



A. Cheryl Curtis: WAACA Oral History

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Interviewer: Doug Shipman
Transcriber: Betsy Kenneson
Editor: Sulema DePeyster

This interview is part of a series conducted with former members of the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association. The content of this transcript has been edited for clarity purposes.



WINDSOR
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Doug Shipman: Today is March 10th [2021]. I'm Doug Shipman, the director of the Windsor Historical Society, and I am here with Cheryl Curtis to conduct an oral history interview about the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association. Cheryl, welcome to the interview, and if you could please just give me your consent to have the interview conducted. You can just say "I, Cheryl Curtis, give my consent to have this interview conducted."

A. Cheryl Curtis: Okay, I'm going to say I, A. Cheryl Curtis, because that's how I sign my legal documents, give consent for the interview.

Doug Shipman: Wonderful. Well, let's get started. As I said, we'll start a little bit with your earlier memories of your childhood. Could you just tell a little bit about your childhood, your family background, [and] where you grew up?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I was born in a small town on the eastern seaboard in North Carolina. Washington, North Carolina, the original Washington, as we like to say. I am the seventh child in the family. I am the baby born into a family of three brothers and three sisters. I went to what was at that time called a mission school. So it was a Catholic-run mission school that, later on, became a school run for poor Blacks in the South. I had a Catholic education from first grade – we had no kindergarten – through 16 because I went to a Catholic all-girls' college after I graduated from high school, and it was run by the same nuns who ran the school that I attended as a girl.

Doug Shipman: Cheryl, can you just say what year were you born?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I was born in 1951.

Doug Shipman: Okay, fantastic, and tell me a little bit more about your family growing up. What do you remember about your childhood and your parents and your siblings? What was it like growing up in Washington County, North Carolina?

A. Cheryl Curtis: [laughing] Well, it was interesting. My mother had been told after I think it was seven or eight years of marriage that she probably would not have children, and then she proceeded to have seven of them. My mother was a domestic. She worked cleaning houses for white people in our town and my father was a laborer in a fertilizer factory. At one point, I'm not quite sure what grade it was, the factory in our town closed and my father, who had only a third-grade education, moved with the company to Virginia and would come home every other weekend to Washington where we lived.

Doug Shipman: So you all stayed in North Carolina?

A. Cheryl Curtis: We stayed in North Carolina and for a while, a number of my brothers and sisters were raised by my mother's sisters in New York. So I had several brothers and a couple of sisters who lived with aunts and went to school in New York for a while. I was never one of those children that had to do that. So, my memories of my older sisters were when they were in high school, probably sophomore year but definitely junior and senior years. My eldest sister graduated at 16 so I don't remember living in the household with her very much, but I do

remember visiting her in New York. She moved to New York [and] worked for the telephone company for a while, which is what many of my mother's sisters did as their professions.

Doug Shipman: Sorry, can I ask, were you jealous of the older sisters and brothers that got to go to New York? Or were you glad that you didn't have to go to New York?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I actually don't know. I mean I was aware [00:05:00] that they lived away from home, but I was always connected to them as brothers and sisters. I saw them particularly in the summer. I was probably very young at that time and don't have very many memories of them living away from home. I have a brother who is three years older than I am and he lived with an aunt when he was really early grades. I think maybe first or second. And then I have a sister who is six years older than I [am], and she also lived with an aunt when she was in middle school. But at some point, they both were back at home. My sisters all graduated from the school that I attended. Two of my brothers at a certain point, probably about middle school age, decided they didn't want to be in Catholic school anymore and so they went to the segregated public school in town. So they were allowed to do that. I don't know if it was burgeoning manhood and not wanting to have to be under the rule of nuns or whatever it was. But for whatever reason, they both chose to go in that direction. The brother who's three years older graduated from the same school that I did. Yeah, so I don't remember. I just remember being happy even after people graduated from high school and went off to [school]. Two of my sisters went to nursing school. It was just always a wonderful occasion to have them back at home because they're your brothers and sisters, and I was the baby so I got away with a lot and was doted on in certain ways by the elders. Not so much the brother who was three years older than I [am]. We used to fight quite a bit but siblings; what can we say? [laughing]

Doug Shipman: Nothing changes, does it?

A. Cheryl Curtis: No, no.

Doug Shipman: That's great.

A. Cheryl Curtis: We still fight. That's because he thinks he knows everything. He doesn't listen to any advice.

Doug Shipman: Are your other six siblings, are they still alive and are you still in touch with all of them?

A. Cheryl Curtis: My eldest sister, unfortunately, has passed.

Doug Shipman: I'm sorry.

A. Cheryl Curtis: The rest of us are still alive and I'm more in touch with my sisters. I have one brother who is on Facebook, so I have more contact with that brother. But I like to remember people's birthdays and I will call. Or if I just feel like, "Okay you've been on my mind a bit and maybe it's time to just have a little chat."

Doug Shipman: And where are they located?

A. Cheryl Curtis: My sisters are all in New Jersey; Montclair, New Jersey. I have a brother who is in North Carolina. That's the one who's closest in age to me. One brother who is in Pennsylvania and another brother who is in South Jersey.

Doug Shipman: Okay. So you're all in the east, still.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes. Interestingly, with my mother's family, many of them moved to New York when they moved north; with my father's family, many of them moved to New Jersey. And it was probably a part of the tradition that you knew that when you graduated high school, the intent would be that you would go live somewhere else in another state. Even though I can remember my mother after I graduated from college wanting to know, "Why don't you want to come back and live in North Carolina?" Well, that was never the message that I got [growing up] and certainly not the role models that I had.

Doug Shipman: Sure.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Everybody went north, you know?

Doug Shipman: Yeah.

A. Cheryl Curtis: The holy grail, I presume, I don't know.

Doug Shipman: Have your parents passed away?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes, they have. They are both passed.

Doug Shipman: And did they stay in North Carolina their entire lives?

A. Cheryl Curtis: They did stay in North Carolina. As I said, my father worked in Virginia until he retired and then he came back to North Carolina.

Doug Shipman: So did you grow up and live in the same house in the town that you grew up in the whole time?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes. So, it's interesting with a lot. We think back to, you know, "Where did we all sleep?" [laughing] There were two [people per] bed. [When] people came to visit, you slept on the floor to make room for your visitors or whatever. But yes. It wasn't a huge house; not many bedrooms but we managed.

Doug Shipman: I apologize. When I say the same house, I meant like your family didn't move around to different houses in different towns or anything?

A. Cheryl Curtis: No. Not at all.

Doug Shipman: All in the same house? That's wonderful. I think it [00:10:00] gives you a lot of memories in one place.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes. The town was Washington, and we lived in a community that was a part of Washington called Whootentown. Tim [Cheryl's husband] always teases me about that. W-H-O-O-T-E-N-T-O-W-N, and lots of farm country, tobacco being a major crop there. I had an uncle

who raised tobacco and [even in] segregated communities, there were some whites not that far away. There are boundaries but still pretty close proximity.

Doug Shipman: So when you weren't in school, what kinds of things did you do when you were at home as you were growing up?

A. Cheryl Curtis: [I played] with kids in the neighborhood for the most part, [but] not a whole lot when I got a little bit older. It's funny, I was trying to remember what year that might have been. My mother encouraged me to do a program. See again, now the memory is going, but I know it [was] working with smaller kids who were going to be entering school, and it was a government program but I'm blanking on the name right now. [Sargent] Shriver may have had some connection with it, and so I'm not quite sure what the timing of that was. I babysat on occasion, parishioners for the church that I attended. When I was smaller, I'm sure I just stayed at home with my mother.

Doug Shipman: Sure.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Getting under her feet but mostly playing outside in the neighborhood until you got called in to be in the house.

Doug Shipman: Right, and what church did you all go to?

A. Cheryl Curtis: We went to the Mother of Mercy Catholic Church.

Doug Shipman: Oh, okay, and was that the principal church in your community? Or did your family choose to go to that church as opposed to other churches that were in the community?

A. Cheryl Curtis: When I say "we" I should probably specify that that was the children who went to the church. Interestingly, many of my mother's sisters were a part of – remember I told you about this mission school that was run by the Immaculate Heart of Mary nuns and the Passionist priests. Rather than attending the public school, they went to school there and my mother thought that the priests and nuns did a great job of educating her sisters and she wanted her children to have that same benefit. So there were a number of other churches in the community; my mother in fact is Baptist and she went to a Baptist church, and I don't recall my father being a big church goer but I do have memories at least of conversations that he identified as Methodist, whatever that might have meant. So when Mother of Mercy was a mission school, it was segregated. It was for the poor Blacks in the area. There was also another school, Saint Agnes, which is where the white Catholics went to school.

Doug Shipman: So was it mostly Black students at the Mother of Mercy School?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes, it was all Black at Mother of Mercy until seventh grade. I think, for me, seventh or eighth grade, and then the school integrated. [When] it integrated, not very many white Catholics from the town itself attended except one family. The mother had 10 children and they had moved from New Jersey, so their kids attended the school and there was a school in Greenville. There were two [Catholic] schools, I think, in Greenville, North Carolina that closed and one was a school for Blacks, and one was a school for whites. Some of those students [Black

and white] chose to attend to continue their Catholic education, so they came to Mother of Mercy. So, I graduated from an integrated high school, but it still was predominantly Black.

Doug Shipman: Okay. Wow, [00:15:00] that's an interesting way to grow up and such a contrast to, I think, what people maybe growing up in Connecticut at a similar time might have experienced as well. So, what year did you graduate from high school?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I graduated in [19]68.

Doug Shipman: Okay, and then you said you also went to a Catholic college?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes, I did. I went to Marywood College in Scranton, Pennsylvania, run by the Immaculate Heart of Mary nuns who were the nuns I had in high school. So Marywood seemed like the holy grail. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: Yeah.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Plus they gave me money, so it was a good thing because we needed that.

Doug Shipman: Well, I was going to ask, with so many children, it sounds like you are all going to schools and different places and everything. How did the family support college for that many children?

A. Cheryl Curtis: It was difficult, but my sisters went to nursing school. I don't know if they had aid or not, but I assume that they did. The one sister who graduated at 16 didn't go to college. She went to work immediately. Eventually, she did go back and get an undergraduate degree and did coursework. I had two brothers who, when they graduated, went to college but both dropped out. And then my oldest brother never went to college either. He just went into being a laborer, finding jobs that he could find, and survived that way.

Doug Shipman: So how was college for you going all the way up to Scranton, Pennsylvania?

A. Cheryl Curtis: It was cold. [laughing] I remember the first time it snowed, and I said, "What do you mean school isn't canceled? What do you mean I still have to go out to go to class?" Fortunately, as a freshman and a sophomore, the dormitory building was connected to the classroom building. So I had to go out for lunch and for dinner, but I'm pretty sure I didn't have boots. I'm pretty sure I didn't know how to wear boots. I remember students laughing at me as I tried to put galoshes over my shoes. It's like, "No, you have to take your shoes off to do this." I look back on that time and sometimes I think it was kind of lonely. I remember walking across the campus and thinking, "I know lots of people. Lots of people say hello to me but people don't really know who I am." There were three Black women in my freshman class, and we were all on the same floor. One young woman was from Jamaica and I'm still in contact with her. The other woman, she's on Facebook but she doesn't communicate a lot on Facebook so I kind of have a little contact with her.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I know there was one class that had quite a few [Black] students from a Catholic school in Philadelphia, but I've completely lost contact with those Black students. But those were the times when they assigned you a big sister, so my big sister was a junior when I

was a freshman. She and I shared a birth date, and I just idolized her. She was so smart, and her best friend was so smart, so I'm still in contact with her. She lives in California now, but we still email and text from time to time. When Tim and my kids were young, we did visit to San Francisco and got to visit her. And then one year, Tim and I were traveling, and we got stuck in San Francisco. I can't remember what was going on. There was some sort of natural disaster that the flights couldn't happen, and I got in touch with her, and she and her husband came and picked us up and took us to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Doug Shipman: That's so nice.

A. Cheryl Curtis: We went out to dinner. So, memories: I used to hang out in her room quite a bit as a freshman. I have fond memories of that and there are friends from my graduating class that I am in contact with on Facebook. In fact, I'm trying to set up not a Zoom [video conferencing] meeting because I don't have everybody's email, but a room meeting on Facebook. [00:20:00] Except I had a little run-in with Facebook, and they haven't solved the problem. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: Oh no.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I'm still hoping that that will happen pretty soon. But a few of the people are on Facebook and so I have that kind of contact with them, and a woman who was the year behind me, she and I [were] kindred spirits. I was an English major; she was an English major. [She's] also a very smart woman, and I'm very much attracted to smart women who think a little bit differently and don't come from the mold that I came from where you just sort of follow orders from the family that I was a part of. So, it was nice to be with someone who was a little bit of a rebel and we had been in contact. She was supposed to be a bridesmaid at my wedding and that was the year of the flood in Pennsylvania, and she could not come. Eventually, we sort of lost contact with each other. But I thought about her quite frequently and I wrote to the alumni association, and they wouldn't give me her address but they forwarded my letter to her. And so then we started to have contact with each other again through email, and that relationship has lasted. It was revived and has lasted for a long time. So that's to say it wasn't all a lonely experience.

Doug Shipman: Sounds like fun. [laughing]

A. Cheryl Curtis: I mean there are people that I met and still have contact with, and I enjoy them.

Doug Shipman: So, may I ask, did you feel that you were more friendly with the other Black students there than the white students? Or do you feel like now some of the friends you're in touch with are both Black and white students?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Some are. Well, I'll say one is Black. This was the Jamaican student, and she was a music major, as was the other Black student that year, and they formed their own tribe. [laughing] Let's put it that way. So not as much of a day-to-day or week-to-week friendship and not even a sisterhood, but there was something there. We knew that we were among the few that were there so there was always that connection. And we liked each other and got along with each

other, and so I'm still in Facebook contact with my friend in Jamaica. Tim and I were fortunate enough to travel to Jamaica and she met us in Negril, so we spent some time together. So, it was like a 30-year reunion in the making and that was very nice.

Doug Shipman: That is wonderful. Yeah, Facebook is great for that.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Oh, I know.

Doug Shipman: It's amazing.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I spend a lot of time on Facebook. Okay, you can cut that part out. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: No judgment. There's no judgment from me, that's for sure. Just about the time I'm ready to quit Facebook because they share my information with too many people, I meet another friend that I wish I had been in touch with and I forget all about that. So I understand completely. So, Cheryl, tell me what you studied in college. What was your major?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I was an English major in secondary education.

Doug Shipman: Secondary education.

A. Cheryl Curtis: A teacher training program for English.

Doug Shipman: Okay and after you finished college, did you then go on to teach?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I did not. Tim and I got married after I graduated from college. That was in 1972 and we lived in Pennsylvania where he taught in a Catholic school, and I did some secretarial work and eventually, I started doing some substitute teaching in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

Doug Shipman: You left out an important [detail]. Go ahead.

A. Cheryl Curtis: He left that out?

Doug Shipman: No, I said you left out an important detail I'll ask you about in a minute, and that is how did you meet Tim. [laughing]

A. Cheryl Curtis: Oh yeah. I did leave that out. I don't know if you want me to go back there or go ahead.

Doug Shipman: I apologize, I shouldn't have interrupted. But please, you were saying that you had done some secretarial work while he was teaching?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I did secretarial work while Tim was teaching, and I started doing some substitute teaching. Fortunately, [00:25:00] where I did the secretarial work was nice about me saying, "Okay I've gotten called in to sub for today," and we worked that out. So that was fine. To go back, Tim and I met on my college campus when I was a sophomore, which meant he was a senior at that time. My college was having a birthday party to celebrate Sesame Street [children's television program]. I think it was their fifth birthday and it was a big deal thing, and Tim attended the University of Scranton, which was an all-male Catholic School. [During] my

freshman year, Tim was doing his junior year abroad in Belgium. So this was the beginning of [my] sophomore year and he came on campus that day, as did a number of the [male] university students, to help park cars as we were preparing for this big celebration. I saw him from afar, somebody introduced us. [laughing] Yes, I was interested from the beginning, and it's a convoluted story from there. But, needless to say, we did find our way to each other. I would go to events at the university, sometimes he would be working the desk. I can remember one time we just started talking. I never made it to the event because we spent the whole time talking.

Doug Shipman: Oh, that's so nice. That's great, and you've been together this whole time. That's just amazing.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes, we have.

Doug Shipman: That's great.

A. Cheryl Curtis: So after Stroudsburg, we decided that, or I pressed Tim, we should do graduate school. So we chose the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and moved into married student housing there. I got a job working in the school of education and started taking education courses and Tim was in the French department taking French classes. After I got my master's, fortunately there were a number of Black female role models at the University of Massachusetts, and they didn't convince me but I convinced myself [that] I could become a doctor, I could get a doctorate. So that's what I did while I still worked at the university.

Doug Shipman: And so you have a Ph.D. in education?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes, I do. Or, as we call it, an EdD, right?

Doug Shipman: Yes, EdD.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Right and I continued to work at the university. I had my first child. I did my dissertation. [laughing] I had an internal deadline because my first child was saying, "Okay, you need to get this done before I'm born." So I did and that was in '82. In '84, I was offered a position at the University of Hartford in Connecticut, and we moved to Windsor.

Doug Shipman: Oh, okay. So that was, of course, a big part of my question as we go along is how you ended up coming to Windsor because I think those are very interesting stories. But may I just ask you to go back to your time at UMass? Did you find there many other Black students at UMass? What was that experience like?

A. Cheryl Curtis: It was interesting. I worked, I was married, and I didn't do a whole lot of socializing. But I had a chance to do some socializing, and one of the professors at the university, a Black woman [who was a] math education professor, and I, became friends. And so a lot of times, it would just be socializing with her and her sister. Sometimes, a few other female professors. It's funny. I mean, I remember her and a couple of other people in particular but less so the students. I worked in the academic affairs office, so I had a lot of contact with professors in particular because I was the curriculum coordinator. I was the one [00:30:00] that they had to turn the courses in, and I would get the courses set so that they would be published so students would know what courses were available for them to choose. So I think I probably had more

contact with some of the professors at the college. There were Black people who worked at the school of education. I did do some socializing with them but usually, it was integrated socializing. It was socializing with other people who worked on the same floor or in the same college, the College of Education. We were in two different buildings, so there were people in my building I was closer to and hung out with. I became very good friends with a woman who worked in the same office that I worked in and she and her husband and Tim and I socialized quite a bit, and we became very good friends and still are to this day. We have a Zoom meeting weekly, and they are part of the group and part of the other group of people that we met while we were at UMass. We played softball together, we played volleyball together, [and] we'd have picnics every now and then.

Doug Shipman: Yeah. Wow, that's great, that's great. So, you had one child while you were at UMass?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Correct.

Doug Shipman: And I don't know how many children you ended up having all together.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I have two.

Doug Shipman: Two. Okay, and so was the other child born after arriving in Windsor?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Correct. The first child was born three weeks early and she aspirated on her meconium. So, she had what was called viral pneumonia and was in the hospital, in the NICU, for 10 days, and had moderate delays as a result of that. Fortunately, they were very moderate. So she received some services when we were still in Massachusetts, and I do remember that being a sticking point when we moved to Connecticut and were living in Windsor because the people in Massachusetts said to us, "The school system should now take over services for her," and we did have a little difficulty with them not wanting to do that. We did end up going to Easter Seals and she received her services through that, and not quite sure why that was the case and why Massachusetts seemed to be a little bit more advanced in that area than Connecticut did. But she attended Windsor schools K through 12, as did my younger daughter.

Doug Shipman: You have two girls?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Two girls.

Doug Shipman: Tell me their names.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Melanie is the elder and Elizabeth is the younger.

Doug Shipman: And when was Elizabeth born?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Elizabeth was born in '87. They are five years apart and yes that was purposeful because I didn't want to have two in college at the same time. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: Oh right, right. Oh, that's so interesting. Very good. So, tell me a little bit about what was it like then to move to Windsor and to start a new position in Hartford.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Well, we had looked at a few towns and Windsor, and someone suggested Suffield and all I could think was, “I think that's where Ella Grasso grew up,” and I've gone down that main street, I've seen those houses there, I'm not going to be able to afford to live there. We had read about Bloomfield being this model community [and an] integrated community. So we looked there and then we also looked at Windsor and I don't know. Now these are childhood secrets; as a child, I went through my history books and I saw this Cape Cod house with a white picket fence and I decided, “Okay, that's what I want. That's where I want [to live].” So, there was something about Windsor and the green and the New England charm, and it was a town where there were people of color. I had an offer at Cape Cod Community College and my sister said to me, “Why wouldn't you [00:35:00] want to go and live on the Cape?” And I said, “But there are no people there who look like me. None of the people who interview[d] me [looked like me], and I want my child to grow up where there are people who look like her.”

Doug Shipman: Absolutely.

A. Cheryl Curtis: So Windsor won

Doug Shipman: Very cool. So, have you and Tim been in the same house since you moved to Windsor, or have you moved to different places in Windsor?

A. Cheryl Curtis: We have moved. We lived in apartments. I think we only lived there for a year. Then we moved into a house off of Deerfield Road near Deerfield in Woodland Park in Windsor, and we lived there for 10 years. Now we live in out closer to the airport on [_____]; [There is] a little bit more room for me to clutter, so that there is now no room.

Doug Shipman: Right. So, your children, then, did they grow up in the Woodland Park house?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Part of the time. Melanie, the elder, was in the [second] home for a year before she went off to college. We moved here [before her] graduation.

Doug Shipman: Very good, and so how was your career as you moved down here and started a new role?

A. Cheryl Curtis: The career was fine. I taught in a college. At that time, it was called the College of Basic Studies, and it billed itself as a college for students who had potential but who perhaps had not shown that potential in high school. This was a chance to have them learn that they can be students, they can be good students, they can attend a four-year college, and they can achieve in that way. So that was a bit of a struggle, particularly because many of the students were well-to-do. So we're not talking [about] an underprivileged population. This was a privileged population where sometimes it could be frustrating. I mean I can remember in one of my first years, I taught what was called study skills and we'd talk about writing and spelling, and a student saying to me, “Well I won't have to do that, my secretary will do that [laughing] or my accountant will do that.” I said, “You'd want to know when the accountant is cheating you, don't you?”

Doug Shipman: Yeah. [laughing]

A. Cheryl Curtis: But attitudes, and because it was this type of school within a four-year college, it was sort of seen as the low end of the totem pole. So I was in the college that, to the college at wide, seemed to have a lower status and I was in a department that, to the department at wide, had a lower status. So, it was interesting.

Doug Shipman: How long did you stay in that role?

A. Cheryl Curtis: How long was I in the College of Basic Studies in Hillyer? Well, now the college is called Hillyer College and eventually we had what was – I don't know how to politely describe it. But there were financial difficulties going on at the university and a number of positions were being eliminated, and because I had a doctorate in education, I was moved into the education department because there was a woman there who was going to be retiring soon. So, I moved from that college to the College of Education, and I was at the university for 25 years. I retired in my 25th year.

Doug Shipman: Oh wow, so you stayed there the whole time. And that move that you just described, was that to help protect your position or protect you from being eliminated?

A. Cheryl Curtis: It did, and when the other woman retired, it was a tenure track position. So, I was able to go up and get tenure through that college.

Doug Shipman: That's great, that's great. Okay, so you were there for 25 years and you had, at the beginning of all that, moved to Windsor, [00:40:00] a new community that you and Tim had kind of selected by looking at other communities and then you move into Windsor. How was it moving into Windsor and what was that like, assimilating into the town and meeting people and so on?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Well, yeah, Tim is probably better at assimilating into the town than I was because eventually he got active. He started out with a group for my daughter's school. Again, it seemed to be an issue around resources and consolidation of schools, and the [elementary] school that my elder daughter attended had gotten to what Connecticut would see as a 'tipping point', so they probably had moved over 50% [of enrolled] students of color and the town of Windsor then is mandated [by the State of Connecticut] to do something about that. Tim became involved with another group of parents who were working on that issue to make sure that our students were not being shortchanged.

Doug Shipman: I see.

A. Cheryl Curtis: From there, he was lured to the Board of Education [laughing] and from there, eventually lured to the Town Council. So he has a long history of that kind of involvement with the town and organizations in town.

Doug Shipman: Yeah.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Mine is less so.

Doug Shipman: And so what did you find yourself getting involved in?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Eventually I got involved with the [Windsor Public] Library and the Library Advisory Board. So, I don't know how many years I've been a member of that, but I am now the chair of the Library Advisory and I also belong to the Windsor Library Association, which is a separate group but true to my literature background.

Doug Shipman: Right. Windsor has a great library so that's an association to be proud of. So, let's talk a little bit about WAACA. From what you're saying, it sounds like maybe Tim got involved in that before you did and then brought you along. But do you want to describe how that involvement began?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Well, it's funny because when you said you wanted to talk to me about WAACA I was like, "I'm not your best witness on that." [laughing]

Doug Shipman: In all fairness, that was Florence [Barlow] who suggested that you would.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I think that I got involved via social activities. So, if WAACA had a potluck, I would go along to that but I have no recollection of attending WAACA meetings. So, I'm sure that that was a Tim thing and I'm sure even with one child or two children at home, that would require getting a babysitter and making those kinds of arrangements. So no, I don't remember ever going to WAACA meetings. I remember going to several potlucks. I remember Guy Jacobs who, at that time, was on the Town Council [and] probably was the one who said to Tim, "You should get involved with WAACA," and met Florence through that and met Vivian [Cicero] through that. I remember going to Mohegan Sun [Casino] on their fundraising trips. So doing a couple of those bus rides where they make the money from that, and you go and Tim and I would set a limit. "Okay, when we've spent this much, it must be time to just wander around." [laughing] So we would do that, and I remember that some of the money that was raised would go to supporting a Shad Derby queen, a student of color. But other than that, those are pretty much my memories of my experiences with WAACA.

Doug Shipman: What was the perception of WAACA or the reputation of WAACA? Maybe if you heard about it before you and Tim were involved [00:45:00] or even as you were involved, what did people think of the group?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Once you knew what the name was, Windsor Afro-American Civic Association, that's a draw. I mean it's a way to have contact with other people of color, so I think you could probably ask people in town who are my age or would have been around when WAACA was more active. You could ask them what it is, and they won't know.

Doug Shipman: Interesting, interesting.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes.

Doug Shipman: Well, I know Florence [Barlow] will frequently say, "It was the same people doing all the work all the time."

A. Cheryl Curtis: Yes.

Doug Shipman: I'm guessing you and Tim were among those people always pitching in to do things in the community.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I don't even want to say that I was that good. [laughing] We were supportive.

Doug Shipman: What are some of the things that you remember WAACA doing in the community? What were some of their activities and projects and programs?

A. Cheryl Curtis: Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know. I want to say I remember them at Shad Derby [Festival] but it may not even have been WAACA. But perhaps it was. I do remember that Archer Memorial [AME Zion Church] was always a part of it because I had to go find the fish that was being fried by Archer Memorial. I know that they were involved with the Northwest Park Fair, so they were a part of that community as well and, as I said, they supported the Shad Derby queens.

Doug Shipman: One of the things I've heard from other people, I think it was a conversation with [Town Councilor] Nuchette Black-Burke recently, she said while she didn't receive a WAACA scholarship, she had friends in high school that did receive scholarships through WAACA. Was there a fundraising process that you recall to generate money to support scholarships?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I assume that the bus rides helped with that, but that's just an assumption. I don't even know if WAACA exists in any even tenuous way.

Doug Shipman: Not that I know of.

A. Cheryl Curtis: [In] the end, they were having a hard time finding women of color to want to participate in Shad Derby and do a queen thing and it was money. It wasn't a great deal of money but it was money, cash in your hand, you can walk away with this. But I don't know specifically who got scholarships and what that application process might have been like. I was never part of a review team doing that.

Doug Shipman: Okay. So listening to you Cheryl, it sounds like some people I've spoken to really make a very big distinction between white and Black and how they were received and treated by other people. I'm hearing you and it sounds like you felt very comfortable, and please correct me if I'm hearing it incorrectly, transitioning between white and Black communities that it wasn't an issue to you. I'm trying to figure out why did WAACA stop functioning and if [people] just didn't feel it was needed anymore. Was there a feeling that there isn't a need to have an organization that's promoting issues for the African American community or some other reason? [Are] people not involved anymore?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I'm not really sure. I think the part of the name that says Civic Association may not have seemed enough for some people that [are] a part of a generation, an era that is more interested in going along and getting along and [saying], "That's not what I'm about. I want to shake things up just a little bit more than that." But that's me talking [00:50:00] off the top of my head. I don't know if that's the actual tenor of the times. But civic is sort of not demonstrative, it's not revolutionary. [laughing] It's not Black Lives Matter making that kind of a statement. It's

sort of very quiet, and I think there's a place for that. I was just reading an article recently about a Black man who deliberately became friends with someone who was a leader in the Ku Klux Klan, and he met with him regularly. He met with him so that this person could see; I am a human being, I have feelings, we probably share some of the same goals in life [and] some of the same feelings. He has since gone on to do that and this one man who then became a very good friend of his [and] with other people who were part of the Ku Klux Klan. So that's a very personal and quiet way to go about dealing with racism and issues.

Doug Shipman: Right, right. Interesting.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Not everybody wants to take that route. They want recognition. I don't know, they want to be recognized, then they want you to confront your racism and recognize it. Teaching classes of predominantly white students and trying to address those issues, I know that that's very difficult because people want to put up defenses and they want to say that that's a bygone era and things have changed, and I just get the sense that many of my students are now going, "Oh, that's what she was talking about." [laughing]

Doug Shipman: Yeah, interesting. So, what are some things that you've done maybe outside of WAACA that have kind of pushed back and challenged the status quo?

A. Cheryl Curtis: It's interesting because let's say I'm nudging, not so much pushing. I've started an organization called Windsor CT Votes and it's modeled after other CT Votes organizations in the state. I think it was in the 2016 election. I was just really outraged by voter suppression, and I could not come up with ways to personally fight voter suppression that I saw going on in other states and didn't particularly think that Connecticut had a suppression problem, but I thought they had a voting problem among people of color. So, this organization, Windsor CT Votes, is dedicated – probably in the way that you think of the word civic to let – to [educating] people about voting and to get people to vote. So, in doing that, I found that lots of people in Windsor are registered to vote but not all of them vote. So, I've done a combination, we've done a combination, of voter registration and voter education and advocating that people to come out and vote in all elections. Not just the national elections but the budget election [referendum]. So we've supported the budget efforts or at least getting the information out to people about what's on the budget, who is saying something that resonates with you, just making sure that they have information and that they are informed voters.

Doug Shipman: Oh, that's good. I read something the other day about a lot of historical sites offering themselves up as polling places and suggesting that it's a great way to enhance civic engagement. There's that word civic again. So, it gets used in different ways but it [got] me thinking about that a little bit as well.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Well, I find myself getting angry again and I don't know what to do. But when you see all of these laws that states are now trying to put in that really, in the end, [00:55:00] are going to wind up being voter suppression. You can say that's not your intent but if that's the result, this is not a good law.

Doug Shipman: Right, right.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I'm just frustrated.

Doug Shipman: Have you ever done anything outside of Connecticut to address some of those issues or allied with people?

A. Cheryl Curtis: No, I have not.

Doug Shipman: If I can ask you this because my guess is that you may have some thoughts on this. I don't live in Windsor but coming into Windsor and having been familiar with Windsor for a few years and knowing the demographics of Windsor, it struck me odd that up until just this year anyway, there was always just one person of color on Town Council. I thought, "Wow, given the demographics, why aren't there five people of color on Town Council? Why doesn't it reflect the community?" It's certainly something we're thinking about at the Historical Society as we look at who is on our board and who is active in the program and all of that. What do you think about that? Is there a reason for that? Is it – I don't want to suggest because I don't know, I'm an outsider – related to the parties?

A. Cheryl Curtis: I don't know either. I can remember when Tim started being involved with the Board of Education, and I'm pretty sure this was after Billie Rogers, who was a Black woman who had been on the Board. She moved to North Carolina and, unfortunately, died, I think, within a year. I'm not sure what it was that she had, maybe some kind of cancer. But I can remember, it wasn't just being out for the Board meeting. Then there [were] these ad hoc meetings that you had to go to and there was always something else and he was teaching every day. I'm thinking, "Who in their right mind wants to do that?" To work every day and then be out at night. But some people have more of a sense of being able to accomplish change than I do, you know?

Doug Shipman: Yeah, well, I see that as levels of civic engagement. Voting is kind of entry-level, right? We all can vote and then the next level is being involved in organizing something or supporting a non-profit or being involved in one of the government things. I just wondered about that, and Florence has shared her opinion on that as well as different things and it's an observation I'm just curious about.

A. Cheryl Curtis: I don't know. I do think that part of it is some people's reservations about seeing people in perceived positions of power, and I'm not quite sure if that has something to do with it or not. It may stop at the color of the skin, and [some might say], "I don't think that person is quite right for the job," or "Is that person smart enough for the job?" I always thought that Tim was a very logical, reasonable person and that he was someone who should do the job. Though I didn't always want him to be the someone to have to do the job. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: Sure. Have you ever thought about getting involved politically?

A. Cheryl Curtis: No. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: I'm not trying to convince you to. I'm just curious.

A. Cheryl Curtis: No. I guess I do smaller things.

Doug Shipman: I think you do a lot, it sounds like. This has been great for me to get to know you better and also listen to your life story. As we sort of wind down, are there any things you'd like to say about your time in Windsor overall, like how has it been? Anything you'd like people to know about your life here in Windsor?

A. Cheryl Curtis: We genuinely love being Windsor residents. We chose Windsor, as I said, because of [the] diversity. We appreciate Windsor because of its diversity. I don't think I would feel as comfortable in another town that is less diverse or that is predominantly white. [01:00:00] Even though I've attended predominantly white schools, I've taught in schools where the students were predominantly white, I appreciate, as I said before, seeing people of color and knowing people of color in this town. I would feel alone, I think the way I felt in college if I were in another town. Even though I may have and probably would [have], because I'm a great person, made plenty of friends in another town. [laughing]

Doug Shipman: It sounds like you still have a lot of great friends from your school and all those other things too which is just fantastic, staying well connected with all of them. Well, thank you so much.

A. Cheryl Curtis: You're welcome.

Doug Shipman: I am really appreciative of your time. It's something that will become part of our town's history and one of the things we're hearing as we're having interviews is that there's more than just a WAACA story. There's a coming-to-Windsor story and there's a story about how people feel about the community, which is why I asked a lot of the questions that I did at the beginning, and your life story too which is, I think, very important. As all of us go away eventually and people look back on how did Windsor become the Windsor that it is today, it's really, really important. If you, and I'll ask Tim the same question, come across any photographs or documents, old programs or meeting agendas, [or] anything that has to do with WAACA. I don't know if you all keep family files or things or even a social event photo. [If you have photos of] friends gathering at the casino on a WAACA trip or something, we would love to scan them in and add them to the collection about WAACA because it will help us tell the story.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Okay.

Doug Shipman: So if you come across any or think of any or if Tim has any, it would be really a great help to us. We have a few things. We have some programs from some events, things like that. Florence has given us a few other things, but we don't have a lot of photos of people at WAACA events and things like that. So it'll be great to have faces to go with the names and the stories. Great, well Cheryl, thank you so much for your generous time and I really appreciate it. I'm sorry that we had to get to know each other over Zoom and not face-to-face. These are much more fun face-to-face.

A. Cheryl Curtis: It's much more personal this way. It's just you and me. It's not a bunch of people chatting each other up so that's good.

Doug Shipman: That's true, that's true. So, as I said at the beginning, this will be transcribed. We will make sure you see a copy of the transcript and have an opportunity to edit if there's

anything that you would like to add or say differently so you own your voice that's portrayed in that oral history. And then ultimately, we hope we put some segments of oral histories on our website and use them in developing exhibits and things like that. So having the release form from you now that we've completed this, if you can sign that and send it to us, that would be great. Then we have that to accompany the record of the interview.

A. Cheryl Curtis: All right. I will do that.

Doug Shipman: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much.

A. Cheryl Curtis: You're very welcome.

Doug Shipman: I look forward to talking to your husband tomorrow to do his half.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Okay.

Doug Shipman: And he'll tell me all the things that you actually did for WAACA that you've forgotten about. [laughing]

A. Cheryl Curtis: All right. [laughing] Nice meeting you.

Doug Shipman: Have a great rest of the day. Take care, Cheryl.

A. Cheryl Curtis: Thank you, you too.