



Stacy Ellison-Veney: 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: So I'll start by saying hello, my name is Sulema DePeyster. I'm the Community History Specialist at the Windsor Historical Society and I'm here today with Mrs. Veney or Stacy Ellison-Veney. We're here to talk about your experience as the 1993 Shad Derby Queen candidate for WAACA and your experience throughout Windsor as a whole. So, are you originally from Windsor?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yes, I am. My family actually is from Alabama.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, they were born and raised [in] Alabama and I guess after a certain time period, they all kind of migrated to Connecticut and [were] making a better way for themselves.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and was it both of your parents that were from Alabama?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yes, both of them, and it's so funny. They lived there pretty much all my life. I have a brother, so they stayed there with him while he was in school as well, and I want to say maybe eight years ago, they moved back to Alabama. So now they live in Auburn, Alabama. That's where they live now.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, and what was it like growing up in Windsor?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: It was actually, in hindsight when I think about it about it, it was a good time for me. I remember it was pretty diverse at our school. It wasn't like a situation where I didn't see other people like me at school. So yeah, I mean it was a good experience. I do recall, I always tell my son. I have three boys. My oldest is 20 and he goes to Tuskegee University. So he goes there. He's majoring in aerospace engineering, and then I have a 17-year-old who plays baseball all over. We are traveling like almost every weekend. And then I have a 10-year-old, and I always tell the older two and their friends when we talk about college and everything. I just I will never ever forget. I had a guidance counselor. I don't remember her name, but she was at Windsor High. And you know how when you're at a certain point in high school, all the kids have to go to see their guidance counselor and just discuss what colleges they're thinking about going to, what fields they want to go into and all that? So I went there and I'll never forget. She looked at my list and she told me, "You'll never be able to get into these schools." It wasn't that I was a bad student or anything like that. But she just looked at the schools and told me I needed to aim a little lower. I will never ever forget that.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: I'll never forget. I went to see Mr. Murphy [English teacher at Windsor High]. I think that was his name. He was the one that really encouraged me to seek historically black college to attend when I graduated and he was like, "Oh, Stacy, you need to go to Howard University. That's where you need to go." And I will never forget. That was one of the schools on my list. Actually, it was my number one school. He told me, "Go. You need to go. Write your essay. I will come and help you fine tune it and everything." And do you know I got into Howard University, and I could not wait to bring that letter to that guidance counselor. [laughing] I made a copy of it for you to put on your wall and everything. So I always tell the kids never listen to what other people tell you, and especially when they tell you you can't do something. Always

aim to try to do your best, but that's like one thing that I will always remember. Aside from that, I had a pretty good high school experience. I was involved in a lot of things in high school; student council. I was a [student] representative for the Board of Education. I didn't really know much about Windsor African American [Civic] Association at the time, and in hindsight, now I'm like, "Oh my gosh, why wasn't I more involved? That's so me." I guess I just didn't know about it. My parents weren't [00:05:00] outgoing to do things in the community or anything like that. But yeah, it's so crazy. I didn't know much about them until I got older. But I was a cheerleader [and] captain of the Varsity cheerleaders. For homecoming, you know how they have like the homecoming Duchess, the Princess, and all that? I won every year except for my last year.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh wow, [laughing] that's great.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: But I was happy because my best friend won. But I was really involved in school. Prior to high school, I pretty much stayed at home a lot. I read a lot, [was] always at the library. [laughing] That type of thing. But yeah. Like I said, it was a really good experience in Windsor. I can't really complain too much.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, that's great to hear. And you had mentioned your best friend. Who was that at the time?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: The one that won the homecoming queen?

Sulema DePeyster: Yes.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Keisha Gatling.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay, let's see.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yep, she won that year. I was ecstatic for her, though. [laughing] It was funny because I was like, "Yeah, I guess they're not going to let me win again."

Sulema DePeyster: [laughing] It's so cool to have it every year, and to have your friend on the final year. That's a good experience.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: I know, I know.

Sulema DePeyster: So besides Keisha, who were some of your closest friends during that time?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Oh gosh, I had so many friends. Let's see. Oh, Dawn McKnight. Keisha and her were my best friends. They were more than just friends. They were like my sisters, you know?

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Until this day, I still feel the same way about them. Actually, it's so funny. They were in my wedding. I was watching our wedding video yesterday with one of my kids. He was a baby so my 10-year-old was asking all these questions. So I shared that video with him. And Keisha is getting married soon, and so I think I'm going to Vegas next month, actually.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh wow, that's pretty soon. [laughing]

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, well that's her Bachelorette party. So I'm excited because I haven't seen her in a little while. But those were my two best friends. Now then I had friends like Lisa Maynard. She actually was a contestant the year that I ran for the Shad Derby pageant as well.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, so it was funny because as far as African Americans, she and I were the only two that were contestants. Prior to us, there may have been some contestants, but I don't ever recall seeing anyone on that float every year that looked anything like me. And so that was the huge thing for me, you know, growing up in Windsor, every year going to the Shad Derby, seeing these beautiful girls in beautiful gowns waving on the float. I looked at my mom. I said, "I want that. I want to be that." You know? So I remember I had decided. It was my senior year [and] I was going to run for this. I called Lisa and I said, "Lisa, you have to do this with me. This is going to be a profound year. It would be two of us. Oh my gosh." Well, not only was it two of us. There was another woman that was – well, girl at the time [laughing] – Lori Beth Munoz. She was actually the queen that year, so it was a lot of diversity there [and] people of different ethnic backgrounds. So, I felt like that was probably a very big year. After I graduated, I moved out of Connecticut. So I really didn't come back home that much because I was all the way in DC. But since then, I have followed and seen that there's a lot of diversity now in the Shad Derby, so that is so exciting for me. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: So what was it like getting involved in the Shad Derby? [00:10:00] What were the first steps that you had to do?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Let's see. It's funny because there's certain parts of it I remember, some I don't. But I just remember one of the first things is you had to have a sponsor. At first, that was a little difficult trying to figure out who did I want to contact, making a list of who to see, and I remember Florence Barlow of WAACA. I don't remember if she got in contact with me wanting to sponsor. I can't remember that part or if I actually [sought] her out. I'm not sure, but I remember she was my big contact person, and I just loved her. I just remember her being so sweet. But she's who helped me with that process. Then I had to write an essay. We had to write an essay. I think it was read at the champagne reception as we were coming down the nice, beautiful winding staircase. Someone was reading it and I remember they had a really good voice, [laughing] like a host voice.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: But they read everyone's essay and there were so many people there like all the people in the town that were like big names. Whether it was the mayor, just various people. It was a big, big deal. So, it was in the newspaper, and they were all there and everything. So it was really nice. And then I think we had to write another essay. I think we had to write two essays. I remember one day, we had to go take pictures. They pretty much gave everybody a beautiful makeover. That was nice. Then we had a fashion show as well. That was fun. That was really fun. I remember that was like one of my favorite parts. [laughing] You know, they had a runway and I think we had like two or three outfit changes, and it was nice. I think Laurie Munoz,

if I remember, her mother, wrote for the Hartford Courant at the time. If I remember correctly, I think she was the host of that fashion show.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. So what exactly did the sponsorship entail? Like what did the sponsor have to do for you for the Shad Derby?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: So as far as like your sash, it would say that you were Miss 1993 Windsor Afro American Civic Association. I believe they paid your way. Oh, I cannot remember, but I believe they paid your way to enter the contest. If I remember correctly.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay. So there was a fee to enter the pageant?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: I believe there was. I think there was. I may be wrong on that but monetarily, they ended up helping out, I remember. And when I graduated, they also gave me some scholarship money for when I attended school.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, that's great. Let's see. So what else do you remember from the coronation ball? I know you mentioned walking down the stairs and having someone read your statement. Was there anything else from that night that you remember?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: So that was at the champagne reception.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, at the champagne reception. Okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah. At the coronation ball, they reread the essays that you wrote for the champagne reception.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Just to let everyone who wasn't there hear [the essays]. So we also had to have an escort, and they really wanted you to pick someone who did things in the community as well. Somebody good to represent you. So my escort was Brandon Jubrey, and I'm sure you know the Jubrey's.

Sulema DePeyster: Yes, I do. [laughing]

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yes, so Brandon was actually my escort. [00:15:00]

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, yeah. So I was just looking at pictures before talking to you, and I was like, "Oh my gosh! Look at these pictures of he and I." So yeah, he was my escort. I think if I remember correctly, someone out of the all the guys had to present something as well because they gave one of the escorts an award as well or something. Yeah, I don't know if they still do that.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, it's possible. I'm not sure. Actually, I can definitely find out the answer to that. Speaking of awards, it said that you were selected as Miss Congeniality. Can you tell me about that?

Stacy Ellison-Veney:

Oh, yes. So of course they pick the Shad Derby Queen, but they also have a couple other awards that they present. One of them had to do with like the person that had the most amount of community service, which I believe Lisa Maynard won that, my friend, right. And then I won the Miss Congeniality award and then Lori, of course, was Queen. Now I don't remember if they did a Princess or not. For some reason, I don't think they did. But I don't know.

Sulema DePeyster: I think [for] certain years, I see people listed as Second Princess. I'm not entirely sure what that meant, but I think [people were selected as Princess], maybe in later years.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, so I did win something. I just remember. I was like, "What! I should have won!" [laughing] It was so funny. I mean, again, I was happy for Lori. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: [laughing] That's a fair thought to have, I think. So do you have any memories of Shad Derby as a whole? I guess that could be outside of the pageant. What did the event look like that year or the years following? I know you had gone to college the next year, but what about the Shad Derby as a whole?

00:17:24 **Stacy Ellison-Veney**

I just remember, as far as Shad Derby, it's always a time that everyone looks forward to because everyone come from all over comes. People from college come back to go to Shad Derby and all the little kids want to get a little goldfish to take home. And then they had games, music, the food. It was just a really good time, I think, for the community to come together as a whole and celebrate something that was so long ago, how it started and everything. But it's kind of interesting. I think I went to the Shad Derby two years ago or three years ago. I came home. I came back to Connecticut. Again, I don't have really any family in Connecticut anymore, but I did go back because a friend of mine was graduating from college and getting another degree. I came home and my friend that I mentioned, Dawn, was there and and Keisha came. I mean, we all came back to the graduation and it happened to be the weekend of the Shad Derby. So that was really nice to see a bunch of people that we hadn't seen since we graduated. Yeah, so I think it's such a good festival for them to have in town and now that I live in Maryland, we don't have stuff like that here. It really makes you appreciate that small town community. When I think about that, that warms my heart. Like wow, it's kind of different and nice, you know?

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah. I honestly never heard of the Shad Derby before coming to Windsor, and it's such an interesting concept. It also kind of enforces the sense of community here and brings everybody together. It gives them something to look forward to, so that's nice. So I guess my next question is about WAACA overall. Do you have any specific memories of WAACA and is there anyone that comes to mind? [00:20:00] I know you mentioned Florence Barlow. Was there any other person that you remember from that time?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yes, Anne Ford. I believe she was involved in WAACA. She was my principal at the time.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, really?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, she has always had a huge impact on me. She was probably like one of my favorite people in high school. She was the principal, and it was not just the principal and student [saying] hello in the hallway. I really felt like I had a good relationship with her. When I went off to college, I would call her every once in a while. When I came home to visit, I'd call her check on her [and] go visit up at the school. And I'm actually friends with her on Facebook now.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, that's funny. [laughing]

Stacy Ellison-Veney: There was another person who made a huge impact on me as well in Windsor. I'm trying to remember if she was my third grade teacher or fourth grade. Her name was Mrs. Cox and I believe she was in WAACA as well at some point. I'm not sure though.

Sulema DePeyster: Okay.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: And I'm friends with her on Facebook now too. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: And how did she have an impact on you? What do you remember?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Oh my gosh, Ms. Cox. I could almost get emotional about this. I was very quiet, I think, in school. When I was in elementary, she wasn't my first African American teacher, but she was the first African American teacher, I will say, that I wanted to emulate. It was something about her. She just had a certain class about her. She came to school every day dressed like she was in a fashion show. And her hair was always slicked back into ponytail. I just remember she had this walk. It was like she waltzed as she walked, and you know who she reminds me of? She reminds me of Felicia Rashad in the Cosby Show. That's who she reminds me of. I don't know, I just love her. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: That's very sweet. Let's see. So going back to WAACA little bit, I know you had said that at the time you weren't that involved but looking back, you have a better understanding of WAACA. What would you say your impression is or was of WAACA?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Well, I think all I knew when I had heard of WAACA, I just assumed it was like an NAACP. That's how I looked at it, and I just didn't realize they were providing financial support to students, whether it was providing books or money for different things. I just didn't realize that it was more like that. I thought it was just, "We want certain rights." [laughing] That's what I thought. I didn't realize they had such an impact on the community as far as providing support to others. I just didn't realize all that, you know?

Sulema DePeyster: Going off of that, what would you say WAACA's impact was on the community as a whole?

00:24:23 Stacy Ellison-Veney

Well, I just know what they did for me as far as helping me. I just remember Ms. Barlow kept telling me, "I am here for you if you need anything." Whether it was support financially, even on a personal level just to talk, or if I was having issues in school. Speaking of rights, if I felt like I

didn't have the same rights [00:25:00] as other kids in the school [or] I wasn't getting the same treatment, I just knew that they were there, you know?

Sulema DePeyster: So you're no longer in Windsor anymore. What influenced your decision to leave Windsor? Was it going to Howard [University] and staying in that area?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, that's pretty much what it was. I went to school here and then after I graduated, I had a job as soon as I graduated because when I was in nursing school, I was working as a nurse's assistant already. So they already knew they were going to hire me. So I started working in Virginia. My first job as a nurse was working in Virginia, so I did that for a while. [I was] working on a family centered care, like postpartum and maternity. And I still do that now, but sometimes I'll help out in the NICU, I'll help out in L&D, PEDS sometimes. So now I'm a little bit all over more and stuff. So I just kind of stayed in the area. Eventually I met my husband, and his family is in Virginia. He went to Virginia Union [University]. We're a lot closer to his family. So he didn't want to move, which was fine at the time, but now I'm like, "Oh, I miss my mom." They live in Alabama. It's funny, I was just talking to her earlier. She had called me. They have tornadoes all the time down there, it seems like recently, and she called and left me a message and said, "Hey, I'm in the storm shelter. Just calling to let you know."

Sulema DePeyster: Oh man, that's kind of frightening.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Yeah, I have to call her in a little bit to check on her, but she hates that. I got caught in a tornado down there couple years ago myself and that was the scariest thing ever. I mean, you could hear the tornado as if it was a train going through your house.

Sulema DePeyster: Yeah, that's a terrifying experience. You don't really experience tornadoes on this side of the country, so wow.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: No, we don't.

Sulema DePeyster: Let's see. So you were talking about nursing and I'd like to know what else you've accomplished outside of your time in Windsor. Is there anything else you've done? [Are] there any other ways you're involved in your community now, or are you focused on work? Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Well, I became a Eastern Star in my town. So we do a lot of charity work and providing. We do a coat drive every year to provide coats for people who don't have the ability to have coats or to stay warm as far as the homeless. So we do that every year. We also donate toys to kids around Christmas time. It's so nice. We'll do like a clothing drive. We'll have clothes set up on tables, but then we'll also have Santa come in and Santa gives out his free gifts. So we just buy a whole bunch of stuff and just give them out as gifts for the kids. And we do like fish fry's. We do coronation balls and donate money to other kids who are getting ready to go to college as well. [We] provide college trips and stuff for them as well and just mentor within the community.

Sulema DePeyster: That's great. This is actually my last question. Even though you no longer live in Windsor, what would you say Windsor means to you?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: It's the community, and I just felt like it was a town [where] people cared about each other. I knew all my neighbors. [00:30:00] You know what I mean? I knew all my neighbors, people in town like my friends' parents, they knew what I was doing. They would call my mom and say, "Hey we saw Stacy down at McDonald's hanging out." You know, that type of thing. So I just kind of felt like it's a small community, but I just have had some really good times there. My parents didn't attend church every Sunday, but my best friend [Keisha Gatling] did attend church with her mother regularly, and I'll never forget. I think it was a Martin Luther King breakfast that the church had. She invited me and I was hooked. They had they had a youth choir and a majority of the kids in the youth choir were my age. I mean I pretty much grew up with these kids and I met Keisha in the seventh grade. So from seventh grade until 12th grade, [I went to] church every Sunday. I mean, every Sunday. Once I got the car, I would drive myself because like I said, my parents didn't go. But I went there every Sunday and participated in a lot of activities with the church, and that was Archer Memorial [AME Zion Church].

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, really?

Stacy Ellison-Veney: It's so crazy. Let me tell you how this is a small world. So the pastor at the time, Bernard Richardson, when I got ready to graduate my senior year, it was also the year that he was leaving the church. He moved to DC and he was becoming the Dean of the Chapel at Howard University.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh, that's funny. [laughing]

Stacy Ellison-Veney: So I was at Howard. Isn't that something? So to fast forward, the church that I attend now here in in Waldorf, Maryland, the pastor, Derrick Brown, attended Howard University School of Divinity and who was his teacher? [laughing] Pastor Bernard Richardson. It's so funny how it's a small world we live in but Windsor just reminds me of home. I know it is my home, but it's just like a sense of comfort, you know? Like I said, I had a good time in Windsor. I did.

Sulema DePeyster: That's great to hear. Okay, I think that is all for now, unless there is anything else you would like to add, especially about Archer Memorial. It's actually really interesting to hear about it.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Like I said, it was a great church, and I met so many people through that church, you know? And like I said, all the youth that I was in the youth choir with, we used to travel all over and sing. I'm still friends with them. There was a family there. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Urso's.

Sulema DePeyster: Oh no, I'm not.

Stacy Ellison-Veney: Oh, okay. They lived in Bloomfield, but they attended our church, and I'm friends with all those kids. Well, they're adults now, but I talk to them all the time and it's just so great. [laughing]

Sulema DePeyster: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me about your experience in Windsor. We really appreciate it, and I'll make sure to send you that release form that I was mentioning earlier.