



Florence Barlow: WAACA Oral History

November 28, 2020

Location: Virtual

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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

Dr. Fiona Vernal: We are officially recording. All right. Good afternoon. It is November 28th, 2020. I am Dr. Fiona Vernal from the University of Connecticut, and today I am here with Ms. Florence Barlow to conduct our first oral history project. Ms. Barlow, if you could begin by starting off with the consent, please.

Florence Barlow: Yes, thank you very much for speaking to me today. My name is Florence Barlow, and I give the Windsor Historical Society permission, and Dr. Vernal, to tape whatever she needs to do. Thank you. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Thank you so much. So, let's start with as much of your family history background as you can remember.

Florence Barlow: Well, I was born in Georgia and as a baby, [we] moved [to] Pompano Beach, Florida. You know what? I'm a very honest person, so I'm going to tell you the way it was, okay? It was a very dysfunctional family from what I can remember. My grandmother was always the most important person in my life. I had two brothers and at the age of seven, for some reason, I was shipped to New York to live with my aunt and uncle who later adopted my brother and I so that we could be in the school system and everything. But every year, I would go back to Florida to visit because my mom lived there. But the interesting thing, the reason I think that I am the way I am, my uncle and my aunt who lived in New York [had] very little education. I think neither one of them even went to junior high school. My uncle, thank God, got a wonderful job with Penn Railroad. My aunt got a job in the city with a Jewish man who taught her how to cut diamonds.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: The Jewish what?

Florence Barlow: A Jewish [man]. He owned a jewelry store in New York, and he taught her how to cut diamonds. She worked for Feature Ring Company, so these were two African Americans with little education who, at the right time, were able to get good jobs and had good backing behind them. We left New York and we moved [to] New Jersey. I graduated from high school there. I met my husband. We all belonged to the same church. New Brunswick, New Jersey, where Rutgers University is. Very small town at the time.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Let's pause for a minute because we've been to Georgia, New York, and New Jersey [laughing] already in about 2 minutes. So, can you back up and tell me any details about the Georgia side of the story?

Florence Barlow: No, I can't tell you anything about the Georgia side of the story. I could tell you more about Pompano Beach, Florida because I was seven when I left there.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: So, there are no details about the grandparents in Georgia?

Florence Barlow: That's what I'm in the process of doing now. I've been through Ancestry, and to be honest with you, half of the information that I'm getting doesn't go with the information that I was given as a child. My original birth certificate says, 'father unknown'.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay.

Florence Barlow: Which is interesting. It has my great-grandmother as the midwife, who gave me birth, and there are so many discrepancies, [laughing] and this is just something I just started looking into. That's why I got interested in history again. You know, and it was one of those family kinds of things where when you would ask someone a question, they would say, "Honey, don't worry about it. We just love you." You know? So it was that type of thing because when I'd go back to Florida, my mom and my stepdad, I didn't have a problem with them. I mean they were a little on the dysfunctional side. But you know, as a child, you don't really think about it, and my grandmother lived there. She lived down the street from us, so she's the one who always took my brother and I to church, and always made sure we had food, and life was fine, so I thought. So, then my aunt and uncle would come down from New York. My mother only had, here we go with the history again, two brothers and my mother.

Florence Barlow: My great-grandmother, [00:05:00] supposedly when she died in 1959, they thought she was probably between 106 and 107. Somewhere in there for her age. Of course, we had no proof when we went back and would look into things. We did celebrate her 100th birthday, so I do remember that. This is in Florida. And so my aunt and uncle would come down from New York, and they had another brother. Well, guess what? I just found out last year doing Ancestry.com, he was not their brother. He came to live with them when he was ten years old. I haven't been able to get any more information on that. But back to Florida. My uncle would have my brother – well me, not my brother because he was so young. I would come up to New York every summer and spend the summer with them. So, I would be on the railroad station with a big sign, with my name and everything on it, and now we're talking the '50s. [laughing] A little Black girl and –

Dr. Fiona Vernal: By yourself?

Florence Barlow: Pardon me?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: By yourself?

Florence Barlow: Oh yes.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Oh.

Florence Barlow: They would send me up from Florida to New York. But you know now, I mean it was called children's companions or something.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What kind of companions?

Florence Barlow: Children's companions. Something like that. So, I would come up and see them, and when I was on the train, I've always been very talkative. I love people, and I would walk up and down the train with the conductor, you know? People say I'm very naive. Even someone said that to me today, but I only remember one time that I thought someone was being rude to me on a train. Sometimes you think maybe you – I've always felt that I had an angel that protected me from seeing too much bad stuff because my life hasn't been that bad. It's okay. So, it all started in Florida.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: [...] So, since we were having audio [issues], why don't we just backtrack to the part where your parents put you on the train and then you just tell that part again?

Florence Barlow: Okay, I would take the train from Pompano Beach, Florida to New York City, and they would have these little signs hung around your neck, like a cardboard sign with your name on it, and someone would pick you up. So, when I was on the train, I would walk with the conductor up and down the train and talk to all the people. So, it was really fun, and I don't remember, as a child, people being rude to me. One year, when I got back to Florida, my mom wasn't at the train, and we found out later that she had an accident. So, all I can remember from that is that there was an elderly white lady who stayed with me the entire day. Of course, when you're a child, you never think, "Oh, I should've gotten her name or telephone number." Little things like that, I remembered that life was always so good.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Can you spell the name of the place in Florida?

Florence Barlow: Pompano. P-O-M-P-A-N-O Beach, Florida. Right outside of Fort Lauderdale.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay.

Florence Barlow: The interesting thing about that is that we lived a mile and a half from the ocean and guess what? Black people were not allowed on the ocean. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: You never learned how to swim when you were younger?

Florence Barlow: No. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right. So, what drew your mother to Florida?

Florence Barlow: I have no idea, to be honest with you. I mean she was born in Georgia.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: The interesting thing, I have a picture of me with my mom when I'm probably two years old. It was taken in, hang on a second. I just lost the name of it. Oh, Key West. We're both dressed to the nines.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: But you were also dressed up?

Florence Barlow: Oh, definitely. I had on this really beautiful little coat and hat and my mom is standing next to this beautiful car. I would ask my uncle about this. I said, "How come mom was always there and how come I was always," and you know it was sort of one of those kinds of things that nobody wanted to talk about it. I think what happens with a lot of us, maybe in my age group, [00:10:00] if no one talked about it and if you weren't really interested in it, then by the time you were interested in it, it was too late. My great-grandmother would talk about when she was a little girl, they had to write on a shovel. So, I thought you know why did they have to write on the back of a shovel? But I really wasn't interested, so we always thought that maybe she lived in some small camp area. Something where maybe they were getting some education because none of my family had any education at all.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: So, do you have any other memories of Florida? You said the ocean was not too far away, but you guys were not allowed to go.

Florence Barlow: No. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: So, what was [your] childhood like?

Florence Barlow: Oh, it was fun! It was just a bunch of kids playing around. We did have one young kid in our town, Erthel [SP] Williams, who later – oh my gosh, I think he won something in the Olympics. I'll have to check with my brother. But we were punished once because we were playing in one of the outbuildings and he fell in and so we all got punished.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Fell into what?

Florence Barlow: Into the outbuilding. Into the potty, yes.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Oh!

Florence Barlow: So, we all got punished. You know, that type of thing, and I'm almost positive he was, years later, in the Olympics or was a football player or something. But my brother knew him. He remembered that. It's interesting that when I left Florida, [I would not go] back much because my mother would come north instead of me going down there. And so, it was like out of sight, out of mind, I assume. I don't know.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What was the neighborhood like in Florida that you grew up in?

Florence Barlow: Oh, the neighborhood. Well, it was very poor. Of course, it was all African Americans because we lived on one side and they lived on the other side, you know? And they were all poor people who were just trying to make ends meet and get through. I mean in Florida, you didn't have apartment buildings. It was all houses, so I didn't grow up in an apartment building on the 18th floor or something because we didn't have those, and we had yards. So, it was pretty good. No problems.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What did your mother do for a living?

Florence Barlow: I'm sorry, now you're breaking up. What was that again?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What did your mother and your stepfather do for a living?

Florence Barlow: My mother was a housekeeper, and my stepdad worked in construction.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right, and were those the jobs that they retired from?

Florence Barlow: Well, they didn't retire. I think you're thinking a little bit. [laughing] You're not listening to me. They were very poor people with no education.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Oh no, I understand.

Florence Barlow: Oh, you mean when they stopped working? He died in 1952, and I assumed he was still doing that, and my mom, by then, was getting older and she died in 1992. She was still trying to work a few hours to get through to make ends meet, and she would go in and do

housekeeping. So basically, there was no lived to get to a ripe old age and retire and live happily ever after.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. Yeah, no, I just wanted to see if they were doing the same jobs.

Florence Barlow: Oh yes, of course, yeah. Well, that was basically – and you know it's interesting now that we're talking about it. I always thought he was a construction worker. I know he left home in the mornings and he came home at night so I'm not even quite sure. I'm sure it was just labor. I know he didn't work on a farm.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Yeah, we had a dairy farm near us, but I'm pretty sure it was construction work.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right, and then you said around age seven you moved to New York.

Florence Barlow: Yep.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Did you know that that was coming?

Florence Barlow: Nope! And I still don't have any reason why. My mom and my stepdad were very dysfunctional. They would go off and go hunt, and they loved to hunt fish and [00:15:00] all of that, and we had a pickup truck. From the time when I was four years old, I have no idea how or why I could read the 23rd Psalm, and I had already memorized it before I started school. So, I would sit in the back, and I would just read. They always gave me little things to read. I think it was decided to keep me quiet. You know, that type of thing, and so I always loved to read, and they would just go off and do their thing. So I'm sure my grandmother was probably taking care of us more then.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right, and so you went off to New York to live with your aunt and uncle. What did they do for a living?

Florence Barlow: He worked for Penn Railroad.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And that that remained his job?

Florence Barlow: Oh, definitely. He had a wonderful job with them, and I think my uncle was always in the right place at the right time because he became a – oh gosh, there was a name for it. Like a trainman that was part of the – not a conductor, but in the engineering area. So, he did very well and, like I said, my aunt worked for the Feature Ring Company it was called, and it was one of the better jewelry stores in New York. And we lived in the Bronx. I always thought we had this huge yard, and we looked later, it wasn't. But it was very nice. But the interesting thing about them is that when they decided to move to New Jersey, they had white friends who found our house. So when they went for the closing, it wasn't the white couple that would get in the house. It was my aunt and uncle. So evidently, they were streetwise. They did pretty good for people with no education.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Can you spell the name of the ring company?

Florence Barlow: Feature. [F-E-A-T-U-R-E]. I think it was something like that. Feature Ring Company.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And then around how long after you moved to New York did they end up relocating to Jersey?

Florence Barlow: Ah, let's see. I went into junior high school, so it would have been – I graduated in 1962, so we're talking probably 1960 or somewhere around there. I can't remember.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What memories do you have of the Bronx for the short time that you were there?

Florence Barlow: None. Seriously, I mean, to be honest with you, I was a child. I had a good life. I played with the kids in the neighborhood. My uncle's best friend lived in Harlem. Every weekend, we would go to church in Harlem.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay.

Florence Barlow: We would go out and eat, and we would go to the park. There was every race [of] people, and you just had fun.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What denomination was the church?

Florence Barlow: Baptist. I'm trying to remember the name of it. Wow, I probably have it written down somewhere. It was on 125th Street.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And then the neighborhood in the Bronx, was that mostly an African American neighborhood?

Florence Barlow: No, I don't think it was. I don't remember playing with a lot of Black children when I was little, once I was in New York. Most of them were – well the Bronx, if you look back, I think it was predominantly Jewish. I don't think there were a lot of children around. Now, don't forget, I don't know if they kept me close or I have no idea. I just never really thought about it, to be honest with you.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay, and then in transitioning to New Jersey, New Brunswick.

Florence Barlow: New Brunswick, yeah. We lived on a one-block street. We were the first Blacks on the street and all the neighbors were fine. We didn't have any problems with any of our neighbors. We bordered the park, a small park, so it was really a great neighborhood. You know, we had Italians and Polish and Jews and it was just a nice little area.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Was it a family area?

Florence Barlow: Pardon me?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Was it a family area? Were there lots of kids?

Florence Barlow: Not a lot of kids, not at that time. Well, we were almost junior high school, so not a lot of small kids. The family next door to us had a son that was my brother's age, and then

they had [00:20:00] an older daughter. So, most of us were somewhere around ten, eleven, twelve, in that age group. And then a lot of the people of color either lived in projects downtown in New Brunswick or out in what we called the country. That's where my husband lived. They lived out on the outskirts of New Brunswick, which was still part of New Brunswick, going into Somerset, New Jersey.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay. But that was more rural?

Florence Barlow: Yeah. Oh, very rural. There were no paved streets. Yeah, very rural.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: As you were coming up in New Jersey now, what was your consciousness like in terms of whether you were well off or middle class?

Florence Barlow: I'd always assumed that we were middle class because we had everything we needed. My aunt loved to shop because, needless to say, if you're in the city every day. She literally had to run to get on the train going to the city because she commuted. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: To get to her job?

Florence Barlow: Yes, because of her job. Oh gosh, yes, she retired from there. Oh, she had a great job, and it was funny because she loved to shop, and would you believe [when] I was 42 years old, I finally realized why I hate to shop. I always told people I only wear clothes because I have to. Even now, I hate to shop. I don't like it. I was dragged into the city constantly because I was so tiny, and she loved to dress me, and I never thought about how many clothes I had. The nice clothes I had. It was just part of my life. You know, I was just somebody that they loved, and they took good care of me. I did the housework. You know, my brother and I learned how to cook, and they would come in from the city from work and we'd go to church on Sunday. We'd shop on Saturday. We'd go back to the city, and when I started dating my husband, it cost \$0.25 to go into the city. So, we went to see plays. We went to walk around New York City. It was that type of thing where I think I sort of lived in a dream world and maybe I've forgotten all the bad stuff.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Did you feel like you were a city girl who happened to live in New Jersey?

Florence Barlow: I never thought of it that way, no. I never thought of New York as – New York was just home. It wasn't a city. It wasn't a big city. I didn't realize until years later that people made a big deal about New York City. Don't forget to us, it wasn't a big deal. It's like living in Orlando. If you grew up around Disney World, it wouldn't be a big deal to you.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Because it's just your norm. So, I think moving from the city to New Jersey wasn't a big deal, and then when we moved there, we joined the church and everybody was like a big family.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Was it another Baptist Church?

Florence Barlow: Definitely. We were always Baptist. Strict Baptist.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: So, as you're becoming a teenager, 16,17, what were you thinking that your future held? Like what did you want to be or do?

Florence Barlow: Really, I wanted to be a nurse. I worked as a candy striper in a nursing home in New Brunswick, and I volunteered a lot because being in the church, we were always doing things for others and that was my dream, becoming a nurse, and I am not going to make excuses. I think probably if I had the kind of parents behind me who pushed harder for us to make sure we got everything we needed because I remember with my guidance counselor when I wanted to start looking into going into nursing, they talked me into becoming a nurse's aide. And so I went to – oh gosh, I forgot the name of it. It was sort of like a trade school in New York City, and I do remember one of my professors who was very – his name was Professor Mikhail or Michaela or something like that. He wasn't a very nice man. I only stayed for a year and it got really hard, so I dropped out and I went back and I started working in the hospital. [00:25:00] This would be 1964, and then my husband and I got married in '65 and we headed out of New Jersey. But we didn't want to live in New Jersey.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Why didn't you want to live in New Jersey?

Florence Barlow: Because [sigh] here we go. Our families just never evolved. That's a horrible way to put that. We weren't close to them and just never – okay I'll tell you. Like my sister-in-law. I am so close to my sisters-in-law, my husband's sisters. But they all stayed there and not that we did anything that great, but James and I, when we got married and we bought a house and we traveled a lot, we did so many things with our son. We got involved. They all just sort of stayed there, and so even though we didn't have a lot, we knew that we wanted something different, if that makes any sense. I talked to my sister-in-law this morning because she just had a new grandbaby last night and her husband was probably the first Black on his side of the family to graduate from college. He was a CPA with a BPT and of course he was an alcoholic and he died at 47. Very young. She just never changed her life. She just stayed there. She's basically my best friend because she was five when I started dating my husband. [laughing] My sister. But it was like my husband's grandmother lived in Hartford. She lived on Wooster Street in Hartford, and we would come up to visit her and we fell in love with Connecticut because it just seemed better. But then sometimes you talk to African Americans who've lived here all their life and it's like it wasn't. I thought it was okay, but we did have trouble getting an apartment. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right.

Florence Barlow: Because of our color. Now, if I wanted to start delving into all of this stuff, maybe it would be interesting. But believe it or not, when you're talking about it, it's like, “Oh that's interesting!” You know?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yeah, yeah. That's why I love having these conversations because sometimes you don't step out of it to ask about it. Somebody else asks and you realize, “Wait, I don't know the answer to that.”

Florence Barlow: Exactly, because that's what happened with my husband's family. My husband's great-great-grandfather was a slave owner, and his two slave children, he left all his

land in Meridian, Mississippi to them, and we do have some of that history. But then we realized this as the years went on. This was probably back in, like I said, in the '60s and '70s. None of the aunts wanted to talk about it because no one wanted to admit that their grandfather was a slave owner. You see what I mean? To him, it was basically embarrassing. To maybe my grandson or my granddaughter, it might be history, and I think that's probably part of our problem now with what's going on. With some people, it's still a private thing that they're ashamed of or don't want to talk about. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Can you tell me how you and your husband met and courted?

Florence Barlow: We met in church. We belonged to the same church. His mom and dad were the Deacon and Deaconesses of our church. His uncle was our minister. So, we had known each other since we were 12 years old, and we didn't start dating until we were 17. [laughing] Like I said, he lived out in [what] we called the country.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: And this is another thing. Think about this. 2014 I realized why my husband was always an introvert. Do you realize my husband his entire life slept in the same bedroom with his three sisters? That's how small their house is. Isn't that interesting how when you're growing up, you don't think of things like that?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: And I remember when we were teenagers, he would say, "Oh, for crying out loud, just put on my sweater." You wouldn't think anything of it, and he would come over to our house. Of course, we had to come straight home. He had to leave at a certain time. If we were playing monopoly and we couldn't finish, we'd literally have to write everything down because we weren't allowed to leave it on the dining room table because it had to be put away. [00:30:00] So we literally, my brother, James, and I, would have to write everything down, put it away, and then we could continue it the next Saturday because he had to go home. So, he was always my best friend, and we've been married [for] 55 years now.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And when did you guys start talking about leaving New Jersey?

Florence Barlow: Probably in 1964. James went to electronic technical school in Kearny, New Jersey, and he came up to Connecticut and he got a job with a company called Anderson Group, which was on Park Ave in Hartford. Believe it or not, that was my husband's only job. He worked there from the day he finished school, started there, and they were bought out. Every time the company was bought out, they hired him. He was a great worker. He really was. Never had a problem. Wonderful life. But at one point, we went to Hyde Park – oh, I'm so glad this didn't work out – Hyde Park, Massachusetts, because they sent us up there to apply for a job, and when we got to the apartment building, they had all the information about us. The lady opened the door, and she slammed it in our face because she didn't know we were Black. So, if that happened today, [there would be] something we could do about it, but not in the 1960s. I think it was probably '67, '68, [or] somewhere around there.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And then what happened after that?

Florence Barlow: Pardon me?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And then after you didn't get the apartment in Massachusetts, what was the plan?

Florence Barlow: Oh no, we just came back. If it had gone through, if we had gotten it, then he would have taken that job because it was a better job. But we just stayed where we were. When we first tried to get an apartment, it was on [Woodland Drive]. There are some apartments on Woodland Drive in Hartford, which is down by Saint Francis Hospital. We tried to get an apartment there. We couldn't get one there because we were Black. That was in 1965 and James's aunt and uncle owned a house on Tower Avenue. It was a duplex. So that's where we lived until we moved to Windsor.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay.

Florence Barlow: And then we bought our house. But those were the only really racial things that I remember. I do remember when we were in our senior year, not being able to sit at the booth in Newberry's in New Brunswick. So, we all sat there, and we went through the same thing everybody else was going through. Then of course we got on a bus, and we went to Washington with our church, and what was that? '63, yeah. But those things weren't big deals because it was like everybody was doing that at the time. It wasn't history, it was just that we were going to the March on Washington. So it was fun, and then we were all able to get away from home. And of course, we were so far away from Martin Luther King that we would have never been able to see him anyway on the mall. At the time, I think we were part of these things. But at the time, it wasn't history. But you can go back and say, "Oh, I remember we went through that." You know? So now it might be a big deal to someone. There's a picture of me when President Obama was speaking in Bridgeport, and when they sat us, you know you had to sit in certain areas. I was so upset because I was right behind the podium. I had people calling me from all over because guess what? I was on CNN and everything because of it. [laughing] You know, silly little things like that. The big news that was in the [Hartford] Courant, and you can see me because I was behind the podium. It never occurred to me that if they're showing the President, you're going to see the people behind them. So little things like that at the time, it wasn't a big deal, and then later when you look at it, you can have a good laugh.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. So let me see if I can clarify the housing story.

Florence Barlow: Okay.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: So, you came to Hartford. You had already visited Hartford because his grandmother lived on Wooster Street.

Florence Barlow: Wooster Street, yep. Right off of Main Street in Hartford.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right, and then when you guys try to get your own apartment, that would have been [00:35:00] on Woodland [Street] and so you guys had to give up on that and live on Tower Avenue?

Florence Barlow: Yes. Well, Rutland Street, which is off Tower Avenue.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay.

Florence Barlow: One block street. James's aunt and uncle owned a house on that [street], which we were lucky. You know, it was okay. But see for me, it was what it was, so it didn't affect our lives to the point where we were homeless [and] had no place to live. We had food. Our life went on. Then we stayed there and when our son was ready to go to school, it was at that point where we really wanted our kids, or we only had the one, to grow up going to school with his friends. I didn't want him to get on a bus and go into another town or something and be with kids that weren't part of his society or whatever. So, we moved to – it's still here in Windsor. They're condos now. They're apartments. They were just building those, and we moved there. It's called, what's it called now? It was called Arbor – no. I forgot what it's called now. Well anyway, it's here in Windsor and they're condos now.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: They were apartments before?

Florence Barlow: Yeah, they were apartments and that's where we lived because that way Jim could go to school with his regular friends. So, our son grew up. He went from kindergarten straight through and graduated from Windsor High. In fact, he had the same friends, and this year when we had his memorial service, there were still some of the guys that came that they had they didn't stay close friends, but they kept in contact.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right. Was it different –

Florence Barlow: Housing back then, I don't know what it was that we didn't have a problem because it seemed like we were around people like Bose Barlow. I don't know if you've done any research on the Barlow's from Hartford. Bose Barlow was a judge.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Ed was a banker. These were all friends. These were all people that we knew. These were all people that we all sort of hung around with and some of them were well educated, some weren't, but we were all hard-working people trying to have a better life. So, we never really got into some type of a [clique] where you were better than me. That type of thing. We would discuss things, but I don't know. Maybe we didn't have as many problems because of school. We just didn't have as many problems as some people. Now I start to think, "Did we do enough to help other people?" [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What was your connection to the other Barlow's?

Florence Barlow: Oh, Bose and Catherine lived across the street from us on Rutland Street, and there were the Foote's. There was Earlene and I forgot their last names. We all lived in that little neighborhood, which was a nice neighborhood. I mean, I think it was predominately Black. I never thought of things like that. It was just my neighborhood. We had a blast, you know, and everybody went to work every morning. They worked hard. They came home. The boys played together, all the kids, and we would babysit for each other. We'd get together on the weekends and have like a potluck supper because none of us could afford anything else. We'd go on bus

trips. We used to go up through the Catskills to Peg Leg Bates's place. Everybody would chip in, and we would all trek up there and have a good time for a week in the Catskills.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What's in Catskill?

Florence Barlow: It was Peg Leg Bates's resort.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay.

Florence Barlow: In the Catskills.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Who's Peg Leg Bates?

Florence Barlow: He was a performer, I think.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And your Barlow and the other Barlow's, no connection?

Florence Barlow: No relation. They couldn't find any information, but we never know. We've tried once. [laughing] And then of course, as we all moved away and went into certain areas, you would still see them because [00:40:00] being involved with all the organizations like the Links and AKA and all those organizations, you know everyone and everyone else's teas or fundraisers. And that's how you sort of kept in touch with all these people.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yeah, all right. So, since you've brought up the organizations, let's talk about what that history of joining social and other kinds of organizations look like for you as you're settling down into your adult life in Hartford and then Windsor.

Florence Barlow: Okay, I really didn't get involved until Jim was in school. I volunteered at his school because I was a dental technician and I worked part-time so that I could be home with him, and I would volunteer at his school a lot. I loved reading to kids and helping the teachers with all the little things. And then as he got older, I realized that I didn't have anything to do, and then of course I went to work full-time and wanted to stay involved with him because I wanted him to be a well-rounded citizen and not take for granted his life. So, I did a lot of fundraising and as the years went by, you joined. We had an organization, I was thinking about this when I was getting ready to think about working with you, called Ebony and Ivory. That was probably one of the first organizations besides Ceramics. [We took] bus trips to see plays in the city and that type of thing where you get together with people. Ebony and Ivory was a mixture of a racial group. As a matter of fact, the Bernstein's and I are still involved, and they were in that first group with us. So that's how my getting involved started and I've always had this feeling that no matter how poor, no matter how small you are, you can always give back, and that was my purpose of starting to volunteer because I love people. I love being involved. I love giving back. So, once you join one organization, that's how it starts.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What is Ebony and Ivory?

Florence Barlow: It was the same type of organization where they were trying to get people together to discuss, here we go, racism and that type of thing. That had to be in the '70s. I don't know if Victor [Bernstein] would remember, but most of those people are gone now too. But it was the kind of organization that was started for people to try to get, as we're still doing in 2020,

people to try to work together to discuss. It's at a point where it's so old. You could write a million books, you can talk about it, but until people do something about it, it doesn't matter. I mean, because we've been doing this [for] forever, trying to get people to get together to discuss racism or to discuss our differences or to discuss this and I know we're a lot better. We're so much better. But it seems to me that it's time to stop talking about it and do something about it. So that's why I'm starting to be a little encouraged with young people. I think maybe I'm hoping that they will do more than just talk about it.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Did Ebony and Ivory emerge out of like a parent's group in the school?

Florence Barlow: No, we were just a bunch of adults. I have no idea why it even started.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Are you neighbors or church members?

Florence Barlow: No, we were just all people that lived in Windsor [and] someone decided to get us all together. Maybe Dr. Silvers, who was a minister. Maybe he was the start of it. You know what? I would really have to look back and see if I could find anything on that. I have no idea why it started, but they've always picked on Vivian Cicero and I because we were the two Blacks in Windsor who were involved. [laughing] Someone said to me last week, "Why is your picture always on the front page of the paper?" Because they don't have any other Black people that are involved, so it's that type of thing. [00:45:00] Vivian Cicero and I always just loved being part of Windsor. We loved giving back. I mean, if we were just serving food at something, or if we were cleaning up after something, we always stayed involved. So now that you bring up Ebony and Ivory, I have no idea why we started. I know we used to meet at L.P. Wilson, but that was probably 35-40 years ago. So interesting. Maybe I'll have to see if I can find out anything.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And so after Ebony and Ivory, what else did you get involved in? What was your church in Hartford or Windsor?

Florence Barlow: My church was Mount Olive. I belonged to Mount Olive in Hartford and in Windsor, I belonged to the River of Life Christian Church, which was non-denominational, so it was really a great church. So basically, my church was River of Life Christian Church, and then when we had to disband and start over again. Our minister was the owner of the donut shop in Windsor. If you knew Windsor at all, you would have known him because the donut shop in Windsor was a very popular place. His name was Gary Westford, and then after that fell apart, our church changed the name to Oasis Christian Church, and that's what we are now. I'm still a member there. We're down now, believe it or not. We probably, at one time, had 350 members. There are only twelve of us now. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Oh.

Florence Barlow: So we can social distance very easily. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What's your Mount Olive community like?

Florence Barlow: Mount Olive? That was Hartford. Well, Mount Olive is still there. It was all Black and I cannot remember his name. I'm drawing a blank. Did you grow up in Hartford?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: No.

Florence Barlow: Oh okay, so you wouldn't know. Oh my goodness, I can't remember his name. Hang on, it will come to me. Battles.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Reverend Battles?

Florence Barlow: Battles, Reverend [Richard] Battles, who was very good friends with Martin Luther King.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: But what was your community like there?

Florence Barlow: I didn't live there. I only went to church there. I lived in Windsor.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: That was just my church, and it wasn't anything. You went to church and came home.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: You weren't particularly involved?

Florence Barlow: No, it wasn't that type of [thing].

Dr. Fiona Vernal: How come?

Florence Barlow: Well, it's like the churches now. Everybody goes to church, and they go home because they have things to do Sunday afternoon, and we didn't have that many programs at the time. So that's probably why, and you served on the program committees when you wanted to have a bake sale or until you did your part. Or if they needed you to volunteer to stay with the kids, you volunteered but then you went home. So there was no really big involvement at the time, and I don't know. Maybe it was because my husband was home with our son, and I wanted to come home because we would go to the ocean or something. You know, we would get out of town.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Wait, he didn't come to Mount Olive with you?

Florence Barlow: No, no. Believe it or not, James never went back to church.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Ah, I see.

Florence Barlow: No, no. I tell you, we grew up in very, very, very, very, very strict homes, and he really just didn't want any part of the Christian part of it.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And can you tell me how the association was created?

Florence Barlow: WAACA?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yes.

Florence Barlow: Well, you've probably seen the information because Willie Graham worked for Senator Dodd, and Stan Cicero worked for the state of Connecticut, I believe. The reason it started was that Willie was concerned because kids in Windsor were not getting scholarships. So

they got together, I think like three or four groups or couples, and talked about trying to get something started for scholarships. That's how it basically all started, I think in 1982. So I came in later after this had already started. [00:50:00] It started out as just the Black Democratic Club because we were all Democrats, and I'm no longer [on the Democratic Committee]. I was on the Democratic Committee for like 40 years or so. After I retired, I decided to take up [volunteering]. I'm still involved, but not on the committee anymore. So that's how WAACA really started and at some point, evidently, they found it would be easier to get a better organization started so that they could maybe get funding or 501(c). I think you have information on how it started. There's a picture with Willie and Stan. And so then they started going around beating the bushes apart to try to get more African Americans involved, and at the time, I was one of them.

Florence Barlow: They'd call on people that they could get involved. So basically what we wanted to do was to have our kids be able to get the same education. Everything – to get scholarships, to be able to go to better schools. My son was on the ski team in Windsor, but see we only had one child, so we could afford those things. And then, of course, basically our son – guess what? All of his friends were either children with parents who were doctors or lawyers or two families. That type of thing. So that's how Jim grew up. It wasn't that we had a lot of money. We only had one child. So, it wasn't a problem for Jim to be involved in anything that he wanted to do, and that's how I started volunteering with all the other organizations in town, like the Shad Derby and the Historical Society and First Town Downtown and – oh my gosh, there's so many. Mary's Place, all of these organizations. But what we did was because we opened the door to go into these committees. Then we were able to start talking to more people to try to get more done for Black kids. But then I think about it now, and I look back and I'm thinking, “How far have we gone in Windsor school systems?” When you think back, Jim graduated in 1984.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: 1984, okay.

Florence Barlow: Our son graduated in 1984 and some of the kids, I still know. I mean Donna, who just moved to California [and] just got a big job with a company out there, she's an attorney. And another gal named Sue, who's a teacher in Massachusetts, and those were his best friends who all moved away. None of them stayed. They all left. So, you wonder. I never really thought about it. I mean, they wanted to go on with their lives, but why didn't they all stay to try [and say], “Oh let's see if we can make things better in Windsor.”

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Well, let's think about your experience. When you moved to the apartment in Windsor, were you living in a mostly white community?

Florence Barlow: Yes.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Yep.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And then by the time you moved to your house?

Florence Barlow: Still a white community.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Where in Windsor did you get the house?

Florence Barlow: We live in what you would call – I guess we're probably in the center of Windsor. I'm like two blocks from the main, no little bit further. I'm less mile from the main entrance. We lived near the highway. I don't know. If you go back and look, there was a house near me [and] the Jones's lived there. They were African Americans. Their house was taken for the widening of the highway. [01:00:00] And literally, their picture was on the cover of Life Magazine once because they would always do their hedges with 'JONES' for Christmas. And you could see it, and they were great people. They lived there, but their house was taken.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Where did they go?

Florence Barlow: Most of the houses there are either the second or third generation, [00:55:00] and it's still all white. This was one of the problems when we would start. People would come to us and say, "We need to get more African Americans involved," and we still do that. And I say to people, "To be honest with you," I've always been honest about this, "I don't know a lot of African Americans."

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. In Windsor.

Florence Barlow: A lot of people try to cover that up. Why did they try to turn it into something it's not? Even growing up, my school had very few Blacks. It wasn't that we were in an elite neighborhood or anything. It was just what it was. When we moved to Windsor, our house, the people across the street – there are only two houses on my street. The people who owned it when we bought, we bought from whites and she always wanted her own house because her husband's family owned this house and she was brought here as a bride, and she always wanted her own house. And when they sold to us, they were already in their early eighties, [laughing] and they bought another house in Windsor. The two men that lived across the street were white. They were born there. My neighbor now across the street from me, the guy who brought his wife, you know, but it was never a big deal. It's that type of thing. With Jim, all of the kids who lived in this neighborhood were white. There was one Black family. Eddie, Jim, and all the Grillo boys. They were all just best buddies, and there were only two Black kids.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Were you concerned about that when you were raising Jim?

Florence Barlow: Nope.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Is it because of your own experience?

Florence Barlow: Concerned about what? Not being around African Americans?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Or being one of two Black kids?

Florence Barlow: Never occurred to me. No, I didn't have a problem with it. I don't know. I mean, all his family, of course, is Black. Well, mostly. We have a lot of mixture in our family because there's a lot of interracial marriage, you know? And Jim's first girlfriend was white, and we always encouraged him to marry her, but he didn't. She's still a good friend of mine. But no, it never occurred to me to be concerned about him because his friends were who his friends were. It never occurred to me that I needed to go out and find Black friends for my son. I don't know.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Well, why didn't you stay in Hartford and send him to school in Hartford? Let's see if we can back into it that way.

Florence Barlow: Oh, we never wanted to live in Hartford. I never wanted to live in Hartford. No. If it was left up to me, we would have moved to Granby or someplace because we didn't want to live in a city. But we couldn't afford anything else, and Windsor was a good town, you know? It was either Windsor or Bloomfield, and we fell in love with the location because our house, we have an acre and a half. There are only two houses on my street, and I own it all from the front of the street to the end of the street. And I can go outside in my pajamas and work in my gardens. So, if we had had money, I would have never lived in a city. We would've lived in the country.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Did you look around in Bloomfield?

Florence Barlow: Yep. But I just told you why we bought this. It was location, location, because we fell in love. We fell in love with two or three houses, but this was the one that was closest to what we wanted.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: What year did you buy that house?

Florence Barlow: '74.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: 1974. So, you loved the location. You didn't want to live in a city. When you started getting involved in the community, in terms of getting more African Americans involved, what kind of vision did you have for Windsor in terms of the relationship with its African American community?

Florence Barlow: For people to really just get along and like each other and get more people involved. And I think, actually, if you talk to people in Windsor, the first thing they would say to you is the diversity. Now, there you go. [01:00:00] Are we going back to the naive saying that we really never had a big problem? I don't know if maybe people are just afraid to push this or give it some real time, but I was always accepted. Whenever we worked on any projects, with girls getting involved with the Shad Derby, I would say, "Guys, you're as bright as they are." It had nothing to do with looks. The Shad Derby, Miss Shad Derby, was all about your involvement [and] your brain. Like I was just talking to [Vallerie]'s mom, Joan Huyghue. Val was the first African American girl to be Miss Shad Derby. But we would say things like, "Go and do it!" We have a tendency, and I say we, thinking back to years ago. One of our biggest problems was always using a racism excuse. If you don't go out and try, at least push for it, and once they started, we had more African American girls coming out. We were just so proud to get more involved. Now they were all there.

Florence Barlow: I remember back one year, names won't matter. There was one mom whose daughter was running for Miss Shad Derby. The mom said, "The only thing she did in Windsor was live here." She didn't go to church here. She wasn't involved in Windsor, and she didn't even come to the luncheon for her daughter. So there. It doesn't matter who she was or anything. She wasn't interested. Her daughter wanted to run. Years ago, there were four girls that were in my granddaughter's dance class that lived in Windsor. I pleaded with those moms. These girls were

all in high school [and] headed for college. I pleaded with those moms to get them involved. Well, they were more interested in dance. Well, they were more interested in that, and now, I don't really know. Well, this year, of course, because of the pandemic, it's totally different, but I think it did open up the door for more girls to realize that it's okay. It has nothing to do with looks or anything. A few years ago, we had a young man running for Miss Shad Derby. So that was interesting. [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Would you apply the same observation to the organization in terms of having diehards like you and Ms. Cicero, but not having a lot of other community members getting involved to keep it sustained?

Florence Barlow: Yeah, well that's what happened with WAACA. We had Jennie Dixon who's an educator, who's a wonderful person. Tim Curtis and Cheryl. Cheryl was a professor at UHart. They retired, and it got to the point where we had people who would join the organization, but that was only during the year when it was important if you were applying for a job, and you were involved. Well, guess what? They would pay their \$20 dues and that would be it. So, you could put on your resume that you belong to the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association, which had a 501(c). But you needed people to stay involved. If you wanted to do a fundraiser, you needed to plan all these things. Now don't forget, we were all getting older and we just couldn't keep it going any longer because the people that were still involved had retired. Some of our members, most of them worked for Pratt and Whitney. They had retired. Six or seven of them had already moved out of Windsor to a better life somewhere else. North Carolina, Atlanta, Georgia. One couple went back to Martinique. Can you imagine leaving Windsor and going to Martinique to live? So one couple lived in Barbados. So that type of thing, you know? So it would have been nice to keep it going. No, I don't know if it would have because it became a chore because we were always involved in the Shad Derby. Mrs. Cicero, in the year that they had planned on one of us becoming the – what's it called when you're the head of the parade?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: The Marshall? [01:05:00]

Florence Barlow: Yes, the Parade Marshall. They said, "We can't without the other," so we were the first two Parade Marshalls. [laughing] So that type of thing because once you saw Vivian, you saw me and if you saw me, you saw Vivian. But we just stayed very involved and the reason we did it was because we loved the people. We loved being involved, and we loved giving back. Now I'm finding with younger people, I don't want to say what they're doing, but I don't know if these things are as – I mean you're young, so you can answer this. But it seems to me that it's not quite the same where you want to be involved in your community just to give back. I don't know. I mean, you probably talk to more young people, and you would be able to tell me.

Florence Barlow: I would love to sometimes sit down with a bunch of young people and really find out, "Why aren't you guys out there?" With Black Lives Matter, what happened to all of those young people that were going to make a difference? Are they doing it? Are they getting together with other groups and saying, "Listen, we need to [do] this or that." Are they doing that? That was where we were headed back in the '80s and the '90s. The late '70s and the '80s [were]

just trying to just get more people involved. Trying to get more kids to say, “You can go to college.” Now you have the law on your side. When James and I went to look at an apartment, that lady slammed the door in our faces, literally. In the ‘80s, we could have taken her to court. But not in the ‘60s because there were no laws. Now, you could walk into any restaurant in the United States of America. As long as you're dressed properly [and] you carry yourself like a human, they have to seat you. Once upon a time, they wouldn't have even let you in.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: But those weren't the kinds of issues that WAACA was focused on in Windsor, though.

Florence Barlow: Yeah, getting people involved.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Getting people involved but getting people involved around what particular issues?

Florence Barlow: Well, better education.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. What does that mean though? Besides the scholarships?

Florence Barlow: Well, I guess there wasn't anything else.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: No?

Florence Barlow: Well, it sounds to me like you're saying we didn't have any issues.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: No, no, I'm asking you.

Florence Barlow: No, what I'm saying is –

Dr. Fiona Vernal: No, I'm asking you to outline. So the origins of the organization was around advocating for scholarships and later on, you said you don't know what's going on in the Windsor schools. So, I'm asking you what the specific issues were. I'm not saying there were no issues.

Florence Barlow: Oh, no. But what I'm saying is when we get back to the reason with WAACA, I would assume it was just to make sure that these kids were applying their education so that they could do better in school and go forward and make better citizens out of themselves. To be honest with you, I don't know if we've delved that deep into more than helping them. I mean, we got computers put into the schools with Pratt and Whitney. That type of thing so that kids could [have] a great computer system. That was all in the newspapers. It's in all those articles. We had people come in and talk with kids about taking better subjects in school so that [they] could get scholarships [and] apply to colleges. We tried to even, at one point, get more African American teachers in Windsor.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: And from what we understood, they didn't pay enough so they didn't want to work in Windsor. They didn't want to work in Windsor because of the finances. Evidently, Windsor didn't pay very well, I don't know. These types of things. But you know what I find? When people say, “We don't have enough teachers of color,” when I've spoken to people, they

don't want to be teachers. If you would rather be involved in technology and you don't want to teach, you can't have teachers if you don't want to become a teacher. [01:10:00] You have to want to be an educator, first of all. So if you don't have people who want to be educators, I can't force you. My granddaughter wants to be a psychologist. As a small child, she loved to read. She loved being involved with books. I was so excited because I thought she was going to grow up and become an educator. You see what I mean? So I think maybe these are things that we wanted.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Maybe. Talking to you now, I wish Willie and Vivian and all of those gals were still around so we could beat this. Because I think back [to] Willie, and because she was African American, she worked for Senator Dodd. We never really got deep into it; except I know her daughter is an attorney. One of her daughters became an attorney. Kimberly. I don't know her maiden name now. But she grew up in Windsor and these are people who grew up in Windsor who have other jobs and they didn't stay either. So, did we do something wrong? [laughing]

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Well, two things. One, is there any sense of inevitability to it? [Because] you grew up in Jersey, and then you wanted something else, right?

Florence Barlow: Right.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Even though your life is perfectly wonderful, and you have a loving home. But you wanted to travel. You wanted to see a different part of the country and you had been exposed to Hartford already. But even so, it wasn't Hartford that you were targeting. You just wanted something else. And your husband grew up in a very strict household without a lot of space, and he wanted something else. So I'm wondering how [many] of the young people who are not staying in Windsor, I'm wondering how much of it do you think is sort of that 'just something else'? Whatever home is.

Florence Barlow: Oh definitely. I have nothing against it. It's like our son. Jim had a great life here, but he wanted something different. I was surprised he even wanted to move to North Carolina because he loved to ski. He loved winter sports. He was on the [Windsor] Water Rats. There were only two Black kids on the Water Rats. So, he was one of them. Then as he got older, after his first divorce, he was able to move down there with his company. He fell in love with it and not that I was disappointed, but then I thought: we left New Jersey. I did not want to stay in New Jersey. I have nothing against that, you know, that they don't stay. But I'm thinking that isn't that the way of the world in some areas where people just move on? And there is nothing we can do about it. But I find that it's almost like people feel as though they have to make excuses for the way things are going. But when President Obama came in, sometimes I use the word stupid [because] I thought every Black male in the United States would step up to the plate. That is so ridiculous. That's exactly how I felt. I wrote President Obama a letter. I have a letter that was written back to me. I'm sure he didn't write it, but I did get a thank you. It still sort of bothers me because I thought that they would all just step up and say, "It's not that we've made it, but we have a chance."

Florence Barlow: But my hairdresser said to me one day, who died five years ago, and she said someone came to the beauty shop and he said to her, “Man, that boy needs to pull his pants down and get his strut together.” She said it just broke her heart because he didn't have enough respect for the president. Because he wanted him to be one of the boys, and so it's things like that that I still think [about] and I try not to do that with my grandson because I don't want him to feel like he has to do something to make me feel better, you know? He's a cool kid. But this should have made such a difference. It did, don't get me wrong, because I do see a lot of change. But maybe [01:15:00] I'm seeing the change [as] a 76-year-old, where you're probably in your late twenties. I don't know if you're even. Yeah, [laughing] you got to be in your twenties if you're a doctor already, so you at least have to be that old. You would see things differently than me, but I just feel like, are we getting better? Yes, because we do see more and more people of color, not just African Americans, which drives me nuts. But even Hispanics or other races, there are more that are educated. They have better jobs. They carry themselves with some dignity. I don't care how you dress, but it's how you carry yourself. It makes all the difference in the world, and so I think back and I think, “Okay, well, maybe we made a little difference.” You know, just by being who we were and being honest [with] ourselves. Because I was never the kind – I have a couple of friends who will go on and on about things that we did in the '70s and '80s where I know they're not living in the real world and [I said], “That's not exactly true.”

Florence Barlow: I grew up in a dysfunctional home. I have an average education. I had to work like a dog for my certification as a dental technician. I worked very hard at my job. My husband and I saved our money. We didn't go out. We traveled a lot. We loved to travel so cruises and all of the islands. And well, I've been to Spain and Egypt and China and all those [places]. I wish I could go again. It's those sorts of things that we did. But that was for us, not for somebody else. But you see more and more people doing that. I mean when my son started skiing, you'd look a little weird out there. Now there are multimillionaire Black people that have their own ski lodges and so forth. We had to borrow one from our dentists, so that type of thing. So, I know things are a lot better. I'm not saying that I'm responsible for any of that. But I keep trying to see all the good that's happened in the world, and I think as a historian, for you, we have to see the past and know that it has gotten better. But if we don't see what the past is like, how can we see the future?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. And so would you say that WAACA outgrew its mission or didn't do succession planning for the next generation? To what would you attribute the decline of the organization?

Florence Barlow: Age. What's the word I'm looking for? Low interest. There were no young people interested in joining the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association. I don't know. Look at what's happening with the Historical Society, with their name. They want to change it from Historical Society because they think the word society puts them in a box. Well, not change it but we discussed that at one of our meetings. Now, I think with WAACA, the reason that we didn't go any further was because we couldn't get young people to join. No one was interested in becoming a member of an organization. First of all, they're all out trying to make a living. So I don't know if we lost [interest]. We didn't lose interest, but I guess others lost interest in us.

Because to be honest with you, most people will say, “So whatever happened with WAACA?” No one followed up on it to find out.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Yeah, so that's interesting. I'll have to talk to Jennie Dixon and Iva [Allison] and see if they remember anything or any reason. But I know we were all at the age where our kids were growing up. They were all finishing high school [and] going off to college. Then our lives, we were more involved with our jobs or whatever, struggling. So I assume it just kind of wore out its welcome.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. You know, I do see a lot of membership organizations [01:20:00] experiencing the same problems.

Florence Barlow: Really? Are they still together, though?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: So, I'm talking about everything from the Barbadian Club, [which] doesn't exist anymore in Hartford.

Florence Barlow: That's right. The West Indian Social Club was huge.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yes, and that is not the right word to describe it right now, right? I've seen upwards of 300+ members, and now there are 100 members but maybe 20 active members.

Florence Barlow: There you go.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Out of the 20 active members, there might be six or seven people who show up for the meetings.

Florence Barlow: And the age?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. The elder members are not transitioning. Well, the elder members were hardly coming to the meetings.

Florence Barlow: Right. But I mean the young people. [Of] the people that are involved now, there's probably no one under the age of 40.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Very few people and the people who are under the age of 40 have a different connection to the club. And so whether it's the West Indian Club or the Caribbean American Society or the Bajan Club, everyone is having a conversation about what is the purpose of these organizations. The founding mission of those organizations looked very different when people were looking for a place when the wider society was cold and uninviting and unwelcoming to them, and when people didn't have their own houses as a social space.

Florence Barlow: Yes, okay. I never thought ever from that end of it. Yeah.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Now, all those purposes in the 1950s and 1960s have shifted. So, although WAACA was a smaller organization, I actually don't think it had a fundamentally different issue than most of the other membership organizations who have to, maybe every 15 or 20 years, ask that question about relevance and mission and vision and purpose. As a historian, I don't

necessarily have a good answer [laughing] from looking at all of these organizations because the way that we prepare young people for the future now [and] the way that we have to prepare. It's not go to school, go to college, and you're all set and get involved in your community. It's go to school, go to college, work three or four jobs, end up with a lot of student loan debt, and don't get out from under it until maybe you're in your late fifties.

Florence Barlow: See that's what I mean. That's why it would be fun to be able to get with young people. What you were just saying makes a lot of sense. So it's a totally different time and you just brought up something I thought about. Maybe we had those organizations because we had nothing else. So, we got together and formed these organizations, so it was almost like we finally had something. Whereas we couldn't go out and join and if you weren't in a sorority –

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Like I have friends in the Links and the AKA. I just saw Cynthia the other day and she had on her AKA sweatshirt because [01:30:00] of Kamala. So if you weren't involved in those things then in your local neighborhoods, what you did was you got together with other people. Because even in WAACA, we had white members because we had a 501(c). So needless to say, anyone could join. And so you're right, and now I look at my grandson, who works five days a week. He and his sister came in this morning just to lay the brick for their dad and then they left. So, it was like, “Well, we’ve got things to do.” Now she's at Smith College, which we're looking forward to. But right now, she's online. She's not at school, [01:25:00] so things are different. They don't get as involved. But you're right. I think back to that now. That's probably why we did form these [organizations] – to try to make a difference. But you had to sort of be with the people who you were trying to make [a] difference with. Yeah, interesting.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: The issues are also different. So, I was wondering if you could say something about – you asked a question or you asked out loud. I think you said, “Are Windsor schools better?” And I think you were just asking out loud. So can you elaborate?

Florence Barlow: Well, what I meant was I do know some parents that still have children in school. But right now, it's a little tricky because of the pandemic. But the African Americans that I do know that have their children in school, guess what? These kids are all either straight A's, getting very good grades, [and] will definitely go on to college.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: So, it's not like I know anyone who's having babies or going to jail. Evidently, it must be going okay. We have Terrence Hill, who was a principal. He might become Superintendent of schools. I don't know how many African Americans we have in there anymore. I'm not involved. I could find out. But I know on the Board of Ed, we do have some wonderful African Americans. So yes, they are doing things. But as far as going into the school system now, I don't have any grandchildren in Windsor, so I don't know. One of my interviewers for the Historical Society has grandchildren in the Windsor school system, and she didn't seem to know much. But I don't know if that's just a grandma who doesn't know because I know she loves her grandchildren. So, I know things are better, but I really don't know totally what goes on anymore.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right. There's also this sense that when you want to make a change, the places [where] you make a change now are some of the mainstream organizations. So, you run for the seat on the Board of Education if you're interested in those kinds of issues and the PTOs and PTAs are falling apart.

Florence Barlow: Oh, they've definitely fallen apart. Yeah, I know people that are involved in those in Windsor and it's not good at all. Believe me, I donate a lot of money to the Windsor Education Foundation. I was on that board and the main purpose was to try to help students do better; get books [and] get whatever they needed to be able to go on field trips that cost money. This is extra money. So that's why I've stayed involved in all of those fundraisers. The Windsor Education Foundation is another great organization that does a lot of work with the schools in Windsor. There are still people out there that are fighting to try to make our school systems better, which means that we're not there yet.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Yeah. So I never wanted to run for a board because I'm a very honest person and I don't just agree with you just to make me feel better or you feel better or to win the election. I run it like it is. If you're wrong, you're wrong. I used to work with a guy and I said, "I don't understand why you really don't like people of color. Because with your curly hair, I'm sure somewhere in your background, there had to be someone." So [laughing] we would just talk about that all the time. That was years and years ago. But I do see a purpose that I know there are still people out there that are trying, and I don't hear a lot of bad things about the Windsor school system. But I don't know.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: I think if we mirror what is going on in the city; if you're not having a conversation about employment, training, health insurance, and childcare, [01:30:00] you don't serve any purpose to young people 18 to 30 because those are the challenges. They're young, they're broke, [and] they're underemployed. They have very little income. They have no assets. But joining these kinds of organizations [is] no longer being perceived as the way to address the no income, no asset, no childcare, no health insurance. Right?

Florence Barlow: That makes so much sense. Yes, I'm learning a lot from just talking to you. [laughing] But you're right, I know. That's why when I talked to my grandson, that's the same thing because I had sent him your – what's it called, EPOCH?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yeah. EPOCH¹, yeah.

Florence Barlow: Yeah, and see those are words that I don't even know. I go, "What the heck is that?" So I forwarded it to him because I had spoken about you, and sometimes I think he wants to say, "Grammy, right now I am just trying to pay my loans and my car payment. I don't have time for anything else." You know? I don't push him for anything. But I understand all of that because it is different and I think now, a lot of young people, the ones that aren't married with

¹ EPOCH stands for Engaged, Public, Oral and Community Histories and is an initiative run by Dr. Fiona Vernal at the University of Connecticut.

children, are just trying to get their lives together. Where we, don't forget, [when we] started these organizations, our kids were already like in upper elementary or going into junior high school. So they were old enough that if I had a meeting at 6:00 o'clock, you've had your dinner, your homework is done, Dad is home, and that's it. I could go. But now, I mean it's a different world. So I understand with young people and I think you're right. With organizations from our time, it's just a thing of the past.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right, and childcare now, I think I had a similar conversation about some of the athletic organizations trying to recruit young people and trying to reach out to the parents. But some of the young men who are running these organizations said, "If I continue to be involved with this organization the way that I am, I'm going to be divorced because my wife is not going to put up with me being gone Monday, Wednesday, Fridays, and Saturdays because I have to be here to support her. Because she's a professional and I'm a professional and we all have our activities." So I think for the people that you would want to reach out to and help in the community, they don't necessarily see these organizations as the ones that can assist them because they're focusing more on sort of basic community needs, right? So, organizations that can address health, welfare, access, employment, training, jobs, anything like that. And then the people who would run the organizations, a lot of those women and a lot of those men have different kinds of burdens in their professional jobs that [don't] necessarily free up their time. So, I think it's all of that.

Florence Barlow: It is all that. As a matter of fact, I'm on the board of the Windsor Food and Fuel Bank in Windsor, and money is no object. People have been so generous with us with money. But again, we need to have more people that shows the town of Windsor, which means we need more people [and] diversity. I'm the only African American. We have two men and they're both white. All the people there are wonderful. I get so tired. If I hear that word one more time, I will scream. [People say], "We need more diversity." I have asked people, "Would you like to be on the board?" "Are you kidding? I'm retired now. I don't want to have to go to meetings." [laughing] Because the youngest person on our board, she's an attorney. She still works, but she's probably in her fifties. There is no one under the age of 40, you know? So that's what I'm saying, and the young lady who was, [01:35:00] she and her husband just sold their house in Windsor and they're going to be moving to Vermont because that's where they always wanted to live, and I guess her job is transferring her. So there goes the youngest person we had. But guess what? She has a show dog. So when it comes to if we have to do a fundraiser and it's on a Saturday; well, if she's showing her dog, guess what?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: She's not going to be there.

Florence Barlow: There's nothing against her. It's a different way of life now. So I really believe that there are some organizations that are just a thing of the past. I know even [by] speaking to a couple of people that are still involved with their sororities. "Golly, we used to have these wonderful teas, we'd get all dressed up. We'd have all these beautiful fundraisers, or we had the red hats, and we did all of that." All of those people were probably either older than me or dead. Then again, I don't think young people have the time. It's not that they're not interested in helping others, but I really think a lot of them would really rather just give you a check than say, "Okay,

I'll be on your board and come to a meeting every Thursday or once a month on Thursday at 4:30." No, that's a thing of the past, I think.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: I do think so as well, and its mission, vision, [and] purpose. And even as someone who is both interested in this history and [wants] to be a part of particular organizations, there's an opportunity cost that doesn't justify it, right? And so if one or two organizations you commit to because you can't be involved –

Florence Barlow: You know, it's like with the Historical Society with their centennial coming up. Getting all this information on the Windsor Afro-American Civic Association, which was an organization in Windsor with some wonderful people. So next year when you're planning this, is anyone going to say, "I can't wait to go and see that." I mean, let's just be in the real world here. You never know. I mean there might be. We haven't really delved into it yet because I would love to talk to Iva, and I haven't gotten to that point yet because she's the historian also for Archer Memorial Church. Now there is Archer Memorial, which is a church that was started by slaves. There should be so much information and people should just be saying, "I have got to go visit that." Is there a reason why you're really not interested or haven't delved into it? I don't know what the answer is to be honest with you. [laughing] That's your new job, so you're going to find out the answers for us.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yeah, I have to figure out how to get people to be [involved], and that's also part of the problem with the profession. We're living with so much history, but we didn't do a good job of capturing it at the time that it was happening. So we're in a race against time, right, to talk to founders and people who are still around. But also, we have to make history interesting. We have to make history interesting.

Florence Barlow: Exactly, and I am finding that out. If you don't remember or it wasn't that it wasn't important. It's just people would say to me, "How come you don't know more about your family?" Well, I'm not saying it [wasn't important]. When I say it wasn't important, that sounds really bad. But evidently, it wasn't. Someone just asked me, "How did you feel growing up, not knowing who your dad was?" Duh. So, I didn't know who my dad was. What was I supposed to do? Go and kill myself or stop my life? I mean, evidently, it didn't. [laughing] I don't have any answers. So I said, "Well, it never occurred to me because I knew my aunt and uncle loved me. My mother and my grandma loved me and so evidently, it didn't break me." So, it's things like that. With WAACA, the reason to me why WAACA was so important is because I always felt like I was part of getting more young ladies involved [01:40:00] and just with other things in Windsor. The same way I would feel today. I mean when I went down to the homeless shelter today, I saw a young lady there that I knew [when she was] a child and she was volunteering, passing out food. So I said, "Oh, that is so cool. Her grandmother would be so happy," because she was giving back with her church, which means she's still [active]. That type of thing. So it's just the little tiny things. Sometimes it's a tiny seed, which no one else will remember. It'll be interesting if you talk to other members of WAACA to see how much they remember that's either different from what I remember or a different spin-off from it.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Did you guys ever actually have that reflection in the organization to say, “What are we going to do to make sure we're around much longer,” when you saw that other people weren't joining or did it just –

Florence Barlow: No, no. Everybody said, “I'm sorry I can't come to meetings. I can't be bothered. I don't have the time.” Seriously, we never sat down. We would talk individually to see what we could do, and basically at that point, they would say, “Why don't we just get together and have a cookout?” That's not the same as running an organization with rules and things where you have to report the IRS and have fundraisers in order to do something. It's not like just having a cookout in the backyard where we sit around and talk about the good old days. So, it had got to that point. Once in a while in the last few years, I'd run into someone and they'd say, “We got to get all the members of WAACA who are still around together.” Well, why don't you do it? So they wait on Florence to do it or that type of thing. You know what I'm saying? And there are only a few of us now. I mean a couple of people got in touch with me when my son died because they saw it and they called me. One person I hadn't talked to in probably 10-15 years, and it was only because they saw that my son had died. So, it's that type of thing. So I guess we never did sit down with anyone specifically and say, “We have to keep this organization together.” Why? I don't know why. I know that Viv and I decided that we weren't going to do it any longer, so it was left up to me to try to finish it all off with the state of Connecticut.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And close it out.

Florence Barlow: Just close it. Yes, to close it out.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Okay. So for the purposes of structuring this, what would you say were the key accomplishments of the organization?

Florence Barlow: To me, it was opening up the door for more young African Americans to see that their lives in Windsor were just as important as anyone else's, and you could do anything you wanted to because those young ladies who ran for Miss Shad Derby, kids that we helped not necessarily get scholarships because we couldn't get the scholarships. But we could open up and have financial workshops so that they could speak to other people that could help them get the right information to do that because if you look in the last few years [and] when you talk to young Black people especially who are doing better, they are looking at going back and helping someone else. Like my granddaughter. She has a 15-year-old cousin who she's trying to keep on a straight arrow because she wants to give her the same opportunity she has.

Florence Barlow: Not that my granddaughter has wealthy parents or wealthy grandparents, but it's that she has learned so much in the Hartford school system that she can help others do a little bit better. So that's what I think. That the accomplishments of WAACA [were] to be able to open the doors for some of those young people [so] that they were able to reach the right people to help them to make the next step forward. And basically to me, the most important thing at that time was to get them through school and into a good secondary school or college. Even if they went into the service or any program but something after high school. Just don't go out and get a job at Pratt and Whitney. Not that there's anything wrong with that. We had one young man who became a plumber. He's done very well. [01:45:00] He has his own business now. But he did go

on to technical school. Our son went to technical school. That type of thing. So, I think that was the accomplishment that we did to help change Windsor.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: And what organization are you a part of now that you would describe as vibrant or still vibrant?

Florence Barlow: Oh, well the Historical Society, Mary's Place, the Windsor Food and Fuel Bank. But those are all programs that are giving back. I don't know if you know much about Mary's Place.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: No, what's Mary's Place?

Florence Barlow: Mary's Place is an organization that's for grieving families. Denise D'Ascenzo was always our MC and we loved her to pieces. She was always the MC every year. And of course, this year with the pandemic, they had to close down, too. But these are all kids who have either lost a sibling or a parent and it's an organization that the kids go [to]. Carmen Funeral Home is part of that, and you can go in for counseling. It's a beautiful organization. The Windsor Food and Fuel Bank, that's what it is. We give the people who are in need, whether it's food or if they need money for basic needs. Only for basic needs. They can't go on and buy a car or anything. And right now, we're starting our program. It's called Project Santa, and that's part of First Town Downtown. A letter goes out to all the kids in the school. If you qualify, a family will adopt a child and you get a wish list, and you buy them their presents. So that's what we're basically right in the middle of. That's one of my favorites. I love that. We're not sure how we're going to do that with the pandemic right now because last year we had 354 kids.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Oh wow.

Florence Barlow: I always adopt. Usually, I adopt a family, but I can't afford it anymore. So I'm adopting one child, which could still run you a little bit of money, especially if they want a winter coat or new boots or something. It's okay, but it's programs like that. But I love working with organizations like the Windsor Food and Fuel Bank. We had a fundraiser last week where Ace Hardware, in Windsor, you buy a bucket for \$5. The organization got the \$5, you take your bucket inside, whatever you put in your bucket, [and] you got 20% off. Well, there was a picture of us on the front page. \$2033 we made that day. That's just people that feel fortunate that they're doing okay. They're not in that line at Whitney coming out of Rentschler Field to get food, so they feel like things are okay. So they give you \$5 or they give you \$100. One family gave us a check for \$600. These are people that feel like, "I'm blessed. There's nothing else I can do right now, but I can help." And I think that was always what we were trying to do. None of us had a lot of money where we could put someone through college. But we knew that we could help someone maybe find the right source to go to college.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right, right.

Florence Barlow: That type of thing. Sometimes it's who you know, and I think that's probably what happened with us a lot of times. I mean I have a picture of Senator Blumenthal with Vivian and I. It's a great picture of us with him, and they said, "Did you know him? I said, "Well, he was only attorney general then. He wasn't a senator." Now if you were to go back and ask

Senator Blumenthal or Gayle King about Windsor Afro-American Civic Association, would she even remember?

Dr. Fiona Vernal: I don't know.

Florence Barlow: It would be okay if she didn't. I mean she remembers living in Connecticut, I'm sure. But it doesn't matter. But at the time, she was a reporter at WFSB, and we needed an MC, and she said yes, she would do it. So, it was a great day. That was a huge fundraiser, and we were able to help so many kids. We were able to give \$2000-\$3000 toward books for college. So it accomplished something. Not that it made the history books or anything. [01:50:00] But we did accomplish something.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: You did and I think it's important to document and record that because I'm sure the organization made a lot of difference in a lot of young people's lives, right, as they're heading off to college. I guess the last question I wanted to ask you was about the role of women in these types of organizations and women's community activism.

Florence Barlow: Well, I think some things will never change. It will always be women because when you look, even with WAACA, we did have couples. My husband was never involved [and] never wanted part of any organization, but he was always an introvert. The women were the ones who always stepped up and got the job done, you know? I seem to look around and I really believe that we're still going in that direction. But now, I can only go by what I see when I read articles, or I look around me. I mean a young lady that was standing here today that is a senior in law school at UConn, she has two sisters who both have done very well. They're all females. I look back and this is not only African Americans. Other couples here in Windsor, all of their girls have done very well. So, I don't know if it's still from moms and grandmas that always try to [help them]. With WAACA, it was women that were basically the ones to do the hard work and find good speakers or [look] into a source to get some information. Maybe the men would be there to drag the tables and chairs around, but it was always the women who basically were at the forefront.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: I don't know if that's our future. I don't know how that works anymore.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: I think we'll see because you said something earlier about women's life cycle, right, and where their children are in the school system. Like whether they're now in elementary or upper or middle school so that they can be a bit more available to do these kinds of activities, because most of the young women that I know who have children below the age of 10, it's difficult to get involved in those kinds of organizations.

Florence Barlow: Exactly, and I look at my nieces and I spoke to both of them because one just had the baby yesterday. She's a financial advisor for Wells Fargo. She has a very good job. She's a female. She has a wonderful husband who's my nephew, but she's sort of like the main [person]. It's "we do things this way and it's done this way," and they've gotten things done. My other niece also works for an investment firm in New Jersey. It's the same thing at her house. They both have good educations, but she sat at a forefront. She's sort of the leader. She has two boys in

college. They're both at Rutgers, but it seems to me today, and I look around. It still seems to me that females are still [the leader]. Even with young children because both these girls have young children, but they are all working from home right now. But in the old days, you would say the man's the breadwinner, right? Even though everybody is a breadwinner, it's still the woman who, even with small children, she gets these little extra things done. But not necessarily have time to go, like I said, to a meeting at 6 o'clock on a Thursday night, and it might not be necessary anymore.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right.

Florence Barlow: Maybe these organizations won't be necessary. We need to find another way of doing things now.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Right, because I couldn't envision it and probably did very poorly. For what purpose would I be the secretary, treasurer, or the officer in any organization right now because I may have about an hour, an hour and a half to attend a meeting. But to then be an officer, or to plan a fundraiser, or to continue, I'm not sure.

Florence Barlow: There you go. Exactly. [01:55:00] So I think sometimes we're living in the past because one of my favorite sayings is now, I try not to say, "Well, in our day we used to..." You know? Because our day is gone, and you can't go back, and I really don't think it's necessary. I look at you. It's 4 o'clock on a Saturday. Once upon a time, you would be on your way to an island for the weekend [laughing] or you would be off doing something. Mind you, it's a pandemic right now. You couldn't do it anyway. But I'm thinking, "Here she is, the director in a college and you're doing interviews." But I know this is part of your job, but I can't say, "Well, when I was your age, I would have been living with such and such a thing," and you totally seem to be enjoying it because I can see you love history.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: But you hit the nail on the head because I might love my job, but it is Saturday and I'm working.

Florence Barlow: There you go.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Which means I can't go to a meeting today, even though it may have been set on Saturday to be convenient. Now you saved me because I ended up going to a meeting this morning at 10 because you were gone at 10. [laughing] So I changed my –

Florence Barlow: Your whole Saturday has been spent in meetings and doing things for your job, and people will say, "Well, why is she doing it?" Well, first of all, you might have college loans or you might have a mortgage and it is your job. So, you if you love your job and you want to do the best, you have to do what you have to do. But you wouldn't want to say, "Oh gosh. Monday, now I have to go to the meeting at the PTA at 2:00 o'clock." No. [laughing] This is what I mean, so it's totally different.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Well, thank you. Thank you for taking the time.

Florence Barlow: Well, I hope I answered your questions, or I hope I opened the door.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Well yes because, as I said, this is the baseline interview and I'm definitely going to be relying on you to help me think about how we capture this history. Then how do we communicate it in a way that makes people interested because even if we're living in a different time, even if our organizations are changing, you and I both know what happens when people don't have a good sense of history and a good historical consciousness, right?

Florence Barlow: Yes, exactly, and like I said, I wanted to speak to you first before I went any further with talking to a couple of other people. So, I won't discuss anything. I'll just say I spoke to you and see what other information [there is]. But maybe once you get a chance to look at some of those articles, that might give you a little bit more info, and you might even know some of those people that are in some of those.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: Yeah, I took a look and then my mind is thinking about, "Okay, how do you present this? How do you tell a story?"

Florence Barlow: Well, we'll see how much more info we can find. Something else to help you.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right. Thank you so much Ms. Barlow.

Florence Barlow: Thank you so very much. It was wonderful talking to you, and we'll talk soon.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: All right, take care.

Florence Barlow: Enjoy the rest of the weekend.

Dr. Fiona Vernal: You too. Good luck with your surgery.

Florence Barlow: Thank you. Bye-bye.