I was fortunate working for the Sheriff's Department.

And so, you would go over there, and you'd make this much money, and you could be able to support your family. You were still technically a reserve, even though you would spend all these years over there as active duty. So, yes. So, we started to rely on our reservists a lot more. And so, I was one of those reservists that got called up to replace the active-duty unit that was in Uzbekistan. We first went to Afghanistan, and part of our unit was in Afghanistan. And then a few of us went over to Uzbekistan, because we had many places in Afghanistan that we had to support. Kabul, just a lot of places there. And then three of us went to was Uzbekistan, K2 [Karshi-Khanabad], to take care of their services there. And then the other half of my unit was still back in California. Well, then, while we were over there in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, being we were no longer chasing—because I started off Operation Enduring Freedom, because we started off chasing [Osama bin Mohammed bin Awed] Bin Laden, and then we ended up chasing Saddam Hussein.

And so, then the other half of my unit got deployed over to Qatar, like some people say Qatar, Qatar, Kuwait. And so, a lot of our people went over there. So, our unit back in the state, we had nobody left it to go to our weekend meetings, basically, because half of us was in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, and other half was over in Qatar. So, yeah, so that's what happened. I don't know what I was talking about. So, anyway.

Q: What was it like for you, Tressa? What were you thinking about? What were you feeling?

That was a very intense time in the world for so many reasons.

Gunnels: It was. And politically—

Q: Wait, you were just saying that you were in West Hollywood, and you were so happy in the kind of work that you guys were doing. And suddenly you're sleeping in a tent in Afghanistan and Operation Freedom, trying to find Osama bin Laden?

Gunnels: Yes. Yes. And for me, of course, it was a big adjustment. You know what? I was too foolish, too optimistic, too gung ho. Listen, right around, like I said, Blacks and history law enforcement stuff, we have our history, but I bled tan and green, that was the Sheriff's Department colors, tan and green. I bled tan and green, because I was not a bad cop. And when I was called—and I was proud to be an American. I've traveled all around this world, and we are fucked up in America. But let me tell you something, we're better than a whole lot of places, though, let me tell you that, because you have the right to choose here. Women have rights here, we don't have as many we have not come as far as we would like to be, don't get it wrong, don't get it twisted. But I've been to some places where women ain't got no rights, and no voice.

So, as fucked up as people say we are, and as we are here, we still got it a whole lot better than a lot of countries. And I'm very proud of that, to be an American. I bleed red, white, and blue, I bleed tan and green. And I know our history with slavery and all that, but also know that I could have been in a lot worse situation, too. So, it's all about your perspective. It's like when you're

were standing with that refrigerator door open, is it half full, half empty? It all depends on where you come from.

And so, I feel proud. So, I was proud to go over there. I didn't necessarily agree with a lot of the politics of at that time. That's when son Bush was in power. And I didn't necessarily agree with all that. But he's my commander in chief. And I'm a soldier, and I'm going to soldier, because that's what I do. And that's what I did. And I was proud. So, yes. And so, I was too optimistic, too brainwashed, some might say, too indoctrinated to really realize the danger that I was going into. Because I was in a war zone. I was in a war zone. When we were in Afghanistan, literally, because we slopped down and we took over the airport, right there, in Bagram. And so, yeah, you would have other forces outside the gate shooting rockets over our head and you know, you're walking around all day with your Kevlar pot, your steel pot and your M-16 and stuff. And you hit the ground when you hear it and all that kind of stuff. So, yeah, but I was a soldier and that's just what you did.

And so, I was too, whatever, optimistic, indoctrinated, to be afraid. I just knew I was being a soldier.

Q: Wow. So, they trained you well to not be afraid.

Gunnels: Like I told you about basic training, they tear you down to make you come together as a team. So, yeah.

Q: Wow. And how long were you there for?

Gunnels: For a year I was in. So, we started off in Afghanistan. And we relieved that active-duty unit from North Carolina that was in place. And then so many stayed in Afghanistan, and like I said, some stayed in Bagram, some went down to Kabul, some went to some other places. And then three of us had to go to Uzbekistan to K2 take care of the services over there. Because that was another strategic place in the fight. And so, I was one of the three that went to K2, to Uzbekistan. And so, yeah. Afghanistan, Uzbekistan. I mean, I don't think those are really high on most people's list of tourist attractions, and so, yeah, I can understand why.

But, but yeah, that's where I was. And so, yeah, we lived—so I went over there, 9/11 happened in September the eleventh for those who don't know, 2001. And that was September. In October, I was in Egypt for three weeks for some advanced training. So, I was over in Egypt living on this—and I was looking forward to going to Egypt because we go for training, and you can get out and do sightseeing. I was like, oh, yeah, I can get out and do some sightseeing. And all this is like. They were like, oh, no, you don't understand, 9/11, they ain't friendly. So, the only pyramids I saw was as we was driving past them. And I remember flying into Egypt, I remember we had to fly in, we had different passports, because you know, the passports, you've got the blue passport as a tourist passport, a red passport is the official one, green one means something. And I remember we had different passports with different—they weren't the blue ones. And they had different names on there with our pictures on there. And I don't know what that was all about. But that's what we did after 9/11 to go into Egypt.

Q: Oh my God, Tressa. I had no idea.

Gunnels: And so, I was in Egypt for three weeks living on this base. And we trained, and we had all these Jordanian soldiers and Italian soldiers over there, which was interesting, because Jordanian you know, Muslim, and I'm a female, but I was the highest-ranking female, or highest ranking in my unit. And so, you know, they had to deal with me, even though they didn't want to because I was a female, and I was the boss. But in any case—

Q: And you're Black.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Because some things we don't talk about is the kind of interracial racism between Arabs and Blacks, even though many Arabs are Black, and they don't want to admit that.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Wow. Tressa. I mean, I don't even know what to say right now. I'm so glad—we have to—you finish these sentences. But I feel like I want to stop the interview. Because I'm just blown away. And I'm so impressed and proud—

Gunnels: You know what's interesting? Is somebody told me, I've had several people tell me, some females tell me, they're like, "You should write a book." I'm like, "I got nothing to say, because everybody's experienced the stuff I've experienced." It's like, "No, they haven't."

Q: No, they haven't. And you're in the middle of such a complex place, right, where military, police, has such negative connotations, right, for a lot of people. And understandably, as you said, I mean. And at the same time, you know, you joined both the police force and the military, and tried so hard to do good work. And it's really interesting to hold that complexity.

So, actually, Tressa, if you don't mind, can we stop now? Because I want to think a little bit more. And I want to slow down and back up and talk about your time in Afghanistan in Uzbekistan, and then bring us back to West Hollywood and then go on. And I have to interview and that will take about an hour till we get to the finish the interview. And I'll have to interview Felicia for an hour more, too. We're starting with the department store. So, let's text and we'll figure out some more time in the next week, is that okay?

Gunnels: Yeah, that's fine.

Q: Even over the weekend, whatever, I'm here, I'm just doing interviews for the next like twelve days, so I'm just around. I'm so grateful. I'm sorry I look a mess. I was up all night with Tara, being a mother.

Gunnels: Oh, no. You're fine.

Q: But I'm so grateful we're doing this. It's going to add so much to the project. So, thank you so much for being so forthcoming and vulnerable and honest. It's beautiful.

Gunnels: Absolutely.

Q: Thank you, Tressa. Thank you. I'll text you soon about scheduling another one. And you think about it, too. You could text me and go, "Robin, here are some times," and maybe you and Fee can talk, and we can go back-to-back two hours, or one hour one evening, one hour another evening, but I'm around.

Gunnels: Sounds good.

Q: Okay, love. And it's really good to see you and I'll see you guys soon, hopefully. Okay, take care. Bye-bye.

Gunnels: All right. Bye-bye.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center

Session Number: 2

Narrator: Tressa Gunnels

Location: Corona, CA; Los Angeles, CA

Interviewer: Robin Coste Lewis

Date: October 27, 2023

Q: I don't know—

Gunnels: What's that?

Q: —but so, Kim and Madeline and everybody, we're back with the amazing Tressa Gunnels. I don't know how to pronounce your name. Gunnels or Gunnels?

Gunnels: Gunnels.

Q: Gunnels, to finish up her final hour of interview. And I was just reminding her that where we left off was when you were talking about how you used to go undercover as sex worker—

Gunnels: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes, [*unclear*]

Q: —and how good you were at it, Tressa. [*laughs*]

Gunnels: Yes, I enjoyed that, that phase of my life.

Q: What did you enjoy about it?

Gunnels: It was just fun playing and being somebody that I'm not. So, that was just cool, right?

Q: Yes, yes. So, for the next hour, we have an hour, we've been granted another hour to really talk about your work and your life from that moment forward—

Gunnels: Okay.

Q: Mostly because I just know that you're such an accomplished person and also such a beautiful soul and mind and I want to spend more time with you to talk about that. So, after you—what made you stop doing those kinds of posts? Or what is it called when you have that kind of thing when you're—

Gunnels: Those assignments? Well—

Q: —yes, assignments, thank you. *[laughs]*

Gunnels: —just the natural progression of things, you start off at the bottom and you work your way to the top and you hit many rungs along the way.

Q: Wow. So, did you miss it once you left?

Gunnels: Yes, I did. I did. I enjoyed it. You know, the further up the chain, the food chain you go, the further away you get from the meat and potatoes, the nitty-gritty, and you start dealing

more with policy and less with the people, whether it be the public or the staff. So, yes, I missed it as I went up the chain and which I would—

Q: And when did you go up the chain?

Gunnels: —jokingly say—I was promoted to lieutenant and I would jokingly say that it gets lonely at the top because you don't have as many people coming into your office or just wanting to sit and talk to you because now you are one of them instead of one of us. [*Laughs*] And so [*unclear*].

Q: I mean, yes, so I want to slow down. So, you were promoted to lieutenant after that?

Gunnels: Yes. Well, I got promoted—well, I went from deputy, made detective. And then, as detective, that's when I worked—I was an auto theft detective and did a lot of auto vehicle theft. And that was at the time when fraud was—you're just getting started in terms of identity fraud, identity theft. That was at a time when that was just starting to get going real good and so I got a lot of cases. I wasn't getting so many cases of chop shops and people stealing cars and shipping them over to Asia or Cuba or nothing like that. It was mostly a lot of identity theft at that point because that's when that was getting started back in the '90s? Yes.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: Yes, late '90s.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: [00:03:016] So, yes, and then from detective, got promoted to sergeant and worked the West Hollywood Station along with multiple other assignments. West Hollywood [Sheriff's] Station was probably one of my most favorite Stations of places to work because we got a little bit of everything. We got the gangsters—because I worked the ghetto Stations, the “ghetto Stations”, as well. I worked the Compton Station, Century Station, Lennox Station, which are in the 'hood. But with West Hollywood, being on the west side of town, you would think you would get only a certain clientele. But the beautiful thing about West Hollywood was you would get all the gangsters who wanted to party coming in to party at the clubs on Sunset [Boulevard] and Santa Monica Boulevard. Mostly, basically if they were up on Sunset, it was usually, generally speaking—not always but this is just kind of the way the trains ran—generally speaking, if they were up on Sunset, they were at straight clubs and if they were down on Santa Monica Boulevard or Robertson [Boulevard] they were at a gay club. And so, at one point, we had a club on Robertson, The Abbey [Food & Bar], and another club right across from it that would let out at the same time, and we would get lots of fights and stuff because you'd have the gay women looking at the straight women coming out of the club and so their men, they, you know—then we'd have the fights and stuff. And so, that was one of the—that was a very fun assignment because we got a little bit of everything. Not only did we get the rich people and all this stuff but we got the people from the 'hood to want to come in. So, that was one of my favorite assignments. And then, from there, promoted to—

Q: [*Unclear*] I am sure at some point I was coming out of The Abbey. [*Laughter*] For listeners and for people listening in, The Abbey—didn't it just close, Tressa? I heard it did close.

Gunnels: No, no, no. The Abbey's all there.

Q: Although something just closed. The Abbey is a famous—

Gunnels: A mecca.

Q: —old school queer club that's been around—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —Hollywood forever.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: Isn't that incredible? Okay.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: So, Tressa, I wanted to slow you down a bit. I know I said we only have an hour but I really want to slow you down and back up. You said something that I thought was very interesting and,

I think, not—I know that chop shops are all over the world. But I really think that what you just said was very specific to California. You said that the chop shops sold to Cuba and where else?

Gunnels: A lot of times we'd get the chop shops and they would chop up the cars and send them over to Cuba because, you know, Cuba, with their embargo—and they're just really behind on the time.

Q: Yes, yes.

Gunnels: Or they would be sent over to Asia because a lot of people in other countries, they like these old, American muscle cars, the traditional [Ford] Mustangs and those big muscle cars.

Q: Right.

Gunnels: And so, it's not—

Q: Exactly.

Gunnels: —uncommon for those cars to be stolen and shipped over or, when we say chop shop, chop shop is where they take these vehicles and they chop them up. They either salvage the parts from those vehicles, either as replacement parts or chop the car up to do something else to modify it in some kind of way.

Q: Thank you.

Gunnels: So, yes.

Q: Yes, and for our listeners—and the reasons why chop shops are so profitable on old cars in California is because of the lack of rust, because it doesn't rain or snow the way it does on the East Coast. And so—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —you have a classic car culture here that is pretty sublime. It's exquisite how so many old cars can remain on the roads here and how many clubs there are for old cars. So, I just wanted to point that out. And because we're in the Pacific Rim, then it's very easy to sell to Asia. Okay.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: [*Unclear*] sorry for interrupting. And then, you said from there, you went on to sergeant? Is that what you said?

Gunnels: I was a sergeant at West Hollywood and then I worked West Hollywood, I worked—then I was on loan from West Hollywood for several years and I went to the gang team out [*unclear*].

Q: And what does a sergeant do, Tressa?

Gunnels: Sergeant is basically a working supervisor. So, in the L.A. [Los Angeles] County Sheriff's Department, in terms of our sworn personnel—because, you know, we have personnel that do not carry guns and arrest people. We call that our civilian personnel or professional staff. Those two words are interchangeable. And they are just as much important, if not more so, than the folks that are out there arresting people because they take care of the paperwork and they do a lot of the things that we don't do. So, with that, a sergeant, you have, in terms of our sworn law enforcement, you have a deputy as the lowest rank and basically, there's only one sheriff. Every county in California, in the United States, each county has a sheriff and that sheriff deputizes people to work under him or her and those people are called deputies. Regardless of whether your rank is a captain or a commander, you're still technically a deputy because you are deputized to work in the Sheriff's—so, the lowest rank of sworn law enforcement for the Sheriff's Department we have is a deputy and then after that we have a supervising deputy where you're still a deputy but you're now, like, you're senior, so you're training the new deputies that come along. And then, after that step, then the next step up is sergeant. And sergeant is basically a working supervisor. So, you're in the nitty-gritty with the folks. You're there so when the shit hits the fan, you're telling them, hey, no, go left, don't go right kind of thing and you're there to keep them on the right path because you know policy and you're that liaison between the higher-ups and the working folks. So, working supervisor, basically, is what a sergeant is. And then, after sergeant is a lieutenant. And the lieutenant is now considered middle management because lieutenant, you're no longer out there in the field. You're no longer out in the jails and the jail cells conducting the searches in the jail cells, looking for illegal—for contraband. You're middle

management now. And so, I'll say the further up you go, the further away you get from all the working people and stuff. And so, that's where I was. I retired as a lieutenant, which is middle management. But then, after that, on the Sheriff's Department, L.A. County, you have captain and then you have commander, then you have chief and—yes.

Q: Okay, thank you so much for explaining it to us because I certainly don't understand it all. Okay, so then you were saying that the thing that was interesting is that once you—I mean, you've always just been so successful and once you made it to lieutenant, it got lonely.

Gunnels: Yes, yes. When I was a sergeant, especially when I had my gang team, my gang team, we would be sent into whatever—

Q: [*Unclear*] gang, G-A-N-G?

Gunnels: —yes, yes.

Q: Okay.

Gunnels: Because as you may remember and you know, not just California, not just L.A. County, but gangs are a major problem now throughout the United States. But we really had a bad time of it here in California, especially in the early '90s with the Crips and the Bloods and all those wars that were going on.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, we have a gang team. And so, what my gang team would do is we were assigned to a station. We were assigned to either Lennox Station or Compton Station and we would handle the gang activity in those areas and wherever the investigation led us, we would go. So, if the investigation led us to Pasadena, for example, we would follow it. But, however, we would also go, if they were a problem—like, for example, I don't remember the exact date but Venus and Serena Williams, very famous tennis players from Compton, California, their sister, I don't know the proper pronunciation of her name, but Yetunde or Etunde or something like that, well, she was shot and killed in a car in Compton.

Q: Yes, I remember.

Gunnels: Yes, and at the time when that happened, the gang activity had kind of gone down a little bit. But it's a cyclical kind of situation. And so, when that happened, in Compton, at that point, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had taken over all policing services from the City of Compton because at one time Compton had their own PD and they had to be disbanded for various reasons. And so, when that happened, when her sister was shot and killed, we started—we, the Sheriff's Department—started directing more enforcement towards the City of Compton to try to get that situation under control. And so, what they would do is they would take teams that were assigned to other areas and take them on loan or, say, for so many days a week because you didn't want to abandon whatever station or area you were assigned to because they still had their issues. But we would rotate into Compton and provide some extra policing. And

so, that's what we did. And, as a result, my team, I want to say we had—it was eight of us because I think I had four cars and each car had—with a two-person team and then I was the sergeant, so it was nine of us in total. And so, my little unit of nine people, we would move from problem area to problem area to combat the crime. And so, as a result, you get to be very close, you become very reliant upon those people because they're the ones that have your backs. I mean, when the bullets fly, you know, we've been shot at, I've been shot at, I've been at shootings, been in car crashes and car chases. And so, that team, that unit, you develop a very strong bond because you are relying on each other so very much.

Q: Yes, thank you. Maddie and Kim, this is for the ephemera and also keyword question. There's a poem of mine called "Math," M-A-T-H on poets.org about my first boyfriend being killed by a drive-by at the very time that Tressa's talking about. And this is one of the things we could put on. Also, Tressa, they're going to contact you about pictures, anything, anything, anything. Books, anything you want to put on the website with your interview. So, you can be thinking about that. That's a little bit down the road but they'll be contacting you about that.

Gunnels: Okay.

Q: Wow, so that's incredible, about the gang assignment.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, [*unclear*].

Q: I think people don't totally understand that time. It was just terrifying.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, you know, and Felicia and I, my wife and I, we've had these discussions. You have a large—especially now, in 2023, having just come through the pandemic and all the stuff that happened in the '60s and '70s, where you had this time when law enforcement was not very kind and loving towards the Black community. Not saying that we are now but I would like to think, I would like to hope that we are making better strides in that direction. But that still does not mean—I still believe that if you don't have any representation in whatever it is you're—

Q: Agreed.

Gunnels: —doing, expertise is—

Q: Agreed.

Gunnels: —it would be even worse because how can I police, how can we police a community and we don't have any representation to know what that community thinks or feels or how they see things? And so, me being a Black female in law enforcement, I had some very rich, strong conversations with family members, as well as Felicia regarding—when a lot of these things were going on, with all the different shootings involving law enforcement and Black members of the community, you know?

Q: Yes, I bet, I bet. And so, after the gang assignment, what did you do?

Gunnels: After the gang assignment, I was a sergeant. Then, like I said, I was on loan for, like, three or four years there and then I went back to West Hollywood, worked West Hollywood for another year or so, and then I'm promoted to lieutenant. And when I'm promoted to lieutenant, my first assignment as a lieutenant was to the jails, L.A. County jails. I was assigned to a place called Inmate Reception Center. We refer to it as IRC. And IRC, in downtown L.A., you have, off the 101 Freeway and Vignes [Street], you have Men's Central Jail, you have Twin Towers [Correctional Facility], and you have IRC. And they're all connected by tunnels and paths, so you can go from one to the other throughout each of them very easily. But IRC, Inmate Reception Center, it is more of an intake center. So, basically, when someone gets arrested off the streets, whether it be by the Sheriff's Department or by another police department in L.A. County that either doesn't have their own jail or their needs, the inmate's needs, the person that they arrest, their needs, they have medical needs or something that can't be met at that local facility, then they bring them down to Inmate Reception Center. And what Inmate Reception Center is, like I say, we're an intake center. So, we take all these people off the streets right after they've been arrested. So, they're in their street clothes and have just committed whatever the heinous crime is that they've committed, they've got them there and then we process them. So, the first thing we do is we have to classify them. We ask them questions like, "Are you gay?" Or, "Do you have mental health issues?" We look at their arrest history to see if they are [California Penal Code Section] 290 [PC] sex offenders because if they're a 290 registrant where they've molested a child or something, we have to protect them from the other inmates because, in this culture of criminals, the molesters, the criminals really don't like—so, we have to protect them. If they're gay, we have to house them separately because then they could be victimized in the jails. And so, at Inmate Reception Center, that's what we do. We process the new arrestees.

Q: Tressa, just interrupt you for a minute. That sounds incredibly progressive compared to other states—

Gunnels: Yes, absolutely.

Q: —because I've never heard of anything so compassionate.

Gunnels: You know, Robin, I'm going to tell you the truth. First of all, let me preface with this: I've never worked another law enforcement agency. I've only worked L.A. County Sheriff's Department. I've been on taskforce with other agencies but I don't know these other agencies' policies. But what I can tell you is even though Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department—we've got the largest sheriff's department in the world, in the entire world. And we have problems, no doubt, where we've been sued and we've been in the news for doing a whole lot of bad things. But I will say that, as time goes by and I see all these things happening in other parts of the world, in other—in the United States where now they're having issues with pursuits and civilians dying as a result of local agencies in other cities and other counties, other states pursuing these people, I will say that our policies that we have set forth with L.A. County Sheriffs are progressive and we have done a lot of these things, put a lot of these policies in effect with this classification thing because we've been sued so many times. And so, I would like to say it was because we were being [*laughter*] proactive but in many cases it's because we were being reactive or responding to a lawsuit.

However, I'm seeing other agencies—like, I'll see shootouts or other things happening in other agencies and I'm, like, wow, you know, we instituted that—don't pursue if it's just a property crime only. We instituted that twenty years ago because we had so many people suing us because we were chasing people in cars for property only crimes. You know, if they stole a car, they stole something, and then, as a result, they end up crashing or we crash and some innocent person in the motoring public is killed. And so, then the lawsuits. So, we've learned from our mistakes. But, like I said, even though we've made mistakes, I think we are far ahead of some of the others. And so, yes, we do this classification because we've learned from lawsuits and people being assaulted in jails and killed in jails and all those keep-aways, the Tupacs [Shakur] who were arrested in our jails, the Suge Knights—who's been in our jails, all the other people, the—what's the guy? The guy who plays—Robert Downey, Jr. One time, he had a big drug problem and he was in jail a lot. So, we had to keep all these people segregated because we don't want somebody trying to make their name in jail by assaulting somebody famous and we're going to be paying out of the nose through a lawsuit.

Q: Yes, so that's interesting. Well, you know, lots of civil rights changes have come about because of lawsuits. So—

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: —that's great. I mean, I wish, of course, we all wish that human beings could be more progressive just because—

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: —but that's great.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Okay, and so, after the gang assignment, you went to—

Gunnels: IRC [*unclear*].

Q: —IRC.

Gunnels: —still there.

Q: How long were you at IRC?

Gunnels: I was at IRC for right around four years or so. And then I left IRC and I went to Cerritos Sheriff's Station because I wanted to get out of the jails. When I was assigned to IRC, I hadn't worked the jails for almost twenty years. And I was real comfortable with being on the streets and policing. I knew policies and vehicle codes and penal codes and that was what I wanted to do was go out there and do that. I didn't want to be confined to a jail, so I finally did my time at IRC and after that I went back to patrol and I was at the Cerritos Sheriff's Station.

And that is where I retired. I worked Cerritos Sheriff's Station for four years and that's where I ended up retiring as a lieutenant, from there.

Q: Congratulations, Tressa. Lieutenant Gunnels, what did you want [*laughs*]*—*why didn't you like being at IRC, in the jails? What about it? You said you wanted to get back on the streets. What about it didn't you like?

Gunnels: You know, we all have our preferences and my preference was to be out on the streets, have the freedom, deal with the public, be more—I like that. I like that freedom. Being in the jails, I was feeling—first of all, as a watch commander, I was only confined to the jails. I couldn't go out and—I mean, I guess I could but it wouldn't be very wise because I had so much under me because I wasn't just over the jails. At Inmate Reception Center, like I said, we have civilians who are very important to our jobs and I worked the early morning shift, which is the night shift. So, I would come in at nine o'clock at night and get off at five in the morning. And so, those were during the times when the sheriff himself and all these people, they were sleeping. So, any of the big decisions that had to be made in the jails, they were made by me and then I'm sending an email or making a phone call to say, "Hey, boss, this is what I did and this is why I did it." So, didn't really want to be away riding around in a car just for that. But I had, when I worked over at IRC, I had, on early morning shift, I had at least two hundred, three hundred people under my command.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: And so, I needed to be there and present and so I would go down to the records—I would walk down to—walk outside of security, out of the jails. Was still inside the building but out of security, where the bars and the doors keep them enclosed and go down to our records area, which is—we're with the warrants and detainers and, you know, when people are in the state of Michigan are running a warrant and they see that somebody has a warrant out of L.A. County, they're calling those people down there. I was over them, as well. And so, I wanted to make sure that everybody knew who I was as the watch commander because if they had any problems, it was ultimately going to come to me and my decision was what we were going to go with. And so, it was good. I enjoyed it. I learned a lot. But my heart was just in being out in the streets and being proactive and looking for people doing criminal things and going from there.

Q: Yes, incredible. And so, then you went to Cerritos. For our listeners, Cerritos is a suburb of the county that is about, I would say, fifteen, twenty miles in from the beach.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: Maybe about five miles to seven miles away from Compton. Maybe ten—

Gunnels: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: —inland and—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —is one of those suburban places that—middle class, very beautiful, everybody was trying to move to when people left either Carson, where I grew up, when people left Compton. Or [Los] Cerritos [Center], the Cerritos mall was, like, the big deal when it was built. [*Laughs*]

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: And that's where Tressa's speaking about. So, what was Cerritos like?

Gunnels: Cerritos was, as far as the places that I've worked, Cerritos was very different because I worked a lot of fast-paced assignments: Compton Station, Century Station, Lennox Station, East L.A. Station, West Hollywood. The places I worked, after two o'clock when the clubs closed, that's when the fun was just beginning and we didn't slow down until four o'clock.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: Well, Cerritos was a lot different. Cerritos, after eleven o'clock, everything was closed. [*laughter*] I mean, the restaurants—I mean, the mall would shut down at ten and then you might have an Applebee's or a Chili's or something or a Coco's that was open until eleven. But after that, everything shut down at eleven in Cerritos. And so, it was just a very different animal.

Q: Were you bored?

Gunnels: To a certain extent. Initially, yes. Initially, yes, because I was used to go, go, go, go, go.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: Over time, I had to learn my way and redirect my energies. So, yes.

Q: Wow. And you said, after that, you were there for four years and then you retired.

Gunnels: Yes, that's correct.

Q: Before we talk about your retirement, what were some of the crimes going down in Cerritos?

I just can't even imagine. Cerritos is such a sleepy part of—a suburb of the county.

Gunnels: You know what? And as a result of that, a lot of its residents got very comfortable. And so, we had the obvious stuff because we had the Cerritos mall and then we had the Cerritos Towne Center, which—the anchor store in the Cerritos Towne Center off the 91 Freeway in Bloomfield, that anchor store was the Wal-Mart. That was the anchor store and then you had a lot of other places around it. So, we had the typical crimes that come with shopping centers. You can figure out what that is. Burglaries. [*Unclear*] stuff. But the residents of Cerritos, what they got very comfortable with was because it was a bedroom community and a very safe community in terms of the crime trend, the crime numbers, the violent crime numbers, it was very low in that respect but people got comfortable and they would leave their doors unlocked. I cannot tell you

how many times people would—they would break into someone's house while they were there, so we got a lot of that for a while in Cerritos.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: And they'd be in a closet or in the bedroom and, "Hey, I heard this on my Ring camera, my back door, and I looked at my camera and somebody came in through my kitchen sliding door." And we'd be, like, "Well, was it locked?" "Well, no, I live in Cerritos!" And I cannot tell you how many times we've heard that.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: So, at one point in time, I hope, when I left, it was kind of going down a little bit, that trend, but at one point in time, that was our big deal, was home invasions. And not necessarily where the suspects were taking the residents of the home and kidnapping them or binding them up or nothing like that. That wasn't necessarily the case. Once in a while. But usually it was, they were coming into the home when the resident was in the home and doing their criminal acts and leaving the home.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: [*unclear*] and when we would arrest these criminals, I cannot tell you—almost ninety—I'm going to say as high as ninety-eight, nine-nine percent of the time, they were from

L.A. or Compton. And we would ask them, "Why are you coming all the way over here to Cerritos to do this?" And what they would always say is, "Because it's safe here. The people don't lock their doors. They don't lock their car doors." And so, that was a fallacy or a comfort level that the residents of Cerritos got and, as a result, they were victimized a lot easier.

Q: It's so interesting.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: So, then what made you decide to retire and how old were you when you retired?

Gunnels: So, I retired, I officially retired in February of 2022. So, just over a year now. Well, coming up on two years here. And it—gotten to the point where the body was just breaking down. I was on the job for thirty-two years.

Q: My God.

Gunnels: I went thirty-two years of running, chasing people, being in car crashes and pursuits and all this kind of stuff. And the silent killer—because with law enforcement, people think, oh, you die because you got shot. To be perfectly honest, most law enforcement are injured or die as a result of car crashes or the injuries that they sustain after that because their bodies can't heal properly, not because we get shot. Don't get me wrong, there are the percentage that die that way. But most of us die from car crashes or the injuries we suffer as a result of a car crash. And so,

what happens with law enforcement is, first, we—working night shifts, as well, just like firefighters. We work these shifts that are opposite of what our body naturally likes to work on our circadian rhythm. And then, we have these go-go-go-go-go, so our adrenalin goes up here and then it's, okay, come down. And then go-go-go-go-go. And then we never—we go up and we don't come back down to here, where we started. We come back down to here and then we go and we come back down. We never come back down all the way and we don't realize how fucked up we are until we're out of that environment and we look back and say, wow, I was really fucked up.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: And so, working nights, weekends, and holidays—and it wasn't just eight hours a shift because we were always short because the trend since the Black Lives Matter and all that stuff, the trend became fuck law enforcement because for a while in the '60s and stuff it was we hate law enforcement. And then law enforcement was okay and now it's back—fuck law enforcement. So, we can't get anybody to work. And so, we always have shortages. But that doesn't mean that the crime—doesn't stop. So, I wasn't working eight-hour days. I was working ten, twelve hour days, sixteen hour days, and then I'm off for eight hours and then I go back and do it again. And I do that for five, six, seven days in a row and then I'll maybe take a day off. And then, you go back and do it again. And so, like I said, you don't realize how fucked up you are until you're out of that environment or until, in the case of one of the many people that I've worked with, they've had heart attacks or they go and get checked out and their numbers are, like, stroke numbers and they're taking off work immediately.

It can do you in. And so, what made me retire was I had medical issues. I had issues with the hip because wearing this gun belt that has thirty pounds—every day, thirty pounds. I got my gun, I got a backup gun. I got ammunition. I got a radio. I got a billy club, a nightstick, a baton was what we call it. I got all this stuff hanging around my waist every day for eight hours, twelve hours, sixteen hours a day.

Q: Thirty-two years.

Gunnels: Yes, thirty-two years, getting in and out of cars.

Q: And want to back up and slow down. You just said something so profound: that your belt weighed thirty pounds.

Gunnels: Thirty, yes.

Q: So, every day for thirty-two—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —years.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: I can't imagine that that did not destroy your spine and your hips.

Gunnels: I had some lower back problems, I got some hip problems and then, you know, we got the vest on, too, and the vest has Kevlar in it and you've got a metal plate in there, a trauma plate to take care of the organs. And so, just every day. So, yes, so I retired [*unclear*].

Q: How much did the vest weigh?

Gunnels: It depends. You can get a lightweight vest. So, it just depended but generally speaking about three to five pounds.

Q: My God. And you were saying, I'm sorry I interrupted you, you said plus getting in and out of cars with the belt on?

Gunnels: Yes, yes, ended up just having to go—retired for medical reasons because I ended up having hip problems, got lower back problems. I end up having a hernia. I got problems with my feet, okay, and so, yes, it does a number on you. But I can happily say that post-retirement—and then, the stress. I mean, it was at the point to where I was over at Cedars-Sinai [Medical Center] and they did a study on me because I had so much stress and I had—I was off work for thirty days and I thought the doctor was just BS-ing [*bullshitting*] me. I'm thinking I don't have to be off work to—because I literally could not talk. [*Whispers*] This was all I could do. This was it, [*normal tone*] because [*unclear*] had burned my vocal cords. And so, they were talking about

doing this surgery and they call it Nissen fundoplication—I'm still not saying it right. Some medical person will get—Nissen fundoplication. But it's where they go and they take your stomach and they basically shorten your esophagus and they tie your stomach up because the acid had gotten to be so bad from the stress in the job—and Cedars-Sinai, they did this study on me where they put this doggone shit down my throat for a week and it was just the weirdest feeling in the world to monitor the acid that my body was producing. And they were going to do this surgery. And so, I had all these medical situations going on and, you know, I'm sleeping three, four hours a night. And it just catches up with you over time.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, I ended up retiring medically for those reasons.

Q: I'm so happy you did.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: I'm so happy.

Gunnels: And now, I did not get that Nissen fundoplication surgery. I found that when the doctor took me off work, you know what? The stress decreased and I did not have that issue with the acid burning my vocal cords and all that stuff and not being able to talk anymore.

Q: Tressa, that must have been a really profound moment, to be off for thirty days considering—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —that you just shared with us. What kind of feelings and thoughts came up for you during that time?

Gunnels: Well, at that time, I still didn't want to believe—I was not a believer at that time. My body did not make me believe at that time—my body made me believe when the shit started acting up and it felt like I thought I needed hip replacement surgery because I had the pains that are commonly found with hip replacement surgery. And it turns out that I did not need hip replacement surgery but the structure—the ball and socket was good but my ligaments and tendons around it are starting to tear and fray and so they don't do surgery for that. So, I go every six months now and, in fact, I'll be going again in November or December and I get a PRP [platelet rich plasma] injection in my hips. And PRP is where they just take your blood and they separate the platelets from the rest of the serum and they reinject those blood platelets into the problem area. I tell you what, that stuff works like magic for me and so I get that every six months. I was a knucklehead one time and waited and—because I was feeling good and I waited and I did it nine months—that was way too long because my hip got to hurting and I was in pain.

Q: Right.

Gunnels: But it's covered and that's just part of my retirement. But that's when I became a believer. The whole thing with the accident and stuff, I wasn't a believer. I was, like, no, because I'm gung-ho, I can do this, you know? I'm just going to eat healthy and have positive thoughts. No.

Q: Yes, yes, the body knows.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, and I enjoyed what I did. It was—

Q: Yes, it's so weird [*unclear*].

Gunnels: —and have a job that's—when you have a job that you love to do, it's not work. I enjoy going to work every day and doing this and, you know, helping people. You know, I would say we would see people on the worst days of their lives. You weren't calling the police if you were having a good day.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: You called us because somebody had victimized you or stolen your property, done something, and you were calling us then.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, I liked coming in and helping folks. And, so, yes.

Q: Yes, I mean, that's what I'm taking from your interview is that you're the real thing. You signed up because you want to help.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: And you're a caregiver and you love to keep people safe and help people.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: And we don't have—one of the reasons why I wanted to include you in this project is that we don't have enough narratives of law enforcement people who are really good human beings, who really want to help, who are really there because they have a huge lion heart and they want to be a part of community in a way and this is their activism and this is how they contribute to being human. And I know that's true about you, both in your personal life and your public life. So, that's the reason, the main reason why I wanted to interview—is just having gotten to know you. For listeners who are wondering about my relationship with Tressa, Tressa is married to Felicia Anderson, another narrator who—you can listen to Felicia's interview, as well, and I met Tressa through Felicia because Felicia and I have been friends for many, many, many decades. And from the moment I met you, Tressa, I was, like, who is this person who does this amazing work because when we first met, you were still working.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: I was.

Q: So, I'm really happy you've retired, you know?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: I think it's important to know, you know, when to stop. Someone asked Toni Morrison, the great novelist—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —I was in a Q&A [question-and-answer] with her once and someone asked her, "How do you know when to stop working on a book?" And she said, "I don't know. But I do know that knowing when to stop is what separates the pros from the amateurs," you know?

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: And I think about it all the time. You've got to know when to step away.

Gunnels: Yes, you do.

Q: To know. So, let's talk about, then, you know, after thirty-two years of carrying thirty-five, forty pounds on your body, running in and out of cars, all kinds of car chases and criminality and meeting people on the worst days of their lives, as you say, and understandably—and all that, it must be such a huge shift to now be so beautifully retired. [*Laughter*] Like, it is—I mean, you've been retired for, what, is it three years now? Three years?

Gunnels: No, no, February of last year.

Q: It's only been a year, Tressa?

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: Oh, my God, you must be—your mind, what's going on for you? I mean, the adjustment must be—I mean, retirement—for a lot of people, retirement is difficult. I don't think I'm going to have any trouble retiring [*laughter*] when and if I do. But a lot of people just embrace it, too, and there's a lot of, you know, difference. Tell us what retirement is like after, as you said, you would go so high and then—

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: —you only would have a day off every five, six, seven days.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: You could only come down—so, let's just say the scale is one to ten, you could only come down to a five. Not a one, ever.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: But that's—you're back up to a twelve.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: And then there's some moment you go down to a six and you're up to a twenty.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: So, what is it like not to—have you been able to come down all the way yet? Or no?

Gunnels: Not yet. I was—

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: —this is what I will say. And I have absolutely no shame and I've shared this with other people that I've worked with who are now in the process of retiring or thinking about retirement—is go talk to a professional before you retire [*unclear*].

Q: What kind of professional do you mean?

Gunnels: Mental health professional. Because for a lot of people, I don't think this was necessarily the case with me but I find this with a lot of males. Their identity is their jobs. I don't necessarily think that was my case. My issue is that I loved what I did and I was just go-go-go-go and I didn't know anything else. I didn't know how to slow down. And so, when the retirement talk started—because, you know, when you first start a job, retirement is in the future. And, yes, we're going to plan for it and all that. But when it gets closer and you start really getting serious about it, it's, like, oh, shit, what am I going to do?

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, you ask: have I completely slowed down and accepted yet? And the answer is no. Unfortunately or fortunately, I don't know, I'm still waking up at four-thirty, five o'clock in the morning. I'm lucky. I'm lucky if I can sleep till five-thirty, six o'clock. I'm usually up—

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: —to be perfectly honest with you, I'm usually waking up around three-thirty, three-forty in the morning and I'm laying there trying to tell myself, okay, just go back to sleep. And sometimes, I'll doze back off and I'm up again by four-thirty, five o'clock at the very latest.

Q: Oh, no, Tressa!

Gunnels: And so, I usually have to get out of bed and come downstairs so that I don't disturb Felicia, something. But I think that's just one of the issues. And the other thing is because I'm used to go-go-go, I found that life suddenly became very still and it's, like, well, shit, what do I do now? And, you know, I cleaned out the closet and then I cleaned out the drawers and then I cleaned out the garage. And then it was, like, well, okay, well now what?

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: And then Felicia would find a project for me and then we would have a big project where we had some home remodeling work done. And it was, like, now what? And that's why just this week alone, I knocked out, like, seven projects this week because it's, like, okay, I got to do some—and then minor projects, like, I put some doorknobs on and a pot filler and moved the TV [television] and—minor stuff but—

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: —because, yes, so—but I think that—and I embraced it. I'm dealing with it better than I thought because before I retired, I talked to a mental health professional because there was a fear of, well, what am I going to do now? Will I have enough money, you know? What if somebody recognizes me because, you know, there are people who don't like me. Not because they know me but because I arrested them or because of the uniform that I wore. And so, yes, so, those fears were out there and Felcia tells me—I go every night. I go on the hunt around the house where I go and make sure all the doors and windows are locked and I got all the little survival supplies, you know? I got the water tablets and I got the extra this and the extra that and the blankets and the night sticks, the little candle things you can break to make light. And she's, like, "What do you need all that stuff for?" I was, like, "Because the zombie apocalypse. You just never know."

Q: Agreed, agreed. I'm, like, "Tressa, can you come over? [*laughter*] You and Felicia need to come over and help me figure out my kit." But I can imagine—so, look, Tressa, just as a mom—I know you're a grandma, too—like, my kid is just turning sixteen and literally is the first time in sixteen years just this week where I am finally sleeping. And this is, like, for me, gold. So—

Gunnels: Wow.

Q: —like, seven hours. I usually sleep—

Gunnels: [*Unclear*]

Q: —three or four or five.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: And I'm also finally now spreading out in the bed, right?

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: Because the kid's always getting in bed with you, all this stuff. And it's just a trip how the body retains memories—

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: —memory, right? And it takes a long time—

Gunnels: Yes, it does.

Q: —for it to—

Gunnels: Yes, it does.

Q: —relax and unlock, stop holding so much, yes?

Gunnels: Yes, you're right, you're right.

Q: And you can't—and that's, you know, we talk about PTSD, right? And thank God—

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: —post-traumatic stress disorder has, in the last couple of decades, gotten so much attention and we understand it so much better now.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: I feel so bad for all the human beings over the last several hundreds of years who didn't have anyone to tell them, "You're fine, just are traumatized." But you just think about this. Like, one traumatic incident can take someone out for their whole lifetime.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: And you've seen probably thousands.

Gunnels: Oh, yes, seen a lot of bad things.

Q: Like?

Gunnels: Lot of bad things. I've seen, you know, I mean, I don't know how graphic you want me to get but—

Q: This is your interview. You can say whatever you want.

Gunnels: —well, I can tell you I've responded to shootings, like I said, back in the '90s, the gang war. And we responded to this one with shots fired and we get—it was over on Castlegate [Avenue] in Compton. The street name is Castlegate, off Alondra, that part of it. And, yes, a young man was in the driver's seat and the top of his head and his brain was on the back seat and on the floor and all you could see on the front seat or his facial part that was left was just teeth. You just see teeth hanging but the brains and stuff that looks like matter was on the backseat and he was all shot up.

Q: My God.

Gunnels: I've seen, yes, I've seen—at one point, there was a—I don't remember what year it was but in L.A., we have trains, metro trains, a metro rail and there was a train collision—well, it came off the tracks but a train crashed up in the [San Fernando] Valley area. And so, we responded out there to help them and so bodies were strewn along the tracks there and it was just bad. And so, to collect—to just get the body parts off the tracks and stuff, they had these barrels and they would put these body parts and this matter—because it wasn't, like, necessarily heads. It was like organs and skin and fingers and—

Q: My God, Tressa.

Gunnels: —and so, they would put this stuff in a barrel to collect this stuff. And so, yes, seen some really bad things like that. Of course, seen people who've committed suicide but they didn't get discovered till many days after the fact. And you'd go out to the houses and most of our suicides that I would get was over in West Hollywood. And many of them were patients who— AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] or—and I just didn't want to deal with that anymore. And the body would just swell up and it just smelled so bad. And people say, "Well, what is"—and I'll say, "Yes, that's the smell of death." And a new deputy would be, like, "Well what does death smell like?" When you smell death [*unclear*]

Q: Absolutely.

Gunnels: —yes.

Q: Absolutely agree with you, yes.

Gunnels: And so, but, yes, I've seen it and people who had killed themselves in tubs, usually women, the vanity issue of it, they're not going to shoot themselves in the head. And so, they would slit their wrists or something and they would kill themselves in the tub but would not be discovered until days after the fact and at that point, the body has just started melting away into this tub. So, I've seen some bad things like that and then I've seen the horrible things where—I know one time in particular where a young girl, I want to say she was, like, five or something

where she was literally ripped from stem to stern because her—I don't even know if he was stepdaddy. I think he was the momma's boyfriend. He molested her and so you see things like that. And so, yes, saw a whole lot of horrible things and you can't take that—you think, well, it didn't happen to me. It's not anybody I know. And you've just got to really—went home and take it off like a jacket and put it to the side. It's still in your psyche.

Q: [*Unclear*]

Gunnels: Yes, that stuff gets to you.

Q: Tress, you said that you got counseling before you retired.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Did you—do deputies and everybody else get counseling for all the things you guys were exposed to while you're working?

Gunnels: No, we have counseling. We have it available, free of charge. The department has, they have a unit that will do that. But you have to reach out to them. Now, what the Sheriff's Department has is they have a representative from that unit that is assigned to every unit within the department. So, you know, if you're a therapist, you might have three or four units under your belt and then it's up to you to go out and visit those units periodically or when there's a traumatic event like an officer getting shot or something at that unit. If you're a responsible therapist, you

will go and make yourself available to people who want to talk to—so, we have those units available on our department and you can talk to them free of charge and it's supposedly kept confidential. I've talked to them before. I never—to be very honest, when my partner was shot and killed, I never—I went to talk to them but I was never truly honest with them because I did not believe that they would keep everything confidential. I don't know if my belief was accurate or not but that was my belief. And so, I went to talk to them because I thought that was the thing to do and my boss told me, you know, that's what you should do. But I wasn't very open with him. But we do have it available, free of charge. But not everybody takes advantage of it. And you don't have to be a cop. You don't have to be sworn. You can be a civilian if you're experiencing this, as well, because, like I said, they play just as important of a role as we do in our department.

Q: Right.

Gunnels: But yes, we have it available and I did it on my own through my own insurance instead of dealing with the department because I felt safer. And that was when we talked about, well, what should I expect out of retirement and what do I do now and how to keep myself busy? And basically, my counselor, my therapist, she told me, you know, "Start finding other interests. Start getting involved in other things that you enjoy doing. Make a log, make daily notes and journal." That what she—and so, slowly but surely, I've started doing that. I have a routine. I'm routine based—

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: —and having joined the military at the age of seventeen and then went from the military to a paramilitary organization—so, I'm very routine based.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, that works for me. My routine is I wake up at three-thirty, four o'clock in the morning and then I come and I watch some news and then I go work out, whether it be going to do Pilates or going to the gym or going to take my two-and-a-half mile walk or whatever, I'm routine based. I've got to get my workout in first thing in the morning, then I come back, make some lunch. And then I come home, eat some lunch and then do some chores around the house. And so, that's my routine.

Q: What are the kind of hobbies you've taken up now that you're retired or the things that you've decided—I know you and Felicia travel a great deal.

Gunnels: Yes, yes. To be honest, that's it, just—I don't have any new hobbies. I'm still working out. But that's basically it, what I just told you. That's my routine. So, no new hobbies.

Q: Yes. What are your old hobbies? I know you like sports.

Gunnels: Yes, yes, love sports, love sports, yes.

Q: What kind of sports do you like?

Gunnels: I like all of the major sports—

Q: You do?

Gunnels: —except I'm not real big on golf. I haven't taken a liking to golf.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: But football, baseball, basketball, hockey, tennis, swimming, the Olympics. I just haven't gotten to like golf as much as people do.

Q: That's amazing. I like sports, too. And what about your adrenalin, you know? Like, it's hard to come down, you know?

Gunnels: Yes, it is. Yes, it is. I'm still—

Q: What does it feel like to do Pilates? Pilates is—speaking of sports, Pilates is such a controlled—Pilates is hard, first of all. And it's elegant and it's beautiful. But it's not a fast-paced—it's so conscientious in the gesture.

Gunnels: —yes. Well—

Q: So, what's that like for you?

Gunnels: —so, Pilates, I took Pilates for two reasons. One is, because of all my injuries that I mentioned, my hernia, my hips, my back, I was doing physical therapy. And the therapist basically told me, "You need to strengthen your core." And I thought to myself, well, I can do sit-ups. That's not a problem. But sit-ups is not your, just, core. Core is the whole girdle area around your abdominal and then your hips and all that. And so, that's why I started taking Pilates. And so, that was the reason I started. And then, within Pilates, they have different classes now. I go to Club Pilates, which is a chain, Pilates studio, around the country. And in Club Pilates, they have a reformer machine because you could do Pilates on the reformer or you can do Pilates on the mat. And so, with Club Pilates, they have classes and the classes could be just the reformer and then they have classes where you use the TRX [Total Resistance eXercise] machine and there's control and balance and center and breathing and stretching. And then they have what they call cardio classes.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: So, you're on the reformer and they put this jump board up and so you're jumping off of this jump board and that gets your heart rate up. And so, I love those cardio classes because that gets my heart rate going and I still [*unclear*] but then, you know, before you're doing that or in between, you're doing some planks or you're doing some core stuff. And so, I really love the cardio classes and that's what I just did. And so, matter of fact, I just came from the class just

before this interview and I still got that Army dog in me and that, "Hooah." And so, in the classes, you know, they're counting and they're playing music and I'm, like, yes, yes! Let's try one! And I'm doing all that. And the instructor [*unclear*] is, like, "Tressa, I love it when you're in class because [*laughs*] you get the class going!" And lots of people walk up to me, they be, like, "Girl, I'm glad you were here," because I'm still that gung-ho, that [*unclear*]

Q: That's so great.

Gunnels: —and, like, "Let's go, let's go! We can do this! We can do this!"

Q: Oh, my God, Tressa, that's great.

Gunnels: Matter of fact, I got a quick, funny story to tell you. So [*unclear*].

Q: Okay.

Gunnels: —Tuesday I did a reformer class and our instructor, she walks over and she's talking to the young lady on the reformer machine next to me because this is a cardio class. And she's standing on the mat between me and the young lady next to me and she says to the young lady, "This is Tressa," she says, "and I just want you to know that she makes noises and she grunts and groans, so I just didn't want you to get scared or anything." And I said to her—the instructor's name is Jackie. I said, "Jackie, what you doing?" She's, like, "Girl, have you ever seen the face of

people when they're next to you and you get to making all those noises?" She's, like, "I had to let her know." I was, like, "Damn, so I come with, like, an advisory warning now!" [*laughs*].

Q: That's hilarious. I'm so, so, so happy for you, Tressa and I just want to thank you for your service, Lieutenant Gunnels, on behalf of L.A. County. I mean, it's just profound and I'm so grateful and honored that you let us do this interview. It's [*unclear*].

Gunnels: I'm honored. I'm honored.

Q: I know that you guys like to travel and I thought we maybe would end on what is it about travel that—I mean, you guys are always going somewhere. So, what is it about travel that seems to be—you know, why? Why do you like to travel so much? Like, my sister's been retired twenty years and she doesn't travel anywhere.

Gunnels: Well, different strokes for different folks.

Q: Exactly. So, I'm wondering why travel for you?

Gunnels: Well, probably, for me, joining the military at a very, very early age I got to go see parts of the world that I'd never been able to—had never been to before, obviously, joining at the age of seventeen. We'd only go for car rides from Kansas City, Missouri to Chicago or to Illinois or I would come to California. So, I got to see different parts of the world. When I was in basic training, you know, I learned that in basic training, you take these people that come from all

these different backgrounds and you have to make these people work together as a team. So, you've got to break down these barriers, you've got to break down these different obstacles that keep you all from coming together as one functioning team and work together. And so, you meet people from different places and you're just, like, oh, okay, not all people from—because if you've never been to wherever in the world, you think, well, oh, they're all like this. But they're not all like that. Anytime you say all or none, that's all-inclusive and that's not always—and that's not the case. And so, I got to see people in a different light. And then, you go to these different places and, you know, like I said, I was in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan and, yes, they're not exactly tourist destinations but not all those people over there are bad.

Q: That's right.

Gunnels: Everybody wants the same basic things. All parents want the same basic things, whether they be very wealthy or they're very poor. They all want what's best for their kids and to be able to provide for their kids and their family. So, I like going to these different places because I get to see different places, different people, experience different things that's different than my little block in Kansas City, Missouri or my little block in Compton, California growing up.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And you just open your mind and you see that there's more to the world.

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, I enjoy that. And fortunately, in Felicia, I have a partner who doesn't mind that, as well. And so, she's onboard. And so, yes, I mean, we just came from Norway and Iceland and let me tell you, I would have never thought of—I enjoyed Iceland so much, especially Reykjavik. Reykjavik is so gay-friendly!

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: They have a whole street there that's rainbow—Reykjavik, Iceland, they had the first president who—a female who was lesbian, openly lesbian. And they were telling us how a lot of the other countries, in dealing with her in political matters, they wouldn't want to deal with her because of her lifestyle.

Q: Wow.

Gunnels: And I enjoyed Iceland more than I thought I would!

Q: Yes, I'm dying to go to Iceland and I'm dying to go to Norway, so I'm going with you guys next time.

Gunnels: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: I'm dying.

Gunnels: Our next trip is Asia.

Q: Yes, yes, the whole continent, check you guys out.

Gunnels: Yes, yes. So, that's why I enjoy traveling, because I get to experience new things and see new things and open my eyes up to other people. And I'll tell you something else, to be perfectly honest, I didn't have—I interacted here and there but I've learned a whole new respect—not that I was disrespectful before but when I worked Cerritos Station—because we had the large Asian population there. And I got a whole new perspective and a whole new respect for some of the different things that they do and I'm, like, oh, not that I was not—disrespectful but it's, like, oh, wow, I didn't know this!

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: And so, it's, like, yes, [*unclear*].

Q: Yes.

Gunnels: —and you have to—a closed mind doesn't learn anything. Open mind, you learn all kinds of stuff and your experiences are so much different.

Q: Yes, beautiful. Thank you, Tressa. Thank you.

Gunnels: And thank you, Dr. Lewis.

Q: Yes, thank you, Lieutenant. [*Laughter*] I'll call y'all later.

Gunnels: Yes. [*Laughs*]

Q: Thank you, thank you. If you need projects please come over to my house, please.

Gunnels: Yes.

Q: Okay? I got you.

Gunnels: Yes, yes.

Q: [*Unclear*] I'll talk to you.

Gunnels: Okay.

Q: Thank you so much, Tressa. Thank you.

Gunnels: All right.

Q: I'm so glad we did this follow-up.

Gunnels: Me, too.

Q: Okay, bye.

Gunnels: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]