



Shirley McKnight: WAACA Oral History

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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

Sulema DePeyster: I will start by saying good morning.

Shirley McKnight: Good morning.

Sulema DePeyster: My name is Sulema DePeyster, and I'm the Community History Specialist at the Historical Society. I'm here today with Shirley McKnight to conduct an interview on the Windsor Afro American Civic Association. If you could begin by giving verbal consent. You could say, "I, Shirley McKnight, give my consent to have this interview conducted."

Shirley McKnight: I, Shirley McKnight, give consent to have this interview conducted.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, great. Also, the conversation can go in any direction you'd like, and we can start with your childhood. So, can you tell me about where you're originally from?

Shirley McKnight: I'm originally from Hartford, Connecticut.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: Born and raised. I have four other siblings, two brothers and two sisters, and I was the middle child, which I don't know if you understand the Middle Child Syndrome.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I do. [laughing]

Shirley McKnight: I was the middle child. I have an [older] brother and sister and a [younger] brother and sister. So I was by myself.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: Not that I was always by myself because up until the age of seven I had my grandmother, who I loved dearly. I only had her for seven years, but from the time I was an itty witty until seven, she was my soul.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, so she was like your closest relative?

Shirley McKnight: Well, my mother raised me and all. My mother and father raised me, but I was just close to my grandmother. I went to high school, I went to grammar school, [and] middle school. Well, back then it was called junior high and high school. I didn't further my education because I grew up with poor parents and there was five of us and back then, there weren't all the other financial opportunities. Back in the [19]50s and [19]60s, either your parents paid for your education or you worked and paid for it on your own. So I knew I wasn't going to college, so I decided I was going to work in an insurance company, which I started at Travelers [Insurance].

Sulema DePeyster: Let's see. So would you mind if we backed up a little bit to your education? So which elementary school did you go to?

Shirley McKnight: Bracket. It was called Bracket. It was in the North End of Hartford.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: But back then it wasn't called North End of Hartford. It was just Hartford. And then from there, right next door was Northeast Junior High. So from Bracket to Northeast, and then I went to Weaver High, and that's where I graduated from.

Sulema DePeyster: Weaver High School, okay. And how did you enjoy your school experience in Hartford?

Shirley McKnight: I loved it because I'm a product of back in the '60s. Well, '50s and '60s, and there was crime, but I didn't feel [that] there was pressure. Now when I was in high school, I didn't feel it, but I have friends that are Black that said they felt prejudice, but I never felt that way.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: Back when I was at Weaver, there was predominantly Jews, and back then they had to take the day off. It wasn't a holiday where the whole school closed. So when I was going there, only Jews took their holidays off. But I never felt that a teacher didn't like me because of the color of my skin. I never felt that any of the students felt that way, but I have had friends that said that they felt it. So I'm not sure if it's because I was an average student versus a higher level student. Maybe in those classes when they might have been the only Black or maybe other two others in the class with them. But I never felt it. And I'm pretty sure it was prejudice back then, but my mother didn't raise us to not like white people. In fact, from the time I was around 7 or 8 years old, I always had white friends. I have less now. I don't know why now that I'm older. I had a little friend that her mother loved when I came to the house because the only time the child would eat supper was if I was there. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, which friend was this? [00:05:00]

Shirley McKnight: I don't even remember her name. I was like 7 or 8 years old, so I really can't remember her name.

Sulema DePeyster: That's okay.

Shirley McKnight: Well, it's almost 70 years ago. [laughing] I don't remember her name, but I know she was a little Italian white girl and her mother loved when I came over because the girl was nothing but a toothpick and she didn't like to eat. But when I came over, and I love to eat as you can see, she would eat her supper.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, wow.

Shirley McKnight: Her mother would always invite me over. And then after a while, my mother said, "Well, she can't come over every day." But even in my work experience, I never felt that because I was Black, that I would be treated any differently. The only place that I have to say was before I retired, and I'm not even sure if it was because I was Black. I think it wasn't organized right and if you're outspoken and see that you can make changes. And it could've been because I was Black because I let him know that we could do this way instead of doing it that way. They didn't like that, but I don't think it was because the color of my skin. At least I didn't take it to be. Even if I was a white person and said it, they wouldn't have liked it.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. Was that at Travelers?

Shirley McKnight: No because I went from high school to Travelers. No, this was at Fleet. I was there from 1999 until 2004.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. Fleet, you said?

Shirley McKnight: Fleet Bank. It's no longer Fleet now. It's Bank of America, but I worked under Fleet.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. And you said that was in 1999?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, I only stayed there five years.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: I was blessed to have an early retirement.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, that's great. And what did your parents do for a living?

Shirley McKnight: Well, my father worked in a factory. I can't remember the name of it, but what he did inside, I can't remember. I don't know if it had something to do with steel or something, but he worked in a factory until he retired, and my mother was a housekeeper until we got to be teenagers. And then she did light housework for people because she went through high school and all, but she was basically a stay-at-home mother. Back then in those days, the mother didn't work a lot. I mean, some did but [with] five children it's kind of hard. I know I was a teenager before she went to work and it was only like 2 days a week.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see. Okay. So were you saying you grew up in the '50s or the '60s?

Shirley McKnight: Well, I was born in [19]46.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, '46.

Shirley McKnight: I grew up in the '50s and '60s and I'm still here. [laughing] If I'm blessed to be here July 18th, I'll be 76.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, that's great. Yeah. July 18th, nice. So what were your parents' names actually?

Shirley McKnight: My mother's name was Florence Sutton.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: And my father was John.

Sulema DePeyster: And what about your siblings?

Shirley McKnight: Do you need last names too? Because three of them are gone, but I'll give you [their names]. Now with my sister, you want the married last name?

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. Yeah, that's fine.

Shirley McKnight: Okay, all right. Barbara Engram and its E-N-G-R-A-M. Then my brother, John Sutton.

Sulema DePeyster: And it's Jr.? John Sutton Jr.?

Shirley McKnight: No, it was a W. And then me, then my sister Elizabeth Sutton, and then James Sutton. So Barbara, James and John, they're gone. So it's just two of us left now.

Sulema DePeyster: How long did they pass away?

Shirley McKnight: Okay, let me get my memory cap on. James died in '82. Barbara died in '86, [00:10:00] and John died in 2007, I think.

Sulema DePeyster: And were you close to your siblings at all?

Shirley McKnight: My oldest sister and I were very close. In fact, that's how I met my husband.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh really?

Shirley McKnight: Through her husband. [laughing] Yes.

Sulema DePeyster: And that was Elizabeth?

Shirley McKnight: No, it was Barbara. I gave you in the order that they were born.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, that's good. Let's see. And so what is your fondest memory of school?

Shirley McKnight: You really want to know? [laughing] Now elementary school, believe it or not, because nobody believes me when I tell him that I was a shy kid. I was shy up until I went to high school. I was the one that was very, very quiet. I didn't say I was not the one that's going to raise my hand. The teacher would have to ask me to answer the question because I would not have volunteered to. Some kids [will say], "Oh ask me, I'll tell you!" I was very shy and people that have met me after high school and all say, "No you never was shy. You talk too much." [laughing] My oldest daughter, she was exactly like me. They had to ask me, "Is she always so quiet?" She very rarely talked. But my best memories, I do remember some things [about] elementary. The only thing I'll tell you, I loved my teachers that I had, especially in elementary, because I thought it was really great back then to have my second grade teacher, my fourth grade teacher, and my fifth grade teacher. They were Black, and that was amazing to me. And my fourth grade teacher, we were very close. Even after I've become an adult, married and everything, anytime she saw me, we just lit up with each other.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, that's very nice.

Shirley McKnight: In fact, she just died maybe two years ago. But I was quiet, so I didn't really do a whole lot of socializing and whatever up until high school. After high school, I became more sociable because you joined more things. But I basically was a quiet person. I did my homework. Now my brother John, he hated school. [laughing] In fact, I'll be honest with you, with the five of us, I was my mother's first child to graduate from high school. And then my sister, Betty [Elizabeth], she was the second. So out of the five of us, only two of us graduated

from high school. But I was determined because I knew I wasn't going to college, but I knew I had to graduate in order to get some kind of halfway decent job. I had to graduate from high school. So I did my studies. I know in junior high, I did play baseball because I don't know if you could tell how this is not straight [referring to her hand]. And then I remember when I caught the ball, it did that. I was only like 12 or 13 years old when that happened. But I liked gym. My best subject was math. I remember math. Even now, I like figures. I never took a language, but math with my best subject. And then in high school, I took a business class and I loved [00:15:00] that because you're doing the typewriter and stuff like that. So I did like that. I loved to sing. I always will tell people I can't sing, so I wasn't in any choir. So my daughter that got the scholarship from WAACA that lives in North Carolina, she's a singer.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah. Oh, she's a singer.

Sulema DePeyster: Like really good?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, yeah. She's got trophies for that. I don't know if they still do it but Windsor High used to go to New Hampshire and they did competitions. And the couple years that she went, she got trophies.

Sulema DePeyster: It's from choir?

Shirley McKnight: That's from choir, yeah.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: Well, she's a singer. She doesn't sing much now. I guess when you're a singer, if you don't use it quite as much, it kind of [...]. So she doesn't sing as much now. But my high school days, I had a lot of fun. I took the basic business classes. So office practice, typing, math. I'm trying to think what else. We have to take English. The major ones you have to take anyhow. I did well with my classes. I just wish back then they had financial help, but they didn't start until I think maybe [1965 or 1966] because I graduated in 1964. I remember they started a work study program after because my younger sister was in the work study. I graduated in '64, she graduated '66 or '65. She was able to do the work study. Do you know what work study is? I'm pretty sure they probably still have it, right?

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, they have it at universities too now.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, really? Oh, okay.

Sulema DePeyster: So I wanted to ask also the name of your fourth grade teacher who said you were very close to.

Shirley McKnight: Phyllis Clark.

Sulema DePeyster: Phyllis Clark.

Shirley McKnight: See how I remember? [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, the people that have a very strong impact.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, yeah.

Sulema DePeyster: And in school, who were your closest friends?

Shirley McKnight: Well, I still have one. Now I can go to after 13. Okay, I got three that we're still close to this day. Do you need their names too?

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, you can provide them if you'd like.

Shirley McKnight: Okay. Carol Davis. Faye Monroe.

Sulema DePeyster: Faye Monroe?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, but it was Robinson when we went to school. But she's Monroe now. And Terry Alderman, who is still Terry Alderman.

Sulema DePeyster: How do you spell her last name?

Shirley McKnight: A-L-D-E-R-M-A-N.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. And you met in high school or middle school?

Shirley McKnight: Middle school. We were 13.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, junior high. Okay.

Shirley McKnight: Now my friend Carol Davis, she lives in California right now. We met, hit it off well, and 60 something years later, we're still friends.

Sulema DePeyster: That's great to hear.

Shirley McKnight: And believe it or not, Carol and Faye grew up and down South together.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, did they? Okay.

Shirley McKnight: But they're not as close as with Carol and I are, or Faye and I are.

Sulema DePeyster: And what did you three or four do together for fun?

Shirley McKnight: Go to the movies. Now Faye didn't do as much socializing because her mother was very strict.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see. Okay.

Shirley McKnight: Terry and I went to parties. In fact, Terry and I were in [what] they called the Y-group through our high school. We would go down to the [YMCA] and we would have meetings. We had [a leader], and we would have dances and we would have fundraisers and [our leader] would tell how to be hygienic and stuff. So once a week, we'd go to the Y. We walked down there to the Y and we did that from the 9th grade until we graduated [00:20:00] from high school. Okay, what did you ask me? [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: I was asking what you did for fun.

Shirley McKnight: Oh okay, yeah. Terry and I did more of the partying. We went to the parties. Faye didn't do that much, neither did Carol. But Terry and I, we were going to the parties or at the Y when we used to have our dances, we were the ones that got it together and made sure people came to it because they would charge like a dollar or something to get in. But that was Terry and she's not well right now. It's kind of hard right now. When I talk to her, I try not to cry. Yeah, she's been having a struggle for the last two years with health. Well, we are getting older. But we went to the movies and dances. In my junior year, I was in the cotillion. The Eastern Stars had a cotillion ball. It's like a coming out thing. I was in that, which was fun. And you have to do like a dance routine. You would get a long white gown, the white gloves, and your father presents you to your escort, and you do a little dance routine, and that was fun.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that sounds like a lot of fun.

Shirley McKnight: It was.

Sulema DePeyster: So what was your neighborhood like growing up?

Shirley McKnight: Well, I grew up in the projects. And now I have to say, when I grew up in the projects, it was fun. My mother was the mother in the neighborhood that everybody loved because Ms. Sutton, as everybody called her, during the summertime, you know the little record players that was two by fours and you had to put a disc in the record and play to the record? We had one of those and during the summer, because we didn't have air conditioning and it would be those hot nights, everybody would come to our yard and my mom be right there with us. And we'd play our music, and we'd dance in the yard, and the kids didn't mind my mother being there because my mother was a sweetheart. She was a sweetheart. She'll tell you, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." But none of us grew up like her, though. [laughing] So that was really one of the things that I liked, even though some kids liked to get away from their house. See, I didn't mind staying at home because I knew everybody was going to come to my house. I used to give parties and it was fun to have people come over. Even as an adult, my husband and I had parties. Everybody would come to my house for parties. After I got older, it's too much work, you know?

Shirley McKnight: I mean, people would bring food and all, but I got older and it's like that's it. Let the young people have the parties. [laughing] But we had a playground in the projects, and I used to love going over to the playground because during the summer, they had the showers that you can go into and there were the swings and whatever. You had not a little walk, but it wasn't like it was in my backyard. But still there were friends down there at the playground. You played with kids and you meet them. But that's what we used to do. But you have to realize back in those days, you didn't really do a whole lot of going here and there. Basically your friends and your mother knew and your father knew where you were going. They basically knew the parents. I mean nowadays, the kids just do what they want. Parents don't even know each other. I liked my growing up in my day, and we were poor. I won't sit here and say that I wasn't or pretend that I wasn't. We were poor, but we had clean fun. And I said kids didn't mind coming over to our house. And even though my mother would be sitting right there, they didn't mind it. So we were

poor, but we had good fun. [00:25:00] And when you live like that, you don't think that you're poor because we always had a roof over our head and we had food in our mouth. I didn't have that extra money until I was babysitting to buy nice things [and] go shopping on my own.

Sulema DePeyster: When did you start babysitting?

Shirley McKnight: I was about 12. I had a neighbor next door. She had quite a few kids. In fact, where I lived was called Stowe Village.

Sulema DePeyster: Stowe Village?

Shirley McKnight: Stowe. S-T-O-W-E. I was really just the babysitter in the neighborhood, and I started at 12, and I know in high school I was still [babysitting]. Probably until I was probably 17. Maybe even 18.

Sulema DePeyster: And that was like your first job until you went to Travelers, essentially.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah. My friend Faye. Carol didn't go, though. There were some other friends that weren't as close to me, but they were friends. They worked on tobacco. I didn't. My mother didn't think it was a job for a young lady to do. So that's why I did my babysitting. One time, I remember doing a spring break working at Fox's. Well, you probably have never heard of G. Fox.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I've heard.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, okay. I remember working and I'm not even sure how I got that job. It could have been where they used to call the schools and ask for a certain one, and I think that's how I got the job because I remember I worked there for spring break and then they called me back for Christmas. Because usually Christmas time is their busiest time, too. So I'm pretty sure I must have got that through the school though because I don't remember just going down there to apply. And then when I graduated from high school, I got the job at Travelers. And then from Travelers, I got married. Then I worked at Pratt and Whitney.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, you worked at Pratt and Whitney?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, because my husband was working second shift and I didn't like being home by myself. And the same thing with Faye. In fact, Faye was the one who told me about the job because her husband was also working second shift and we were both working in the same place at Travelers. So she took the day off from work and she went to Pratt and Whitney. And then I called her on my lunch break and she said after work, they were having an open house. She said, "Take the bus," and I didn't have a second car. "Take the bus to the Pratt Whitney, they are hiring." Sure enough, I got hired. So we both worked together there at Pratt and Whitney for three years. And then I got pregnant with my first child. And then I was home [for] a year. Then I went back. See I worked at Travelers three different times.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh really? And what were your roles during those three times? Was it similar or different?

Shirley McKnight: No, they were all similar. Back then, instead of data entry, they used to call it keypunch operator.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, but now [data entry] is more sophisticated, I guess. I went [to Travelers Insurance] from high school. I remember leaving there after I got married. Then after I had my first child, I went back to Travelers. I'm trying to think. After I left, where did I go? Because I stayed there. I'm trying to think.

Sulema DePeyster: Take your time.

Shirley McKnight: Well, I know what happened, okay. After I had the first child, I was home a year. Then I went back to Travelers because I was at Pratt, had the child, stayed home a year, then I went back to Travelers. Then stayed there maybe [00:30:00] four years or five years. Then I got pregnant with the second child.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: And then after I had the second child, I was home maybe about two years and then I got a job part-time at Travelers.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. So the third one was part-time?

Shirley McKnight: The third time was part-time, yeah. What happened was I would go to work at like 8:00 o'clock in the morning and then was home before my husband went to work because he worked second shift. So then I was home before he went to work. So that was good. I think I worked from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. or something like that. Those are good hours.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that sounds like great hours.

Shirley McKnight: Those were perfect hours. [laughing] And then after the second [child] was five, I went to Hartford Insurance

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah. Then I was there for 18 years.

Sulema DePeyster: Is that where you retired from?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, and it wasn't my choice. What happened was the department that I was working in, they relocated to where the agent was and they left the state. I could have had a choice to go to Columbus, Ohio, or Nashville, Tennessee. And my husband was like 30 something years at Pratt and Whitney and he said he's not going either places, [laughing] so that meant I couldn't go. So then I was home a year and then that's when I went to Fleet [Bank] after a year.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, that was my nightmare job, though.

Sulema DePeyster: But what about it made it a nightmare?

Shirley McKnight: As I told you before, they weren't organized that well.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, they were disorganized. Okay.

Shirley McKnight: [laughing] When I tried to suggest things on how they can improve, I thought it was an improvement. Upper management wasn't too keen on it.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay. Yeah, they didn't like change very much.

Shirley McKnight: No, no, no. And see I was in management, but I wasn't in the higher level management. And even though we would have our staff meetings and I would bring out certain things that could be changed to make it easier, they didn't buy it. So I used to do things in my own department that I had. I did my own thing. Of course, that's against the rules. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Understandable, though.

Shirley McKnight: But it worked for me because remember, the people who reported to me, if they do bad, upper management isn't coming to them. They going to come to me. So I tried to improve the productivity. I had different ways of doing it. I tried to keep the morale up because to me, if you have good morale in your department, people are going to work better. And that's what I tried to tell upper management, but they didn't see it that way. So, I lasted five years.

Sulema DePeyster: Five years at Fleet?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, and then I was blessed to be able to retire at 57.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh yes, that's very nice.

Shirley McKnight: It was time for me to go.

Sulema DePeyster: Which would you say was your favorite job of all the ones you've had so far?

Shirley McKnight: When I worked at the Hartford Insurance with the underwriters.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, Hartford Insurance.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, I said it wasn't my choice to leave. They were relocating and my husband said, "You're not going to relocate." And plus, that really meant the kids had to come out of school. So they gave a nice package, and I was home a year. A year goes by like that [snaps fingers]. Then it was like, "Okay, reality, reality." And then I was still young. I was 52, I think. So that's still young to not work. So I saw an ad for Fleet and I went there and they hired me and I didn't know it was going to be like it was. [laughing] But no, Hartford Insurance, I said I had 18 years there. I would have had probably up to age 65 if they hadn't [relocated]. I did post out one job but it was in Southington, and driving from Windsor to Southington is not ideal, especially if the weather is bad. So [00:35:00] I turned it down. They did offer, but I turned it down.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. And when exactly did you move to Windsor?

Shirley McKnight: In '72. Yeah. So I've been here 50 years! Oh my God! You know, I just thought about it. 50 years.

Sulema DePeyster: That's a good amount of time, yeah.

Shirley McKnight: That's a long time. Yeah, because my oldest will be 53. Yeah, she wasn't quite three [years old] when we moved to Windsor. Yep, '72.

Sulema DePeyster: And what caused you to move to Windsor?

Shirley McKnight: [laughing] My husband. Well, because he worked the second shift. My oldest daughter, he would watch her during the daytime until I got home. At that time, I had a babysitter from say 3 to when I got home at 5. So by him having her during the day, he would go down 218. You know what 218 is?

Sulema DePeyster: Oh no, I don't think so.

Shirley McKnight: Okay, do you know where the Mount Saint Benedict Cemetery is? Do you know where Blue Hills Avenue is?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes.

Shirley McKnight: Okay, in that area. At that time, we were living in Hartford, so he saw a big sign on a tree. Okay, do you know where Pilgrim Way Church is?

Sulema DePeyster: No, I don't.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, you don't, okay. So what areas do you know in Windsor?

Sulema DePeyster: Let's see. Not that many. I think I know the center more than the outskirts.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, okay. All right.

Shirley McKnight: But do you know where the Windsor shopping center is?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes.

Shirley McKnight: Okay. Almost in that area going towards Bloomfield.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: And he saw a big sign on a big tree. Right now, it's a church there. And it said 'new homes'. So he went down the street, which is called Columbia Road, and he saw the house. And it had a for sale sign, and he took the number down, and called and they said the house was available. So it must have been like a Friday because that Sunday, that's when the realtor said they would meet us at the house and I remember going in the house and liking it, and it was just a basic ranch. But it was nice, and we were able to get that house.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: So that's how we ended up in Windsor.

Sulema DePeyster: And were you actively looking for homes at the time or did you stumble across the house?

Shirley McKnight: No [laughing] because we had a two-family in Hartford. So now we had to put this house up for sale. We could have kept it, and every time I think about it, I don't know why we sold it because we didn't have to. We could have kept it and rented it and made money off of it. My husband wanted to get rid of it, and every time I think about it because a friend of mine, her husband did the same thing with them. They didn't have to sell their two-family either, but he didn't want to keep it. They moved to Windsor also, and it was like oh man. Thinking about it once the kids started getting older, we should have kept that. They're going to college. That could have been our college money. My husband didn't think about the importance of investment at that time, but they were able to go to college and they did well. In fact, both of them went to college.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh yes, what were their names again? Your two daughters, what were their names again?

Shirley McKnight: Oh, Michelle. Michelle McKnight. And Dawn Yarbrough.

Sulema DePeyster: How do you spell her last name?

Shirley McKnight: Y-A-R-B-R-O-U-G-H.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: And that's the one in North Carolina. She got the scholarship from WAACA back in '93.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. Yeah, it would be great to speak to her about that experience as well. But speaking of WAACA, when exactly did you get involved with WAACA?

Shirley McKnight: Okay, I have to say I can't remember the year that I started.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that's okay.

Shirley McKnight: I just remember the year that I stopped going because it was in '99 when I was working at Fleet. And see, because of the hours that I was working, I wasn't able to make the meetings. So I had a friend that now lives in Georgia. She left Windsor in '99 also. So some of the members said because Sallie [Battle] left, [00:40:00] that's why I left, but it wasn't that. It was because I was working long hours at Fleet and the meetings started at 7. Sometimes I didn't get off work till 9:00 o'clock [in the evening]. So by the time I got out of work, the meeting was really over. But I don't remember when I started because my understanding, the same lady I'm talking about, Sallie, she was in it, I think, from the beginning. Have you interviewed all the other people?

Sulema DePeyster: Not all. We've interviewed a few, but I think I know which person you're talking about.

Shirley McKnight: But Sally doesn't live here anymore.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, in Georgia, and was she married to the Reverend?

Shirley McKnight: No, her husband was on the Board of Education here in Windsor.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: Their last name is Battle.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, yes, the Battle's.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, so you got their name.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. Sallie and I still talk, and she was the first one to tell me about it. But at the time that they started, it had to be a husband and wife. My husband wasn't interested in being in social stuff like that. So that meant that I couldn't join.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, so there was a requirement?

Shirley McKnight: Back then. That's my understanding, and I don't even remember how many years later that they were taking singles or those whose spouses didn't want to join. And that's when I joined, and I said I can't [remember]. '93, I know that's when my daughter graduated. So it might have been the late '80s or the early '90s that I joined.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and what caused you to join?

Shirley McKnight: Sallie. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, she introduced you to the organization?

Shirley McKnight: Sallie, yeah.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: But I did know a few other people also in the organization. But she was the one because she was the original. When she first approached me about it, she said it was a couple. It had to be a husband and wife, and then I said my husband wasn't interested at the time. Like I said, I don't even know how many years later she brought it back up. I guess they made changes in their bylaws. And then she said, "Oh, you could join WAACA now." So I did. I was not what you'd call a very active member, okay? I went to meetings. I know we had fundraisers, we had bus trips, we had dances. They gave out scholarships. I'm trying to think because like I said, [laughing] I wasn't as active as some of the others like Florence [Barlow] and Sallie. Iva Allison was very active. Well, Vivian's gone now, but Vivian Cicero. I was very surprised that they folded up when they did because when WAACA first started, there weren't many people of color in Windsor. Now there's an abundance [laughing] of people of color and it folded up. So I'm not sure why.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. I was going to ask if you knew anything about it at the time.

Shirley McKnight: No because I had been long gone when they folded up. So I'm not sure exactly why. I don't think they really know why.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, there's been a bit of talk about possible reasons, and I think that some people were no longer able to attend the meetings.

Shirley McKnight: You have to realize that a lot of us was getting older too. In fact, I call them the core players of the group, they were getting older. Well Florence is still a little busy body, but don't tell her I said that. [laughing] But Vivian was getting sick. Vivian wasn't well either, and there's a few of them that had moved away. But like I said, it was, to me, kind of strange that the town was getting more people of color, but yet your organization for people of color [00:45:00] – well, they're not all of color because we had a Caucasian in the group, too, at one time. But when it first started, you had less people of color. You have more and a lot of young people here, too, and you fold up. I didn't understand why and I'm still not because if you have a core organization like that, it should be still going on. It shouldn't just fold up. So I don't know what happened with that they didn't keep it going. And maybe they weren't recruiting younger people.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that's possible as well.

Shirley McKnight: Or maybe the young people were not interested either. But it's sad, though, because Windsor's a wonderful town. I've been here 50 years and to see an organization [end], especially when it's really needed and if they had a strong voice in the town. But we're getting older. We can't keep on doing it. Just like I tell my family. I said years ago, I used do the family reunion, but I'm not doing it anymore. A lot of you are young, but they don't take the initiative, and that's sad, though.

Sulema DePeyster: It's very sad.

Shirley McKnight: There's a lot of us. In fact, I just had I lost a cousin in November. January, I lost a nephew and another cousin, and he [snaps fingers] just like that. And then once you marry into a family, he may not be blood, but you're still nephew and nieces and whatever. And I lost a very dear nephew who was very, very, very, very close to me in February on a cruise ship.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh no. I'm sorry to hear that.

Shirley McKnight: So that has been very hard for me. We used to talk, at least, if not four times during the week, sometimes every day. So every time the phone rang, and it's not his name on it, it's been very hard because we were very close. And like I said, he was on my husband's side, but we were very, very, very close. And I really, really miss him. So like I said on my family, we're losing people but there's still young folks. They could start doing a family reunion because I used to do it. I used to have it at my house and everything and it's too much now.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, it can be a lot.

Shirley McKnight: But just like with WAACA folding up, I just didn't understand that. You have more people of color in the town now and it's gone. So can I ask you something? Because if I don't ask questions when I think of it. What's going to happen with all this information?

Sulema DePeyster: So we're actually thinking about developing an exhibit that would be in the home across the street. And even though we don't have a specific design of it currently, we

would like to showcase the entire history of WAACA and display the stories of people who can tell the story of what WAACA looked like at the time. So we'd like to get as many perspectives as possible about how WAACA influenced the town. And I guess I could also segue into another question, which is how do you think WAACA affected the town or impacted the town while it existed?

Shirley McKnight: For me to answer that honestly, I have to say I really don't know because I wasn't too involved with the town. I was a member of WAACA, but I wasn't really someone like Florence or Iva. I'm trying to think who else. I don't know who's on your list. They were more involved in the town versus me.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: And what held me back a lot is my working. So yeah, I was a member of WAACA, but as far as knowing the influences that they had in the town, [00:50:00] I really can't answer that.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, that's very understandable. Everybody who was involved was involved in different capacities, so it's completely understandable.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah.

Sulema DePeyster: And so based on that, I was going to ask about any other ways you were involved in Windsor, but because you were also busy.

Shirley McKnight: No. In the school, I know when my oldest one was in elementary school, I was in the PTO, PTA, whatever they called it. But as far as any other [involvement], not really. I go to church here in Windsor. I've been there for 30 years.

Sulema DePeyster: Which church do you attend?

Shirley McKnight: Archer Memorial [A.M.E Zion Church].

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Shirley McKnight: I've been there over 30 years. But as far as anything else with Windsor, when you work and especially [because] I'm not what you call a real big social butterfly. [laughing] To be honest with you, I really don't like meetings. But like the Historical Society, I could have joined many years ago, but just not really. And I think a lot of it [was] because my husband wasn't really social. He was less sociable than me. But no. Those questions are [for] people that have more than one organization in Windsor. Our church used to have a booth at Shad Derby. I would help out with that with the church. I don't know if we're doing it. I meant to ask Iva if we're doing it this year. Are they doing a Shad Derby this year?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, they are.

Shirley McKnight: They are? Oh, okay.

Sulema DePeyster: It's been a while.

Shirley McKnight: Yes, having everything. It's sad, though, how life has changed.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, it is.

Shirley McKnight: And I mean changed. I hate this. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Yes. I definitely understand.

Shirley McKnight: I hate it. I just don't know how much I hate it. But this is the way we have to live.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, unfortunately. It's very, very unfortunate. So you had mentioned a few of the things that you remembered of WAACA, like the bus trips and the dances and scholarships? Which of the events do you think stood out the most? I know there were some annual events like the [Celebration of the Black Experience]. Have you ever attended that or any of their other annual events?

Shirley McKnight: I'm trying to think. I might have, but just don't remember. Because I'll be honest with you. You're the one who called me, right?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I am. [laughing]

Shirley McKnight: After I hung up from talking to you, [I said] "Why did I tell her I'll meet with her? I don't know much about WAACA." [laughing] I was just that member. In fact, I don't know if anybody gave you any names, but there's one lady and I've meant to call and tell her I was going to do the interview. She was living in Florida for a long time, and she moved back here three years ago. Annie McGeachy.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh yes, I've seen her name before.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, you've seen her name?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes.

Shirley McKnight: Yes, she was involved with WAACA too. She lives in South Windsor now. But I didn't do a whole lot. Also, I don't remember if I did because I think Iva said I was in some pictures. I don't even remember having no pictures. I don't. Like I said, Iva and Florence and Joyce Peoples, they were really involved. I left basically in '99 after I started working at Fleet, and I've got to think back. When did I join? When they were doing the T-shirts, I do have a T-shirt. I think I told you. It has [19]82. I think that's when they started, but I can't remember when I started though.

Sulema DePeyster: That's okay. [00:55:00]

Shirley McKnight: But no, if they needed help with something, they were organizing something, I would help out with that. But I'm probably the wrong person to have. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Definitely not. I think we've still gotten a good amount of information as well.

Shirley McKnight: I do remember we had bus trips and we had the dances. In fact, I have friends that live in New Jersey. At the time, they lived in Long Island. One of the dances they came down to, I had invited them to come and they spent the weekend with us. They had a good time. See now, I was in an organization [for] collectables. I could tell you a lot about that one [laughing] because I was very involved in it. I loved collecting at one time; figurines and dolls. Oh yes, I spent thousands of dollars on figurines and dolls, and you name it. The UPS truck was always coming to my house [laughing] because I had a subscription to magazine for collectables. And at that time, if you get a retired piece, it was valued to a lot of money, as I thought. And now those pieces mean nothing. But no, I can tell you a lot about that because I've even gone with Sallie that I was telling you about with WAACA, we went to Alabama to what they call an All God's Children reunion. We went to Alabama and had ourselves a good time in Alabama, and one time we went to New Jersey and met some of the collectors there. Oh, that was a fun time. But I was more interested in my collectives than the civic organization. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: That's okay.

Shirley McKnight: Loved them. I mean, I spent thousands of dollars on figurines and dolls. My husband used to say, "Don't you ever stop?" "No."

Sulema DePeyster: What sparked your interest in the figurines?

Shirley McKnight: My oldest daughter went to Cape Cod, and this is really funny because she always brings it up a lot of the time. She brought me a bell, a real pretty bell that said, 'Cape Cod'. I don't know, I think I was looking at a magazine or something and it said you could order these bells and you'd get one a month. And I said, "Oh, this seems like something I would do." So I started ordering the bells and then I got this case for it and it had a section. I think there were 18 little slots for it to put the bells on, and that's how I started.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see.

Shirley McKnight: I don't know. And then one of the stores downtown, I don't know if it was downtown or if it was in the mall, they had the little Black figurines and I started taking a liking to that. Now I don't actually remember who started because we did have a Black collectors club. Some of the same people that were in WAACA were in that. [laughing] And I remember joining that and just loving it because here I was collecting figurines and dolls and bells. I have two huge curios that were full of figurines, and I had them set up that it looked like a display. I mean, I was really into the collecting. And I like said, [we went] to Alabama and we had a ball, though. We had a wonderful time. I won a free nice Sojourner Truth figurine. I won it. We were at a mall and they were having a raffle. Sallie and I were the last two people to put our name in the box and the box was already stuffed the capacity and they pulled out my ticket. And I was like, "Oh, what's this?" [laughing] But that I could tell you more about than WAACA because I remember, I think we were at Florence's house. We had a figurine party where you dressed up [01:00:00] as one of the figurines.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh really?

Shirley McKnight: I remember I was a sunshine. I had this sunshine of something in my hair and the dress I had had the big sunflowers on it, and we had a night because I remember it was at Florence's house. It's sad, though, because like I said, a lot of the figurines now they're not even worth anything. I have my dolls, though. My daughter is their mother because they're not play dolls, and she didn't think that they would want them because they would want to play with them. I spent like \$300.00 on a couple of dolls and for them to play with it and ruin it, she just didn't think they should have them.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that makes sense.

Shirley McKnight: I do have a great niece that's going to be 9 and [she lives in Springfield]. This summer, her mother is going to bring her down, and we're going to spend the day going through my dolls.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, so she can pick one out?

Shirley McKnight: I'll let her have a couple, but I explained to her they were not play dolls, so you don't play with them. I said they are for display. But I was really into the collecting. It was therapy for me because I had lost my mother in '93 and then my father in '94. After he passed, I needed something to do and that was therapy. But I had already started with the bells, but then with the figurines, I started after.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight:

But we're talking about WAACA now. But like I said, I can't remember a whole lot with WAACA. I just know I was a member and I think we had dues.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, yes.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, so I paid dues. But after '99, I was working. I wasn't able to make the meetings and it was like don't keep me on because I can't help out like I want, you know? But it's just sad that it's no longer around, though.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, yeah. But it's good that we can talk about it in the future and how it may have [affected the town].

Shirley McKnight: Impacted, yeah. And I said the year my daughter graduated from Windsor High, she was one of the recipients that got the scholarship from WAACA. I think it was one of her friends. But I can't [remember]. In fact, I think I do have Robert's number. I think he got the other one, though. I think there was two. Robert Harrison.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: But he's in California now. I'll have to text him and see if he remembers, as far as the scholarship. But I know my daughter [received a scholarship] because I remember when they were deciding who would get the scholarship that year and this guy is no longer with us. He passed away a few years back. I was up at L.P. [Wilson Community Center] for

something, I can't remember what it was, and he said, "Your daughter is going to be really happy." And I said, "Oh?" He said, "Yeah." I knew they were having a meeting about the scholarship, and he said my daughter was going to be really happy. She got quite a few scholarships from Windsor. When [my] oldest one was born, we lived in Hartford, but she was not even three when we moved to Windsor. But the second one was born here. And she comes back. She was here in November, but she went to North Carolina A&T [Agricultural and Technical State University], and never came back. Well, she met her first husband here.

Sulema DePeyster: That usually happens when you go to college. [laughing]

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, it does. They go to historically black colleges [HBCU's] and then they don't come [back]. Where did you go to school?

Sulema DePeyster: UConn, actually.

Shirley McKnight: That's where my oldest went.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh really?

Shirley McKnight: Yep, she went to UConn. She didn't want to stay on campus. We made her because she was the shy one.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, but she had to learn to be independent. So [she stayed] on campus, but she would come home. First semester, my husband worked at Pratt. He'd drive up to [01:05:00] UConn, go get her, bring her back. That would be on a Friday and then Sunday, he'd drive her back up there. But she didn't want to stay the weekends up there. And then finally, I think it was like in January or February with ice, they ran off the road and he told her, "That's it. You're going to have to stay at least a couple of weekends up on campus until the weather gets better." You know that drive. And it was a Sunday when he was taking her back. And when he got back home, he said, "Oh no. I told her she's got to stay up there." He said it scared the both of them with ice, and Storrs is a little drive from Windsor. So then he had to come back himself because he only had the truck and there wasn't no room for the three of us. But she learned to be up there. She had no other choice. [laughing] One time, she took the cab and saw how much it cost. She said no, she won't take the cab. That's a lot of money. But now she went to UConn, and then she got her masters at Cambridge College.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Shirley McKnight: You got your masters?

Sulema DePeyster: No, I don't. [laughing]

Shirley McKnight: Well, you're young. They're both in education, so I think at a certain time you have to get your masters anyhow. So both of them have their masters. In fact, she's talking about getting her administrators. In fact, she looked into Central [Connecticut State University] just last week.

Sulema DePeyster: That's great. That's great news.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, so she's going to get her [administrators]. Then she's talking about a PhD. She has no children, no husband, so might as well get the PhD. That's expensive.

Sulema DePeyster: It is expensive.

Shirley McKnight: But her daddy left her well and she said she might as well do something with the money. Yeah, I said "Just do it before I go."

Sulema DePeyster: So I guess we can transition into Windsor as a whole because you were saying you lived here for 50 years. So what do you enjoy about Windsor?

Shirley McKnight: I like that it's a very diverse town. I really like that. When I first moved to Windsor back in '72, though, my oldest wasn't even quite three, and there was two little girls across the street from us. There were no houses at that time, and it was nothing but sand. You know little kids like to play in sand. So my daughter saw the two little white girls playing across the street. She asked if she could go over there and play with them, and I saw no harm in the little kids playing together. And I sat on the step so I could watch her. Next thing I see her running across the street to me with sand all in her hair.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh no.

Shirley McKnight: And she had hair like you.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh really?

Shirley McKnight: Yes because in fact, I had a picture when she was in 6th grade with the same style you've got. [laughing] And I asked her, "Who put sand in your hair?" And she pointed to the little white girl. So I went over there and I said, "Why did you put sand in her hair?" "Because she was brown. She didn't look like us." So I had to go speak to the mother.

Sulema DePeyster: How did that go?

Shirley McKnight: Of course I told them. I said "If the little girl didn't want to play with her because she's not the same color, she didn't have to put sand in her hair." And I said not only that, but these little girls were like three and four years old. I said, "They learned that from an adult," and of course they denied it. I said, "No, they learned it from an adult," because at that age, I don't think they really recognize. I mean, maybe the kids these days do, I don't know, but I don't think back then it really made that much of a difference. Something had to have been talked about people of color in their household and after that, I said if they don't want to play with her, that's fine. But then there were some other little white kids a couple houses down. They were fine with her, but you don't know how much I did. You have a child that's got thick hair like you [laughing] and sand and that was not the day for washing hair.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah.

Shirley McKnight: And now I've got to wash your hair because you got sand all in your hair and you're tender headed. [laughing] So that put a jibe on me, which I didn't appreciate. But I

told her. I said, "If your kids don't want to play with her, that's fine. [01:10:00] But they don't have to be mean to her either." And I explained to my daughter. She was only three and she didn't really understand everything I was saying. But I just told her. I said, "You can't play with them because I don't want for you to have to go over there and play with them in the sand and then you want to come back. Mommy don't like washing your hair and I know you don't like Mommy washing your hair." [laughing] So that's the only thing that I've experienced. I've never felt any prejudice. My kids, I don't think they've ever experienced any of that in the school. I've never had any problems with the teachers because I always taught my children you go to school to learn. You behave yourselves and if you don't, you're going to have to answer to me and your father. So they never had any problems. They had little white friends coming to the house and stayed overnight. Like I said, I'm still here in Windsor. I do plan to leave.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, do you?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, my husband died almost three years ago and the house I'm in is just too much for me. I have 4 bedrooms. I'm there by myself. It's just that I don't know what I want to do. I know what I want to do. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do it. I'd like to move to North Carolina. My daughter is in a situation right now where she needs to find a house and I don't want to move. See I could've moved last year. But I didn't want to move because I knew she was going to move and not stay where she is permanently right now. There's no sense in me moving down there if I'm not going to be close to her. See, I would like to do in-law. But she said you don't find too many houses down there with in-law apartments right next to her house. So she got finally got a realtor just a couple weeks ago. So I've got to wait to see where she going to end up because there's no sense in if I go down there now and find something for me, and then she finds something that's an hour away. It doesn't make sense to me.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah.

Shirley McKnight: So I'm staying put for the moment. But if Windsor wasn't so expensive, [laughing] I would buy another smaller house. But I know I can get more from my bucks in North Carolina, though. Although their houses are going up in prices, too. But I like North Carolina. Where my daughter was living before, I got to know a lot of nice people, was going to the church she was going to. I met a lot of them because I used to go down quite often up until the pandemic, and then after that, I didn't travel as much. I went down last year because my oldest granddaughter graduated from high school. So 2021 I went down, but I haven't traveled anyplace else.

Sulema DePeyster: I see.

Shirley McKnight:

Yeah, it's kind of hard.

Sulema DePeyster: It is very difficult right now.

Shirley McKnight: I have a 4-year-old granddaughter, too, so she hasn't known Nana. Although we've done [FaceTime], she doesn't like to talk when I'm on there. [laughing] She won't talk to

me on the phone. She was here in November. She was good, though. But she came up in November. I wish I could travel more because I'm missing [out] and Nana is getting old. So I don't know how many years I might have around, but I wish I was closer to her.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, I understand that.

Shirley McKnight: In fact, when I left Fleet, the oldest one was just a year [old]. So I was getting free trips. That's how much I was traveling back and forth in North Carolina. Yeah, I was going every other month. [laughing] Anytime there was a good price for the flight, I got on that plane, and I stayed down there. That's when I really should have told my husband we should have moved down there. But then if we did and we moved in the area where she was, we would be too far away from her. But that's why now I'm waiting. But Windsor is nice, and I just think the prices of homes are expensive. [01:15:00] I'm not one of those that is in and out of people's houses. I know my neighbors on both sides. I just got new neighbors in December across the street. And then a young man that used to live diagonal across, he died at the end of 2020. So that house, nobody's there. And then there's a few other ones that I know in the neighborhood, but I'm not one for [being] in and out of people's houses. My neighbors know I'm there. They check on me.

Sulema DePeyster: So you're familiar with your neighbors?

Shirley McKnight: I used to more so when the kids were little. Once they got older, then they didn't have a lot of friends in the neighborhood either because most of their friends from school lived in other areas in Windsor. My daughter has friends that they've been friends since they were 12 and 13 years [old] since middle school. They're still friends today, and I think one lived off Poquonock Avenue. But they didn't live in our area because in high school, they started going to their friends. And then the older kids in my neighborhood, some of them were gone off to college. So, the neighborhood changed. Yeah, it's changed. I said I got new neighbors. In fact, they're the second people in their house in five years. The people next door to me on both sides, they don't have children. But on one side of me, she's by herself, too, so we, you know, communicate. The other one, she checks on me to make sure I'm okay because she knows I'm by myself. So I don't really know. The neighborhood has changed. A lot of people have moved out and new ones in. I do have a friend down the street from me. She's about the only other one that I can call actually a friend.

Sulema DePeyster: I see. And was this the same home that you initially moved into, or did you move?

Shirley McKnight: No. I didn't move far from the initial house. Really just down the hill. [laughing] Well, I liked the type of house that it was because my oldest daughter had a friend that lived in the house I'm in now, and I remember her going over there for birthday parties and I liked the set-up. So I don't know if I was riding by or whatever it was. I noticed the house was up for sale, but they had already moved out because my daughter told me that her little friend had moved out the house. And I saw the sign or they had an open house or whatever it was, and I've been in that house now since '78.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, so you were in the first home for about five years?

Shirley McKnight: Six years, yeah. See, that was the one that they didn't have a garage. It only had the two-bedroom. They had three bedrooms, but one bedroom I made into a TV room. The girls were sharing their share and I said, "They're going to grow up. They need to have their own separate rooms." So that's when we bought this house and I've been in it ever since. Now it's too big for me. Three bedrooms and there's nobody because it's like a tri-level split. So there's three bedrooms on one level and there's nobody there but my junk. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: I see. So I guess a good closing point would be, in general, what would you say Windsor means to you?

Shirley McKnight: I never thought of Windsor meaning anything, really. Like I said, it is a diverse community. I was able to find a church home there. The people that I have met through the years seem to be genuine. I met a lot of nice people in Windsor. Not that I consider all of them friends, but I have met quite a few people. [01:20:00] I don't know if anyone told you that my church puts on a Martin Luther King program.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I think I did know about that, yes.

Shirley McKnight: I like that. We've been doing that for years and even though we don't meet at the town hall for it in the last couple years, at least we still do something. I don't know. Do you know Pat Gardner?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I do.

Shirley McKnight: Okay, I give her credit because she makes sure that that Martin Luther King program [continues] regardless because this year was virtual, and I think last year too. It's still continuing. It's not like with WAACA for so many years and after that, it just folded apart. I'm pretty sure as long as Pat is in Windsor, there's going to be a Martin Luther King program somehow, and I commend her for that because we put that on. When we used to do it at the town hall, we've had quite a few people that would come and attend that. So, you had First Church. Their choir would sing. So I like that we have that diversity. Like I said, that's one of the reasons why I've been in Windsor so long; because of the diversity in the town. I've seen it grow with more people of color and not just African Americans. I've seen Indians and I've seen Hispanics, but it has grown. I basically stayed to myself, and I know there were a lot of opportunities out there. Not happy with the town taxes though. I'm not going to lie about that. Although it's cheaper than some towns. So I'm here until I decide to leave. [laughing] And like I said, I'd like to go to North Carolina. Preferably, if not this year, next year. If not, I'll probably stick around in Windsor. I don't know if that's a good answer or not.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that's a great answer. I hope your plans work out the way you would like them to.

Shirley McKnight: No, I would love to go to North Carolina. I have a four year old granddaughter and I'd like to. Right now, even though I had the knee and now I don't know

what's going with the toe, I'd like to see her grow up. I probably won't see her until she's 18. By that time, that's what, 14 more years? I'll be 90.

Sulema DePeyster: You never know.

Shirley McKnight: Well, that is true. No, that is so true. But I just take one day at a time and thank the Lord for that; that he gives me that day. But no, I have really no complaints, and I don't think my children really had any complaints either living in Windsor. I can't really think of anything else.

Sulema DePeyster: That's a good place to stop, I think.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, yeah.

Sulema DePeyster: So thank you so much for coming in today.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, I almost cancelled you. [laughing] Because after I got off the phone, "Why did I tell her I'd interview? I don't know much about WAACA."

Sulema DePeyster: I still think we got a good amount of information, like I had never heard about the marriage requirements.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, I probably opened up a can of worms.

Sulema DePeyster: That's okay. It's part of the history.

Shirley McKnight: It is, but I'm pretty sure they wouldn't mention that. Don't say I said that. No, I don't care if you say I said it. It's the truth because like I said, I remember when Sallie Battle had asked me about joining and when she asked about me and my husband and it was like he could not be bothered. My husband was kind on the quiet side, and he was not one for no meetings. I'm not really big on meetings either, but I did want to join something that was a civic organization in the town of Windsor. This is where we live, you know? So that's why I joined. But I remember that distinctly. I just thought that was not the way to go with things.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, I understand.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, you don't say only couples can join. And [01:25:00] there were talks about that. I know I'm being recorded. No, I [won't] say it. [laughing] But it's just that once they were able to open it up to others.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh yes, I think I know what you're suggesting. There's been a few other conversations with other interviewees about possible reasons that WAACA ended, and one that's come up is opening it up to non-Black members, and that has been discussed before.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, yeah. When I was on there, that one white guy that was on it, we called him iSpy. Well, why would you want to join an organization that's basically Blacks? It's for African Americans and you're not. [laughing] And it's just like me going to an Italian American organization. And I'm not saying that I couldn't, but I don't understand why would I?

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, I see.

Shirley McKnight: Some Blacks might feel like, “Yeah, I'm going to join the Italian American organization,” but why? It's not your roots, you know? So that's why we didn't understand why he joined. But evidently, you can't deny a person from joining. I just felt bad when I heard it folded up because you have more than enough [people of color] to keep it running, and then it's no longer [around].

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, it's very unfortunate.

Shirley McKnight: To me, it's how strong was the organization? But if it was strong, it would still be around.

Sulema DePeyster: I think one thing that's also mentioned is that with a lot of organizations, not even just WAACA, there's few people that actually can keep it up. Once they can't, [the organization dissolves].

Shirley McKnight: Right. See, that's when you need to try to groom that second age group or the group that's younger than you.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, exactly.

Shirley McKnight: That's when you try to pull them in and keep it going because think about it. As I just mentioned, Italian American organizations and the Greeks and the Irish and all them. Don't you think they keep going? They don't stop. So that's why I'm saying how strong was WAACA? Because we didn't keep it. Ukrainian [organizations], do you think that just started because of what's going on with them? Oh no, that's been around for years and years and it's going to continue going on for years. But I don't know. I'd sometimes get disappointed because a lot of times when we do start something, we don't continue it. So you've got to keep it going, and that's the thing that I keep saying in my head. There's more people of color in Windsor. We should be very strong out there. I don't know. It's just sad, though, because now what do we have as far as to represent Windsor?

Sulema DePeyster: And the Black population of Windsor specifically?

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, and like I said, I moved here in '72. There weren't that many people of color. I mean there were some, but the percentage, of course, is much higher now than it was back then.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, definitely.

Shirley McKnight: And even in the school system, I remember my oldest daughter being the only one in her class.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh really?

Shirley McKnight: Oh yes, that was kindergarten. No there was two of them; her and another little girl in kindergarten. In fact, she was four when I put her in a nursery because at the time, there was no Head Start. There was no Head Start when we moved here. And so there was a church down there on Windsor Avenue. I put her in the nursery three days a week, and I remember the first day that she went [01:30:00] and asked her, “How was it?” [She said], “I was

the only brown one Mommy.” [laughing] And then I think the following year, because she went to kindergarten at 5, it was three. She started [Head Start] at four. I guess the following year, there were maybe a couple more kids her color in the class.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay

Shirley McKnight:

But I remember [her saying], “I’m the only brown one Mommy.” [laughing] And even though there's five years difference in my two girls, the year they started Head Start, the second one was three, I think. I remember going to the first meeting because I'm going to put my child in Head Start, which goes by your income.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, really?

Shirley McKnight: Oh yes, because I’ll never forget this lady that used to be my neighbor. She had moved but I know what church she still goes to, and she was in charge of getting the applications. When I put down the salary, she told me before they notified me that I didn't qualify. She said, “Well, you're not going to be able to get your daughter in,” because a couple of dollars more that my husband made and someone needed it more. So that was disappointing because it was like, “Great, I could have her go to Head Start, they’ll come and pick her up and bring her home.” We were over income. Granted, I believe that those that can't afford something, help them if you can. I don't like nobody going to use the system the wrong way, though. That bothers me. So that was in ‘78 or ‘79 when they started the Head Start in Windsor because like I said, I know with the first one, there was no Head Start. I remember going to the meeting to put the application in. The lady told me. She looked at me and said, “You’re over income.” And I’m not going to tell you what the income was back then. You’ll probably say, “How did you live?” But you have to realize things were different back then, too. You weren’t paying more than four dollars for gas.

Sulema DePeyster: Definitely not.

Shirley McKnight: That’s ridiculous. But like I said, I like Windsor. I think it's convenient where I live.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I understand that.

Shirley McKnight: Easy access to the highway where I live because I’m off of [Route] 218. It’s not a big deal to me because I drive, but I'm not near a bus line. Yeah, that's the only thing because there's only certain streets that the buses run on. I mean, I could walk up but it's a long walk. By the time I got to the bus stop, I’d probably be dead. [laughing] That's the only thing, but mostly everybody drives in Windsor.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that's true.

Shirley McKnight: But, no. My kids got a good education. I thought that was important that they got a good education. And I said I don't like the taxes. And then it's like, “Okay, why is it so

high?" But then there are other towns. I have a friend live in Manchester and her taxes are unbelievable.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, like much worse?

Shirley McKnight: Oh, yeah, their rates are much higher. I'm trying to think what else is a good thing about Windsor. To me, it's very convenient because your access to Hartford, Springfield's not too far. I think we've got plenty of stores, as far as grocery stores. Shopping, if you really want something, you've got to go to the mall because there's nothing really in the town of Windsor for me anyhow. It is a nice little town. It is growing. I mean, I've seen it grow. I prefer Windsor to Bloomfield. I wouldn't live in Bloomfield. [01:35:00]

Sulema DePeyster: Was that ever considered at one point?

Shirley McKnight: Nope, never really considered. The first house we had was in Hartford and then the two in Windsor. And we had one in North Carolina at one time too.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, is that why you were traveling?

Shirley McKnight: Well, not really because my daughter lived in it going into her junior year in college. Where she was going to school, they went on a lottery system. And she knew she had two years. She had her freshman and her sophomore year. Her junior year, she didn't know if she would be able to get into the lottery. So it was like either pay rent to somebody, and then my husband said, "Well, no. I'll buy a house." And then she had two roommates, and the two roommates paid the mortgage. It was a cute little ranch. I was a little upset after she decided to get married. She wasn't going to be able to stay in the house because the job that her husband got was an hour away just one way. So I said to my husband, "Why don't we just rent it out?" And he did. We did. But then the person that rented out lost her job and she said she couldn't pay the rent anymore.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see.

Shirley McKnight: So my husband said, "Let's just sell it," and I wish we had kept it.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, it's like the same situation with Hartford.

Shirley McKnight: That one more so and I'll tell you why. When he died in 2019, I would have been down there. I would have gone at least for the winter because he died in August. I would have gone down and stayed down there for the winter and came back here in the spring. So that one I really would like because I needed to get away after he died. I really did, and I didn't have that house. We didn't have to sell it, but he just felt because my daughter wasn't there, who was going to look after the house? And you can find people that do look after [houses], but he said no. After the lady that was renting said she couldn't afford the rent anymore, he said we might as well get rid of it. And I was like, "No, let's keep it," because even though the girls had all graduated from college, the mortgage wasn't that much. My daughter didn't pay the mortgage. She was living there [for] free. Then after they graduated, she lived there for at least two years by herself. But my husband was paying the mortgage. I was like, "No we don't really have to get rid of it." But he said yes, it's kind of hard. You've got to keep up the grass, and we didn't want to

tell my daughter to come down because she's out living an hour away. It wasn't fair to her. But it was a cute little house. Just a little ranch, but it was nice. I met some of the neighbors because I used to come down a lot. [laughing] A lot. And then 2020 came and I wasn't able to go do my traveling. And my nephew that died on the cruise. Last year he did have COVID, but he lived through it. Go on a cruise and he dies. But that was what he loved. He loved cruises. I don't think he should have gone because I think once your heart stops and they do revive you, I don't think you're ever the same. And see last year when he had COVID, his heart stopped twice, and they revived him. But he probably shouldn't have traveled. But he was [saying], "I'm going to do what I want to do." So he did. But we all say he died when he wanted. He wanted to be on his ship. So I don't know if you have anything else.

Sulema DePeyster: I think I've asked the majority of my questions. I think that this is a good place to end the interview. But once again, thank you so much for coming in.

Shirley McKnight: Okay.

Sulema DePeyster: I really appreciate you coming in to share your story

Shirley McKnight: Well, it got me out the house. [laughing] Yeah, that's the only thing I said about this COVID. I'm a chicken. I'm not going to lie. Well, I think my kids made me a chicken [01:40:00] because my husband died in 2019 and then COVID came 2020, and it was like, "Well, you can't go anywhere, Mommy." And the only thing you could do is sit on the front porch. And it was like, "Okay, we can't afford to lose you. We just lost Daddy last year. We're not losing you this year," because, of course, anybody over 65. And I do have high blood pressure, and it was like, "No, you can't go nowhere." So I didn't go nowhere. I ordered my food, delivered it, wiped down every little piece of thing. I was really bad. I mean, I wiped down everything. So that was March of 2020. I didn't go because I have friends that were still going to the store. I said, "I'm not going to no store." I don't think I started until maybe that August. That's when I decided it and you don't know I prayed all the way. "Lord please don't let me get COVID." There was no vaccination out at that time. So I think I only went to the store maybe once a month. [laughing] And the only reason why I really got [vaccinated] at first was because I knew I needed to go to my granddaughter's graduation that June. I didn't get my first shot until the first part of March last year, and then I got the second one 21 days after. And I just got my booster in November, but I had to go to my granddaughter's graduation. I mean, how can you not be there, you know? But I haven't been down there since. I used to go every Christmas, and then and I haven't been there since 2019 for Christmas. So prayerfully this year.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes. Let's speak it into existence. This will be the year.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, I just missed going down. And the house she's in now right now is smaller, so prayerfully she'll get a house by the summer and then I could this winter. And then maybe I can move down there.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that's the hope.

Shirley McKnight: Are they going to have any kind of celebration of anything [for] WAACA? I don't know if it was Florence or Iva that had mentioned something.

Sulema DePeyster: I guess it's along the lines of the exhibit, which we're hoping [to open] in December. So yes, we'd have an opening that day and I guess you can call that a celebration.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, okay.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, but that date is still tentative and we're planning the rest of the exhibit out currently.

Shirley McKnight: Okay, what's across the street now?

Sulema DePeyster: So we have the Chaffee House. That's our historic home across the street. It's the big brick building that you have driven past, and we have a room in there that's kind of a rotating exhibit. Right now, there's a tobacco exhibit in there and once we remove that exhibit, then we hope to replace it with the WAACA exhibit.

Shirley McKnight: Okay, how did this all come about with WAACA?

Sulema DePeyster: So I guess Florence is very active in the community and with the Historical Society.

Shirley McKnight: [laughing] I wish I had the energy she has, let alone being involved. I don't know how she does it.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, I hear that question a lot. It's very funny, but she's very busy and I believe she's being able to contact a few people and that also influenced the start of the project. And so we began interviewing other [members] and then we thought this would be a good thing to premiere in an exhibit so the other people of the town who may not be familiar with it can learn about the organization.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, okay.

Sulema DePeyster: So that's essentially what it would look like.

Shirley McKnight: I was wondering how it all came about. So are you all still interviewing?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, we are. I believe we will conclude interviews within the next month or so, but we've technically started interviewing since the beginning of 2020 or 2021. So it's been, it's a lot.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, so it's been going on [for a while]?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, but it hasn't been finalized until recently to become an exhibit. That's a relatively recent idea. But I think it would be great once we get everything together and decide how we want to display each of the [01:45:00] interviewee's stories.

Shirley McKnight: Right, right. I know Iva just said you all have pictures.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, we got a big box. Was it from Joyce Peoples? But it was pictures from different events and meeting minutes and all sorts of things.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, okay.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes. We're also trying to collect physical artifacts to display.

Shirley McKnight: Right.

Sulema DePeyster: And we have the sweatshirt that you mentioned. From Florence, we have a big blue banner. We want to collect, for example, sashes from the Shad Derby because there were some contestants sponsored by WAACA. So that's one of our really big artifacts that we'd like to get our hands on. [laughing]

Shirley McKnight: As far as with the Shad Derby, I don't remember WAACA.

Sulema DePeyster: I think it may have only been two or three years.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, because I know my church [has] been doing Shad Derby for years. So that's why I said I don't remember WAACA because I know I would help out every now and then with the church at the Shad Derby. But WAACA, I'm pretty sure they probably did do a couple years, but I just don't remember. Like I said, I really don't remember a whole lot. I know I never held any executive [positions], president or anything, because I don't even remember who was the president when I was there. I really don't. I just know Florence, Vivian, Vivian's husband [Stanley Cicero], Sallie, the Quintero's [Richard Quintero and Shirley Quintero]. Yeah, they were there. At least I do remember some of the people that lived there.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, I think that's also helpful, too, because we interviewed Richard Quintero not too long ago.

Shirley McKnight: Oh, Richard. Yeah, yeah.

Sulema DePeyster: So yes, it's good to hear the names and yeah.

Shirley McKnight: And the Curtis's [Timothy Curtis and A. Cheryl Curtis].

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, we've [interviewed] the Curtis's as well.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, that's how I've met a lot of them; through WAACA. And then there was another [member of WAACA]. He's gone now but the wife is down in North Carolina. Guy Jacobs? The Jacobs'? I can't remember what her first name is.

Sulema DePeyster: I believe it's Ann. I'm not entirely sure.

Shirley McKnight: Yeah, Anna Jacobs. It's funny, though. Guy had died before my husband. I don't know how many years. A couple years or so. My husband died in August so that September would have been my anniversary, and I went to the cemetery. And I just happened to walk around and see if there's anybody near his grave that I know. Now Guy Jacobs used to live a couple streets [away from me]. He was in my neighborhood and Guy would just come over. He talked a lot. So I'm walking in the cemetery and this is no lie; maybe 8 feet away from my husband is where Guy is buried. I said to my husband, "Your neighbor is 8 feet from you so if you get lonely, Guy is right there." [laughing] Guy was okay, though. Guy would just come by, and there would be times when you're not expecting someone to come by because he didn't call.

He just stopped by, and Guy used to stay for hours and my husband was on dialysis. There'd be days that Guy would come by and that dialysis would wipe [my husband] out.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see.

Shirley McKnight: My husband would fall off to sleep, and I've got to sit here and talk to this man? And I mean I could talk, but Guy used to. I don't know. Did anyone tell you about Guy Jacobs?

Sulema DePeyster: I've heard his name before, but I don't know.

Shirley McKnight: He was on [town council]. But it was just funny that day that I happened to walk a couple feet. Like I said, it could have been 8 [feet], it could have been less than 8 feet, and I see the stone for Guy Jacobs. I said, "Oh my God, I can't believe how close he is to Russell [Shirley's husband]." Anna had sent me a card when Russell died in, and I said I was going to send a little note and tell her how close Russell and Guy are. And then it's funny. There's another neighbor that's there also in the same row where my husband is. And then this guy that I grew up with, [01:50:00] he's maybe two rows over from my husband.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, wow.

Shirley McKnight: I was like, "Oh my God, the neighborhood." [laughing] Yeah, the guy used to live in the neighborhood, but he had moved to Suffield. But Guy Jacobs, he was something. They had moved to North Carolina because I think they were in Charlotte. Have you ever been to North Carolina?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I have. I have family there.

Shirley McKnight: Do you like it down there?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, it's nice.

Shirley McKnight: I love it down there. I do. The year before [my husband] passed, 2018, we were looking at houses. But then in 2019, he wasn't doing good. But I like North Carolina. See, I have a friend that's from South Carolina. Carol. She said she will never ever live in the South again, but she grew up in the '60s in the South.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, I see.

Shirley McKnight: And back then in the South, in the '60s, it wasn't good down there. But she said, "These white folks." I said, "What do you mean those white folks?" I go down to North Carolina and they don't know where I'm from. If you go to the grocery store, they don't know that I'm not from there. She said, "Yeah, they're all prejudice." I said, "Well, they seem all right to me down there." I don't see a difference than up here. Now, my daughter is in the school system down there, and she has [had] some white folks treat her bad or try to treat her bad. And then because she doesn't have an accent, although now she does because she's been down there for so long, she said when she first started teaching, the white folks [said], "Who's this northerner coming down here to teach?" But see, they could tell that she was not from there because she was just out of college. So they had to do the student teaching or whatever and then

she got hired as a teacher. At the time, she didn't have an accent, but she's got one now because she's been around. Well, all her friends are down there. They have that accent. And she said, "No, I don't have an accent." I said, "Yeah, you do." Well, she's been down there since '93.

Sulema DePeyster: That's a good amount of time.

Shirley McKnight: So she's not coming back here. There's no need for her to come back here. She's certified down in North Carolina, and she loves her job because they dance, they sing, they really have a good time. When I say dance and sing, they do not the electric slide but strolling or whatever. She's always texting us and showing us videos of what they do. I said, "This is what you do at your job? You're supposed to be teaching." "Oh yeah, we do this after work." But she loves her job and she said she's trying to find something [closer] because she's 45 minutes away. But she said she can't anything close to where she lives or to what she's doing because she loves her job. And she said she gets along well with the people, and that makes a difference.

Sulema DePeyster: Exactly. It does.

Shirley McKnight: Yep, she said, "No, I'm not ready to leave my job. I'll just travel back and forth." So I said, "Just be careful." Down there if it's icy out, school closes anyhow. They can't handle snow or stuff. In January, I think it was, they were out for a whole week.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh wow, that's a long time.

Shirley McKnight: But she loves it down there and she's made a lot of nice friends. Yes, a lot of nice friends. Well, I've been here 2 hours.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, has it really been two hours? Oh, wow.

Shirley McKnight: It's one o'clock. That's what I said too. I just happened to look up there. It's time for me to go, unless you have some more that you want.

Sulema DePeyster: I think we're all set.