



Jennie Dixon:  
WAACA Oral History

January 13, 2021

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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:** All right, we are officially recording. It is January 13th, 2021. This is Dr. Fiona Vernal from the University of Connecticut, conducting an oral history with Ms. Jennie Dixon on behalf of the Windsor Historical Society. Ms. Dixon, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. We appreciate you taking the time to share your history and information with us, and if you could give your consent at the top of the interview to say, “I, Jennie Dixon, consent to have this interview conducted.” Can you give your consent?

**Jennie Dixon:** I agree to have this interview conducted.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you do it a second time? It trailed off a little bit.

**Jennie Dixon:** I, Jennie Dixon, consent to have this interview conducted.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right, thank you. Can you start by telling me a little bit about your childhood and your family background?

**Jennie Dixon:** I was born in Jamaica. Pretty typical Jamaican background. I migrated to the United States in 1968 to join my parents, who were already residing in Connecticut.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you say a little bit about how your parents got an opportunity to come here?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, my mother came for a job opportunity. She was a domestic worker. Later my father joined her, and then I joined, followed by the rest of my siblings – a brother and two sisters.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Where in Jamaica are you guys from?

**Jennie Dixon:** Saint Mary.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, and can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to grow up in Saint Mary?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, actually I lived for a time in Saint Mary, but I was really born in Saint Ann. And then my mother moved to Saint Mary and so she moved me with her there. I lived for a time in Saint Ann, then Saint Mary, and then I moved back to Saint Ann during the latter years of my primary school education. At that time, I [won] a scholarship to [attend] high school in Kingston. I went to St. Andrew Technical High School in Kingston, and upon graduating from there, I attended Mico Teachers College. [*now Mico University*]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Did you always want to be a teacher?

**Jennie Dixon:** Not necessarily, but it was one of the few [career] opportunities that one had at the time. If you were a girl, it was pretty much you're going to be in the nursing profession or the teaching profession. Also, the teacher's college offered free tuition. So, without a lot of financial resources, that's probably where I was going to go. That was the opportunity available to me.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right. What was your parents' occupation in Jamaica?

**Jennie Dixon:** My father was a carpenter, and my mother was a stay-at-home mother. She [got] a job when [the older children were in high school]. But for most of the time, she was a stay-at-home mother.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And then do you have a sense of what your connection to foreign was? Like had other family members gone to the United States or England, for example?

**Jennie Dixon:** Not really, no. My mother had the opportunity to come to the United States. She took the opportunity and then brought us here.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you know how the domestic work opportunity came about? Like what kind of network or who did she know?

**Jennie Dixon:** I have to think back now, it's [been] so many years. But I think [00:05:00] some friend of hers worked for an American landowner with a house in Jamaica in the Ocho Rios area, and she got to learn of Americans who were looking for domestic workers. I think that was how she found out about it.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, and her friend was a domestic worker as well?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What was your mother's name?

**Jennie Dixon:** My mother is still alive. Her name is Carmen Garvey.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Carmen Garvey. Where is your mother?

**Jennie Dixon:** She lives in Windsor.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Ah, I think I should interview her as well. [laughing] Do you think she would be up to that?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'd have to ask her. She's sick and shut-in now and has been so for several years. So that could create a problem.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** On the phone. We could do it as a phone interview.

**Jennie Dixon:** She's also accustomed to using Zoom.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Oh, she's a big Zoom [user]. Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** Oh yeah, she does that for church and there are times when we have had family gatherings over Zoom, and she participates. So, she's comfortable with Zoom.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Oh, all right. Well, I will –

**Jennie Dixon:** The major problem here is that she [does not hear] well.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right. Then we can see where that goes if she would be willing. All right, so how old were you in 1968 when you came?

**Jennie Dixon:** 21.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And was it something you were excited about? How long did you find out ahead of time that you were coming?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, I graduated from Mico and I did a year of internship, which was a required part of the training, and that was an absolutely miserable year of my life. [laughing]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Oh no! Was the internship where they placed you in a school?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes. It was in an area that I was not accustomed to and so I had a difficult time during that year.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** When you say not accustomed, do you mean – like was it in a rural area or just too far from home? Can you explain?

**Jennie Dixon:** It's the people that lived in the area. There was a lot of crime in the area and that actually came over to the school community, and I just didn't have a really good experience with the students that I had to teach, and I really had no choice. So, I completed the year and was looking for an opportunity to get away.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Was this in Kingston as well? Your placement?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes, it was.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And when you –

**Jennie Dixon:** In Denham Town.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** In Denham town, okay. What grade [did you teach]?

**Jennie Dixon:** Denham Town Junior Secondary School.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What grade were you assigned?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm trying to think now. The grading was [different in Jamaica]. I think rather than saying the grade, [I'll say] they were 13- and 14-year-olds.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, 13. And once your mom had come to the United States, did you know that it was a matter of time before you would come up?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes, I knew that.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Were you excited?

**Jennie Dixon:** I wouldn't say so. Not necessarily. I was more thinking about what lies ahead, what was ahead of me, [and] what I [wanted] to do, because I did like teaching. It was just the environment that created the problem for me.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, all right.

**Jennie Dixon:** I thought I would continue in the teaching field, but I didn't. Not immediately.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Did your mom do or say anything specific to prepare you for coming here since you were already 21?

**Jennie Dixon:** I would say not. I had to fend for myself and I really didn't know what to expect. I didn't know too many people here. I had no mentors, so I was just out there trying to find my own way.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** But I did know that [00:10:00] I would return to college.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** How did you know that?

**Jennie Dixon:** Because education is very important in our family, we all knew that we would keep going and that we needed more education. It was available. Probably didn't know what it would take, but I know that that was a goal.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Where are you in relation to your siblings?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm the first.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** You're the first? And then your siblings are how much older?

**Jennie Dixon:** [We are] two to four years apart.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** About four years apart, okay. And when you came in 1968, where did you come to?

**Jennie Dixon:** It was to Hartford.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** In Hartford.

**Jennie Dixon:** Where my mother was living.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Where was that? What was the address?

**Jennie Dixon:** It was on Magnolia Street in Hartford.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Was it an apartment or a house?

**Jennie Dixon:** It was a house. [My mom] rented a portion of it.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Is it on top of each other or side by side?

**Jennie Dixon:** No, [second floor].

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right, but I meant is it –

**Jennie Dixon:** One [floor] above the other.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** One story above the other, okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** Two-family house.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What was your impression of Hartford when you came in '68? What time in '68 did you come?

**Jennie Dixon:** September.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** September, okay. And were people talking about the unrest in the country and in the city?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes, and there was some burning that had gone on or was going on.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Were you able to get any information about the context of that?

**Jennie Dixon:** Not that much. Maybe what I got on the evening news. I guess I wasn't very curious either.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** How about in the context of the assassination of Dr. King?

**Jennie Dixon:** I knew that it had happened when people were talking about it, but I really didn't know a lot about the black experience in the United States. It wasn't until later that I started to learn the history of black people in the United States.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right, yeah. That had happened around early April, and so you came in September. What were the other impressions that you had of Hartford? What stood out to you about the city, or what was memorable for you when you came, compared to where you were coming from?

**Jennie Dixon:** Perhaps the weather. [laughing]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** It's not dead winter yet in September.

**Jennie Dixon:** But to me, it was. My mother bought me my first coat and I was wearing a fur coat from the beginning of October. [laughing] And I remember leaving the front door to the apartment open when I'd leave. I had come out of the house without the coat and then I got outside, and I said, "Oh, it's cold." So I had to go back into the house to get my coat. I even had pains in my shoulders from that fake fur coat, wearing it so often.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** [laughing] Was there something particular about the fur that your mom or you liked?

**Jennie Dixon:** It was synthetic. It wasn't real fur.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And can you talk to me about how you settled down that first few months, you know, September, October, into the holidays in 1968?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, you're asking me to go back way now, and I don't think there was anything that really struck me that hard because I was with family and so that made a lot of difference.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Did all of you come at the same time?

**Jennie Dixon:** No, no. My other siblings followed.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** Don't remember the [00:15:00] exact month, but it was less than a year after [me that] they came. My sister, the one [after] me, graduated from high school and then came. And the other two, they were in [still] grammar school.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, and what had your father settled into as far as a job when he came?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, he got a job with a manufacturing company as a carpenter, and he worked there until he retired.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you know where the company was?

**Jennie Dixon:** I think it was Jacob's Manufacturing.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. What town?

**Jennie Dixon:** I can't tell you. I don't remember what town it was, but they later moved to Bloomfield.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Did he move to Bloomfield?

**Jennie Dixon:** I think that's about the time that he retired.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, and what about your mother? Did she stay with one employer?

**Jennie Dixon:** No, she had a number of employers, and she actually completed her high school diploma. Then she went on to college to a community college and took courses in accounting.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you say that again because the video paused when you were saying that.

**Jennie Dixon:** About my mother?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yes.

**Jennie Dixon:** She completed her high school degree here and then she went on to take courses at – what was it? Capital Community College.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And what did she settle into as a career?

**Jennie Dixon:** She did accounting at the college, and so she had a number of jobs that utilized her accounting skills. She retired from Travelers [Insurance] in their customer service department.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Retired from Travelers.

**Jennie Dixon:** I think she also worked at Colts [Firearms].

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, and then how long did you guys live at that address on Magnolia Street?

**Jennie Dixon:** I can't remember how long. It was not very long because we ended up purchasing our own house in Hartford, and so we moved to our own house.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Where did [they] purchase a house?

**Jennie Dixon:** In the Blue Hills area. On Hebron Street.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Is that where she still lives?

**Jennie Dixon:** Oh no, she lives in Windsor. She's been in Windsor now for a long time. Over 30 years.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** So, when did she leave the Hebron Street house?

**Jennie Dixon:** [In the 1970s], she moved from Hebron Street to the Windsor house in which she lives now.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** Continues to live.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** The Hebron Street house, did it stay in the family or was it an outright sale to purchase the Windsor house?

**Jennie Dixon:** It was sold.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** It was sold. And did you move to Hebron Street as well?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right, and how long did you live there?

**Jennie Dixon:** Back to the same thing, I'm really not good at keeping up those kinds of records. I probably should.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Oh, it doesn't have to be exact. I just meant, you know, in '68. Just a general outline. So in '68 you guys lived on Magnolia [and] in the '70s, you were living on Hebron.

**Jennie Dixon:** And then I got married and I had my own apartment in Hartford – Hartford South End. Then I bought a house in Bloomfield. I lived there for a few years and then moved to Windsor.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Did you sell? You sold your house in Bloomfield and bought a different house in Windsor?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right. So can you talk about what brought you to the South End of Hartford?

**Jennie Dixon:** We found an affordable apartment and didn't mind the area. It was convenient.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And then when you were looking for your first house, what attracted you to Bloomfield versus Windsor or another town? Or Hartford?



**Jennie Dixon:** I knew several people that lived in Bloomfield, and I did find an affordable house in Bloomfield. [00:20:00] So we moved there.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right, and what prompted the sale of the Bloomfield house?

**Jennie Dixon:** [By then I had a child and] I needed more room.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. Did you know that you were going to leave Bloomfield, or [were you] just sort of looking at different houses in Bloomfield in Windsor?

**Jennie Dixon:** I was only looking in Windsor at the time when I knew that I needed to get a larger house. Actually, I had a friend who had a brother that was a real estate agent and sold lots of houses in Windsor, so that's what prompted me.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And is it the growth of your family that made you need a bigger house?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'd say yes.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** How many children did you end up having?

**Jennie Dixon:** One.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. Can you talk to me about the differences that you saw or what kind of community life you ended up having in Hartford once you settled down in the '70s and kind of got to know the place a little better?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, I was never one. I'd say our entire family never [wanted] to be involved in a lot of community activities or join lots of organizations.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** So give me a sense of what your life was like in 1975. Like where were you working? What were you doing? How had you adjusted to American life?

**Jennie Dixon:** 1975 I started working at Aetna in Information Technology. I stayed there for 14 years, and then I was laid off, [and] got caught up in the economic downturn. Then from there, I went back into teaching. I had an opportunity to do teaching, so I got a teaching job at Central Connecticut State School of Business. I stayed there for three years and then I went back into Information Technology.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** How had information technology changed in the arc of the time that you were involved in it?

**Jennie Dixon:** In terms of?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yeah, like what did information technology mean when you first started? By the time you got back into it, right, it's after 15 years or so. What had changed? Because I imagined –

**Jennie Dixon:** No, I didn't really. It was only [about four] years before I went back in because I stayed at Central for three years.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Oh, I understand. What I'm saying is [what changed] in the 14 years?

**Jennie Dixon:** There were more women in the field.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, more women.

**Jennie Dixon:** Certainly, and maybe more people of color in the field.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And what were you actually doing at the job? Like when you say you were teaching, right, I know exactly what you're doing. But when you say information technology?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, I started off as a programmer, and then I became a systems analyst. I've had several types of jobs in information technology, from programming to project [management].

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right.

**Jennie Dixon:** I've been in systems design, coding, managing projects, [and] working as a consultant or as an employee. So, I've been in just about all the different areas of information technology.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And when you were at Central, you taught business?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes, because my degrees are in business and that [was] my area of interest there. I also had a small business of my own. So I was able to combine my teaching skills with my business knowledge, and so that was how I got the position to teach in the School of Business.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you tell me a little bit about your business? [00:25:00]

**Jennie Dixon:** It's changed over the years, but I do still have it now. I'm in the financial services business, so I do some small business consulting. At one period of time, I was in the investment business because I'm a Chartered Financial Consultant [ChFC®] by professional designation. And so I was doing wealth management consulting [and] investment consulting for a while. I don't do management consulting anymore because I no longer have those licenses. I'm more concerned now [with] financial literacy education, [especially for women], and that's really where my focus is today.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Especially for women, and can you talk to me a little bit about – so you chose Windsor for a bigger space. Can you talk to me a little bit about how you came to get involved with your community in Windsor?

**Jennie Dixon:** I had a neighbor who was one of the founding members of WAACA, and he invited me to become involved and I got involved. The more I got involved, I realized that something that I could do could help to make a difference. I believed in the mission of WAACA and so I did most of my community work through WAACA.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. What was it about WAACA's mission that appealed to you?

**Jennie Dixon:** The idea of getting people of color to be involved in the community [and] to provide them [with] information about the political arena. So, it's more about educating people, especially [those] of color, to participate in their community, which was not happening before

then. There were a number of issues that needed to be addressed, like the issue of voting, how politics works, and how one would need to prepare oneself to get involved in politics.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** How long after moving, like just approximately, how long after moving to Windsor did you get involved in WAACA?

**Jennie Dixon:** Maybe about five or six years. By then, I had a child in the school system as well. That was another place where I started because I wanted to make sure that my child was [getting] a good education. Also being a teacher [inaudible] I should say, we know how important it is for the family to be involved in the education process and not just rely on the teacher. So I needed to be involved and I knew it was the right thing to do. Then I also got to find out that many of the kids, especially those in high school, were not getting adequate information to help them plan their careers or even see what interests they had and how to develop those interests. So I started to be a regular visitor at the schools, much so that when my daughter [left Windsor schools], I felt I should have a seat somewhere in one of the classrooms.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What do you mean?

**Jennie Dixon:** Because I was a regular face at the school. I was not overbearing, but they knew me, and I would always advocate for my child. I knew her better than anybody else and could be the best advocate for her. There were times when I saw things going on at the school that I thought [00:30:00] needed some explanation, especially as it affected kids of color. I felt that I had to get involved. So, I would seek information and I also knew through WAACA some teachers that worked [in] the school [system]. [These people] would guide me. "This is what you do, or this is what you don't do. This is who you speak to." And I would follow up on that advice. Then I realized that other kids also needed the same kind of advocacy and that's when, as a member of WAACA, I started to organize workshops.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Organize workshops on?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm trying to think of it. I had career events where I would invite [professionals] from the community to come in and talk to high school students. I would organize financial aid workshops. Members of WAACA would mentor students at the high school. So, there were a number of events to help the children along and to help plan their futures and their careers because I didn't think the guidance counselors were doing a good job. I mean that was my impression and I had agreement from other people as well. So, we brought people in who knew how to guide these children.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** You said earlier that you didn't necessarily see yourself as someone who got involved in community events. Can you talk about more community activities? Can you talk about how that shifted for you with WAACA?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, once [I was] introduced to advocacy, I found that I had something to offer and there are people who needed that kind of information that I have, which is the principle I go on. Even today, I feel that I have a lot of knowledge in a lot of areas and people want that information because they'd ask me. And so I felt my duty to provide that information. I see that as my gift. Several years ago, I think it was actually in the '80s, I wrote a book called *How to*

*Make Ends Meet*. But I was not a marketer of books, and I didn't know a lot other than I wrote what I knew and what I knew worked and my background was in finances as well. So I could do that, and I got lots of good reviews on it and people asking for it. And so right now, I'm actually working on revising that book to get it out to a wider [audience], especially women of color. And I think COVID-19 has even shown more of the need for that kind of information. So that's where I'm focusing right now.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you elaborate on how you think COVID has sort of revealed the need for that information?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, let's take something as simple as people having an emergency fund, which I think one reporter said that most people don't have. It's the lower income people [that] don't have as much as \$400.00 in an emergency fund, and we've seen how many people have lost their jobs. We've seen how long it's taking for them to get back into the job market. So that creates a lot of financial stress [and] financial pressures. So even something like that, teaching somebody how and why you should have an emergency fund, is information that I think people need. Another area that I'm seeing a lot of need for is in the area of estate planning, and COVID has shown us a lot [00:35:00] there where we've had as many people die as we've had. And many of these people are people of color, people of lower income, and they think maybe a will is all that estate planning is. But there's so much more to it that everybody needs to know and to do and to prepare because you don't know when you'll need that. And I know I have that information, and I also have a skill of making things simple and easy to read, which is something that I think is a gift to me. So not only do I have the knowledge, but I can make it readable and understandable to people, and that's one way that I can help especially people of color.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Earlier when you said that you weren't getting involved in community activities, is there a specific way that it could have been pitched to you for you to get involved when you were in Hartford?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm really not sure. It was more about I had particular goals and I wanted to go after those goals and coming up in a family that really didn't get involved in a lot of community activity, I didn't know what the need was or what [I had] to offer. So that's probably why I didn't get involved. My thing was, I needed to go back to school. I needed to get more qualified and not community activity.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** But then as I got introduced to what that was and what advocacy looked like, then I realized that I had something to offer, and [that] I could make a difference.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What was Windsor like by the time you had gotten involved in WAACA in terms of the racial makeup of the community?

**Jennie Dixon:** I don't have any numbers for you but each year, the population was growing. If you know about West Indians, we tend to move to communities where there are other West Indians. So, as you had a few moving in, you had others moving in and you might move on the street where you were the only Jamaican or maybe even the only person of color. But then soon,

you would find other people of color moving in. Or if there was a house that became vacant, you would tell somebody who would need one. So that was really what I saw; that as the opportunities were there, people were taking advantage of them. And also the school system, I think, was pretty good compared to any around, and so that's also important to many people. So that was a drawing card as well.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** When you first moved to Windsor, what was your street like in terms of the racial makeup? In terms of your neighbors?

**Jennie Dixon:** Mostly white. Very few of color. I do remember my daughter; she was like 3 years old then and the other kids that were neighbors that she would go to play with were all white. Then one day she came home to me and said, "Mom, why am I not white? How come I'm not white?" Because all the other kids were white. She said it innocently, but I know that was a teaching moment for me to explain differences among people. The neighborhood changed by the time I left it. I'm living in a different area now, which is integrated.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What street were you living on in Windsor when your daughter was younger?

**Jennie Dixon:** Tamarack. Tamarack Drive.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Lived on Tamarack Drive. And then what was the motivation for moving within Windsor again?

**Jennie Dixon:** I just needed a new house. The thing is, I moved to this brand-new house and it got to the point [00:40:00] where it was in maintenance mode. This needed fixing, that needed fixing. And the way that we did it in my family, at least some of us, is, "Gee, let somebody else take care of those problems. We'll just go get a new house." And I wanted my daughter to stay in the same school.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** So you've only moved to two houses in Windsor, right? The house is the one you're living in now?

**Jennie Dixon:** That's correct.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right, and can you say a little bit about stepping into homeownership for the first time? Did you face any particular kinds of challenges?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'd say no. That was in Bloomfield.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right. So, there were no challenges there.

**Jennie Dixon:** No, I didn't find any challenges, and the street was mostly people of color. No problem with neighbors. We took pride in our neighborhood.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** You said you took pride in your neighborhood?

**Jennie Dixon:** Everybody did.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Were they West Indians and African Americans? Both?

**Jennie Dixon:** Both.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And when you say you took pride in your neighborhood, what did that mean? The garden? The back, like, what did that [mean]? How did that manifest itself?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, making sure that your property was kept up. That was pretty much it. We'd look out for each other.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What does that mean, though? What are you looking out for? The kids or just?

**Jennie Dixon:** The kids, the adults. I mean it could be as much as watching your neighbor's house if they needed you to do that.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. If they're out of town, something like that?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yep, yep.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And in terms of moving to Windsor, no particular challenges there?

**Jennie Dixon:** I would say [no]. Except the first street I moved on, I had some white people moving there who explained that as long as they had a neighbor that was of a different color, they would keep moving. We had people like that on the street.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** You say they explained that. How did you hear that?

**Jennie Dixon:** From other neighbors.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** We saw it manifest itself. Pretty soon, they'd move away.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, and did Windsor make any particular impression on you? Since you are now a mature woman who's assured of what she's doing with her life. You have a family, you're married, [and] you've already owned a home. So, did Windsor make a particular impression on you from that vantage point?

**Jennie Dixon:** It's a community that I like. I've been here for so many years. My daughter grew up here. She went to Windsor High School, but she did well and so she got into a fairly decent college. I think it provided a good foundation for her. But as I said, it was not without my intervention or making sure that she was getting what she needed. That's why I said to you before that I was known on campus. [laughing] But the thing is if she had a project to do, I, being a teacher, even if I didn't know the subject matter, I can tell an A paper from a D paper. And if it's something that I thought was at least an A paper or certainly a B and she came home with a D, then somebody would need to explain to me why that was. And there were many instances of that.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And who was the neighbor who got you involved in WAACA?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, he's deceased now. But his name was Guy Jacobs.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. [00:45:00]

**Jennie Dixon:** He was on the town council at one time.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you talk about the longevity of the organization and organizations like it?

**Jennie Dixon:** Actually, I don't know many more organizations like it, and it's been so long since we no longer exist that some things are pretty fuzzy. But I think we made an important impact [on] the community. We were known to help get people included in the workings of government and the workings of the school system. I think that the first president of the Board of Education was a former president of our organization, a woman of color. So, matter of fact, there were two women of color that came from our organization that became president of the Board of Education.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And you think that's a direct result of being involved in WAACA and advocating?

**Jennie Dixon:** I think so. I certainly learned more about the political process than I would have if I hadn't been in that organization. I chose not to run for office, but it was not for lack of encouragement. I didn't see myself in any political office. Still don't see myself there. But I did learn a lot from other people there. And there were times in Windsor [when] we had problems with the police, and WAACA, as a voice of the community, was able to bring in the Chief of Police and express what our issues were and come up with solutions.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you elaborate on the problems with the police?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, right now it's like hearsay because some of these things didn't really happen to me and I don't have any young men of color.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** So, I wouldn't experience some things that other people experienced, but I'll just give you an example and you can take that for what it's worth. There were times when my husband and I would go out on a weekend to social events. He had two cars. He had a Mercedes and then another car that he ran around town with. Whenever this happened, lots of times we were coming home from an event, sometimes after midnight, and we would always get pulled over and asked where we were going, where we were coming from, and where is home; what's the address. But whenever he drove his little car, nobody ever pulled us over. And there seemed to be –

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Only when he drove the Mercedes.

**Jennie Dixon:** Yes, so it seemed like there was a pattern. So, [that] is one example I can mention of what we experienced. I think most of the people that have complained were people that had young sons of color.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And can you talk about the fact that the organization doesn't exist anymore? What does it mean in terms of having an outlet for the community to have its voices heard now? Because the population of Windsor has grown, right, and the population of Windsor has shifted, and it sounds like there is just as much of a need for participating in politics and education as

there was when you joined. So can you talk about that vacuum that the organization created and what that might mean now?

**Jennie Dixon:** I would certainly like to see an organization like that be revived. I don't know that we could.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you have any [00:50:00] understanding of how it went into decline in the first place?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm trying to remember now. I think it's probably a lack of interest and people not having [the] commitment, and I see that same problem in other organizations I belong to. People are just not committed. You have those who are the joiners and that's all they'll do; join or they'll follow certain people who they think [are] influential in the community into certain organizations. And I know that that happened when we first got together. There were people who joined because they wanted to be associated with certain members and then once those people were not there, they fell by the wayside.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** I think it would be recruiting people and making sure that the recruits signed on to the mission and had the same interests at heart and not [just] necessarily a joiner. It was difficult to get young people to join, which I've seen that same problem all around at different organizations [in] different communities.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What kind of organizations would you say are having the same problem?

**Jennie Dixon:** I'd say that many of the community organizations that I've been involved with.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** What other ones did you get involved with?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, they were not organizations that necessarily had the same mission as WAACA. I was on a [Homeless] Shelter Board. I was on [a transportation board and the Housing Board]. These things are so long ago. [laughing] There's an organization in West Hartford that provides transportation for the elderly. But all of [them] seem to [experience] the same problem after a while.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Well, you've certainly said that it's a generational thing.

**Jennie Dixon:** That's what I believe or see.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** But do you recall any discussion of succession planning in these organizations for them to say, "As the founders and early leaders get older, we need to make sure that we have other people who are going to take over." Was there any kind of recognition that this was going to be a problem?

**Jennie Dixon:** Yeah, I tend to see that a lot with the older people. They're reluctant, and people will often say, "Well, I am the founding this and the founding that." Even though it may be a tax-exempt organization, they tend to operate as if it's their organization and [are] not willing to let go [or] change. They [say], "This is the way we've always done it," and that doesn't work.



**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you think there are any antidotes? Have you seen any successful antidotes to that?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, I'm a strong believer in mentoring. So that if we could find people [with] at least [experience] and interest and [willingness] to mentor that person, I think that that could work or at least is worth a try.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. How active were you in WAACA when it was really robust? Did you step away from the organization officially or did it just kind of dwindle?

**Jennie Dixon:** I think it died. [00:55:00] Yeah, I held a vice presidency at one time [and was chair of the] Education Committee. We worked together to do whatever it is that we do. So, it's not just because I'm chair of the Education Committee or the Vice President, that's all I was going to focus on. Maybe I had more knowledge [and] expertise there. Now maybe more connections so that I could do the things that I do. But one area [in which] I learned a lot is the voting process. We would go to polling stations, take the sheets [of the registered voters], run them back, [and] give people rides. [We also knocked on doors on behalf of the candidates of color]. So, in that way, we were involved in the process. Reminding people to vote, that kind of thing.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right. And were you –

**Jennie Dixon:** And getting a Christmas card from Senator Dodd. [laughing] Well, I mean, we participated. We'd get on Senator Dodd's Christmas card list for the rest of your life. [laughing]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** A Christmas card every year for the rest of your life, you said?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, it wasn't for the rest of your life. For several years. [laughing] Well, until he left office.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And were you there up until the point when WAACA got weaker and no longer existed as a functional organization?

**Jennie Dixon:** I think so. Except I can't remember my last day. [laughing]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** So, when did you guys start seeing that process? Like, what did that process look like? Did people stop coming to meetings? How did it unfold?

**Jennie Dixon:** I would say so, and also, we couldn't get people to run for offices in the organization.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay, so also –

**Jennie Dixon:** I don't think we had any funds either. Not that we did spend a lot of money.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. So the fundraising wasn't there.

**Jennie Dixon:** We really didn't do fundraising officially. It was more sponsorships. That kind of thing. I remember for one of the workshops that we did, I did get a small grant from Aetna. Partly because I was a former employee, and so I got a \$500.00 grant for one of our workshops.

But I don't think funding was really the major problem. It was the lack of interest and the millennials and the 'me' generation. "What's in it for me?" [That] kind of thing.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you think that it can be revived? Not necessarily in the context of COVID, but do you think it can be revived when we go back to normal? Or are the fundamental issues that created those problems, are they still there?

**Jennie Dixon:** Maybe not so much as they were in certain areas. But I don't know how we'd revive that. We definitely would need some younger people.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** I don't know how many of the older people who were in significant roles are even still alive.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you think that the issues that all of you focused on from your vantage point; education, police violence, police harassment, sort of town and community relationships, community policing. Do they all seem as relevant and as urgent? Voting as well. Do they all seem as relevant as when you had joined the organization?

**Jennie Dixon:** It's hard for me to say in certain areas like voting. I don't know what the voter participation rate is in Windsor as compared to what it was then. [01:00:00]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm not sure how much more educated people are about the process. And again, I don't know what has changed in the schools because I don't have anyone in the school system and I'm not really in touch with people who have younger kids in the school system. So I don't know if the same problems are there. I think we'd have to first do some kind of information gathering, fact-finding, to find out what is the problem today, if there is a problem, and then go after that. [Don't] just assume that because that's what it was, it's the way it is today.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** Another thing I had mentioned is that some of us used to participate in community conversations on race. Are you aware of that? NCCJ, whatever that organization [was called]. National Conference for Community and Justice is the acronym. We used to do workshops called Community Conversations on Race. I was trained as a facilitator for these sessions and had done a [few] of them.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. Yeah, there were study circles and study kits.

**Jennie Dixon:** Yeah, study circles.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** Community conversations on race, we used to call them.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** And so, certainly at the national level, the issues around social justice and education and community policing seem to resonate with what young people are going through

today, and I think young people are taking the initiative, right, and have a lot of momentum around the various social justice movements that have risen up. Do you think that that broader national conversation might be enough of a spark to revive WAACA, for example?

**Jennie Dixon:** I think it could be. But then who's going to light that spark? Somebody has to get started. I know Florence was one of those [people] who was always out there in the community. Every week, Florence's photograph would be in the local newspaper. [laughing] Every event, she was there. She and Vivian Cicero, who recently passed. She was collecting food for the food bank at the Stop and Shop in Windsor. But how many other people are out there like Florence?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** It needs somebody at the helm.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right. Do you think family life and work life, just the strictures of it, inhibits that kind of community involvement?

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, here we have a new variable: COVID.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** You know, how does that affect people wanting to get involved in these kinds of things? That, I really don't know.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Well, it's certainly –

**Jennie Dixon:** I think many of our people prefer face-to-face interactions.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** Even in my financial literacy [business] that I've been talking to you about. There are resources out there, but many of them don't speak to the people that I want to go after because they'd rather have a face-to-face workshop. They don't want to do this on Zoom. There's research that's shown that face-to-face interactions are more effective [01:05:00] than [saying], "Here's a book. Read this book," or, "Hey, I'm inviting you to a Zoom meeting."

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Do you think that there are any possibilities, though, in terms of Zoom meaning that you don't have to leave your house? If you have transportation issues, it's no longer an issue. You can join on your phone. You can do it while you're mobile. Are there any? Is the pendulum swinging at all in terms of access [to] the kind of thing that you're talking about?

**Jennie Dixon:** No, I really don't know. I'm just thinking of my church that has a lot of older people.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** They've pretty much warmed up to the idea of [Sunday] services on Zoom.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** They have.

**Jennie Dixon:** So again, one would have to go out there and test the temperature of all that.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** How about with the younger generation, though? Because you want to talk to young women who are in the middle of their working lives, right? And women who maybe want to start up their own business, you want to teach them those skills, I would imagine. Do you think that that audience would be receptive?

**Jennie Dixon:** [I believe so. Young people are quite receptive to technology]. The thing is, how do you know without making the approach?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Oh, maybe I misunderstood. I thought you were trying to do that during COVID.

**Jennie Dixon:** Oh, you mean for myself?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** You said that COVID has kind of opened up this window so that we can see that people don't have an emergency fund and especially for people of color. So, I think I read into that, maybe. I thought that you were trying to run some of those workshops.

**Jennie Dixon:** Yeah, that's something that's next on the plan. Right now, I'm focusing on revising my book. And then from that, I can branch out to other [things] because I used to do workshops and speaking and the like on financial literacy. I don't know how receptive the group that I'm going after will be [to] this, and I'm saying the same thing would apply to restarting WAACA.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** I was just saying that I do know the personal finances that people of color, and especially if they're of low literacy, would benefit more from actual face-to-face interactions. But I'm saying I don't know if that carries over to the screen.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right. All right.

**Jennie Dixon:** You know, you can write a book about physical fitness, [but] nobody is going to get physically fit just reading [the] book.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right.

**Jennie Dixon:** So, we've actually got to do what it takes.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yes, yes.

**Jennie Dixon:** It could be the same if I write a book on financial literacy or financial wellness. Reading that book alone isn't going to do it. You've got to do something else along with that. That's part of my plan, but I'm not there. I haven't transitioned to that yet.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right. I just had one or two more questions. What keeps you in Windsor? You know, so many people turn into snowbirds, and they go back to Jamaica, or they move to Florida. What keeps you in Windsor?

**Jennie Dixon:** I have never thought of moving anywhere else. This is home. I've traveled a whole lot and been to just about everywhere I care to go to. But this is home. My parents are in Windsor also and I don't have any reason to leave. Never thought of it.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** I'm not about to start over now.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** [laughing] All right, and have you had that conversation with your parents about what keeps them in Windsor? Like they didn't want to go back and retire?

**Jennie Dixon:** No, they never wanted to go anywhere [else]. They want to be close to their children. And all three of us girls are in Windsor. [01:10:00] My brother lives in Alabama [who has passed as of February 2021] and my mother keeps calling, "When are you moving back here? Can't you even move to New York?" [laughing]

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** I see. [You've] lived here since 1968. Can you say something about how the West Indian community that you're a part of has changed between 1968 and now?

**Jennie Dixon:** To tell you the truth, I haven't seen a lot of change except maybe more of us have gotten into the political arena.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay.

**Jennie Dixon:** Both locally and now we're seeing nationally. We embrace our culture, and we really hold on to that. So apart from that, maintaining our culture and getting more involved in the political arena and maybe the economic arena as well. We have more people having businesses and they're in areas where we once were not involved.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Can you help me think through it in terms of if 21-year-old Jennie landed in the U.S. in 2015? Let's do something before COVID. If 21-year-old Jennie landed in the U.S. in the late 2000s, what would have been different for you as a 21-year-old Jamaican girl coming to the U.S. then versus a 21-year-old Jamaican girl coming to the US in 1968?

**Jennie Dixon:** For one, in 2015, I have a lot more information available to me like the Internet. There are resources that were not there in 1968, and so I would have been better able to make informed choices as to what my life could look like or could be that I couldn't envision then. When I first came, I thought I could still continue teaching. And so I tried to apply to Central and the person I spoke to, even before I applied, told me that I would have to start as a freshman. And I'm saying, "No way. No graduate of Mico College would be starting as a freshman anywhere." So I said, "No, that's not going to be." So then I went to University of Hartford and it was there that someone said to me, "Okay, you don't want to be in education anymore. However, we can take some of the credits from Jamaica and use them as electives." I said, "Oh, I don't have to start as a freshman." They said no so I got my transcript, had it evaluated, and I got more than a year of credits, even though I was [enrolled] in the Business School.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Okay. So, you would have had access to that information earlier because Jamaican teachers still have a hard time making the transition here in terms of certification. All

right. Well, the last thing I want to ask you to do is I'd like you to pretend. In your answer, I'd like you to speak to the next generation of people who might want to revive WAACA. And as a former WAACA member in its first population, what would you have to say in terms of advice to the future next generation of young people who want to work on education, advocacy, and political advocacy?

**Jennie Dixon:** I would say first become informed. [01:15:00] Speak with people who have the knowledge that you are seeking. Find out what the problem is. Don't assume any problems. Get reliable information. Then look at the skills that you have, the gifts that you've been given, as it were, and see which of those gifts you can use to help to make a difference in these issues that you might have discovered. And then go for it and don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to ask others to join you in your cause. And you can make a change. You can make it better.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right. Thank you, Ms. Dixon. I really appreciate you taking the time and I will be working on a transcript and sending that to you for review. So when that is ready, I'll give you a call and get your address so that I can get that in the mail or I can e-mail the transcript.

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, thank you. I appreciate that because it's been such a long time and I had no idea exactly what you were going to ask me. And so I may say some things that are not exactly accurate, but no malice intended.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Right. And then we will add notes in the margins to the interviews. Whether we're correcting the name of a place or a date or the spelling of something. There'll be plenty of opportunity for us to add that information. And again, when we do these kinds of histories, it's really important for us to understand the person so that we can understand the context in which you became a member of WAACA, right? Because otherwise, we will be committing some of the same errors that you just said, which is don't assume anything. Don't assume that West Indians or Black women are always involved in their community in a particular way, right, and then go from that assumption to then predict what you would have done in WAACA or why you joined WAACA. So, each of these interviews will serve as its own record where you get to contribute your voice and your story to the record. And then when you receive the transcript, you can let us know if there's anything that you want to add, if there's anything that we overlooked, or if there's anything that we got wrong. So, thank you.

**Jennie Dixon:** And what is the outcome of this project?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** The outcome of this project is to document the history of WAACA. Ms. Barlow has told us just how many people have passed away – former officeholders, former founders, members – and it was really important to get this on the record for posterity. So, the first thing is to get it on the record and to have people who were involved recorded.

**Jennie Dixon:** And you said this was for the Historical Society?

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yes, for the Windsor Historical Society, and once we've finished the interviews, then we are going to brainstorm about what else we can do, whether there might be some kind of exhibit. But the first focus is definitely on collecting the story and preserving the story.

**Jennie Dixon:** I've got one picture. I was looking in my files to see if I had anything left of WAACA, and I found this photo that we took at one of the career seminars that we had done.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yeah, it would be really –

**Jennie Dixon:** You're welcome to have it.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yeah, it would be really great if you can scan that to me and then scan me a photo of you now. [...] We have to see what pictures we have and what stories were able to collect and then talk to Ms. Barlow and talk to all of you and then go from there.

**Jennie Dixon:** Now let's hope she has some pictures.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yes, she's busy looking for records as well. I know she went to pick some up and there were records in someone's basement or attic. So I think we're trying to gather as much as possible. We have a lot of newspaper clippings of some of the events. So we should be able, in the next three months or so as we finish up the interviews, [01:20:00] to take a look at the full range of pictures, interviews, and then documents from the organization that we have to see what kind of program we can support. So, I will keep you posted on what we're doing.

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, thank you for this opportunity.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yes, and I would love to interview your parents so [laughing] I will attach you as my conspirator on that. I'm happy to do it on the phone. So if you could work on that, I'd really appreciate it. I would love to talk to your mom and your dad.

**Jennie Dixon:** Remember they're in their nineties. One will be 92 this year and the other will be 95.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yeah, well the technology is caught up with us where if it's just the phone, then we just do the phone audio. I mean Zoom has not worked out here with the video, but it's recording the audio, I can see. So if it's just the phone, then there's also just that to record the audio.

**Jennie Dixon:** Well, my sister retired recently, and both of my parents sent video messages.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right. I am proud of your parents. [laughing] But for all of the almost 100 people that I've interviewed, even the folks who are really savvy, not everybody wants to be on video, you know? Even folks who use Zoom all of the time. Some people just wanted to focus on the audio.

**Jennie Dixon:** I don't like it either. [laughing] More than I like to hear my voice.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** That's fine. That's fine. I think we all have a little bit of cringing when we hear our own voice.

**Jennie Dixon:** No problem at the podium, though.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** Yeah, I understand. So yes, if you could convince them, I can do them together. Maybe it can be a fun remembrance thing. Or I can do them separately. But do let me know and I will touch base with you.

**Jennie Dixon:** I definitely will check with them.

**Dr. Fiona Vernal:** All right, thank you. Take care and have a good evening and I will not talk to you tonight. [laughing] Take care. Bye. Bye.