

GALLERY OF PORTLAND
A Black History Month Panel
Brownstone Intermediate School
February 24, 2024
Sponsored by:
Portland Historical Society, Inc.
Portland Committee on Solidarity
Portland Public Library
Transcribed from video by Mary Maki

Panel:

PJ: Patricia Hall Jemison
DR: David Roane
BS: Barbara Shaw
LW: Rev. Laurence Woods

Announcements:

BM: Bob McDougall – Facilitator
JB: Jennifer Billingsley – Library Director
ML: Martha Lutecki – Portland Historical Society
NG: Nancy Goodwin – Portland Committee on Solidarity
RC: Ryan Curley – First Selectman
NCP Naji Chester-Payne - Poet Laureate

JB: Welcome everyone to Gallery of Portland, a Black History Month Panel. We are very excited that everyone is able to be here, especially our panelists. So, I wanted to start off by allowing our co-sponsors, who are the Portland Historical Society, the Portland Committee on Solidarity, and the Portland Public Library to make some brief announcements before we start our program.

So, I'd like to introduce Martha from the Portland Historical Society.

[Applause]

ML: Good afternoon. My name is Martha Lutecki and I am a trustee with the Portland Historical Society. This year we will be celebrating our 50th anniversary and we have always welcomed new members and volunteers to help us with all our endeavors. This May 11 is our 28th Annual Town-wide Tag sale. It is our biggest fundraiser. It helps us with our museum and everything we like to do around town for the year. We are so pleased to collaborate with the library and the Solidarity Committee on this Black History Month event. We have been doing research on the redevelopment agency for the former neighborhoods under the bridge, and we look forward to hearing from our panel today firsthand what it was like to live in this area of Portland back in the days of the 1960s and '70s. Thank you.

[Applause]

NG: Hi everyone. My name is Nancy Goodwin, and I also want to thank you all for coming today. The Portland Committee on Solidarity is charged with working to address racism, bias, bigotry, and prejudice in our town. We welcome all residents to voice their concerns and to come together to create positive changes in our town. We stand committed to peace, justice, and freedom for our citizens, here in Portland and in solidarity with all Americans. The Committee on Solidarity meets on the second Tuesday of every month and we do have openings on our committee. The meetings are all open to the public and our meeting minutes and agendas can be found on the website PortlandCT.org. So, if you are interested at all in joining our committee, or if you have any questions at all, I encourage you to speak to someone on the committee. Will the people from our Committee on Solidarity please stand?

[Applause]

And one last thing. Please save the date for June 15 for our Portland Juneteenth celebration.

[Applause]

JB: Hello again. Hi. It is I, your brand new library director, Jennifer Billingsley. I just wanted to take a quick moment to express my gratitude to our wonderful panelists. First of all, who are so generously sharing their time and their stories with us. I have really, really loved learning about the history of Portland's historic black community, its current residents, and everything about Portland as I take this new job. So, I am really appreciative of you sharing your stories.

: You are supposed to have the volume turned up.

JB: I don't know if that is possible. I think we might just have to move the microphone closer to us. Thank you. I would also like to very specifically thank David and Barbara for spending so much time in meetings with us.

[Applause]

Thank you for that. You are really wonderful. Also, our panelists, Miss Jemison and Rev. Woods for taking ...

[Applause]

... for taking several phone calls about these biographies all in a row. So, thank you for your patience with me. The program in front of you is mine. So please charge any errors or omissions to my head and not my heart today. Also, thank you to Liz from the Solidarity Committee and Susan Bransfield from the Historical Society for dreaming this up collaboratively with David and Barbara, and myself. This was definitely the case of classic Portland, which is many hands making light work. And you are all really amazing.

So, also thank you to Bob for acting as our facilitator. And finally, thank you to the Portland Public Schools for very, very generously allowing us to use the Brownstone Auditorium today. There was a whole team of Portland Board of Ed employees that made this possible, not the least of which is Karen, who was helping us at the last minute with tech today. Also, Nate, who helped us set it up. Susan Webb at the front desk and Curt from the IT department for helping us get on so that we can make Susan's amazing PowerPoint presentation slide show possible. And also, they are very generously hosting the Committee on Solidarity's Juneteenth celebration at the Middle School this year. So, we are very grateful to our town partners that make this possible. And another town part that makes so much of this possible is, and I am very pleased to bring up to the podium our First Selectman, Ryan Curley, to do some welcoming remarks for us.

[Applause]

RC: Hey everyone. Thank you, Jenn. Can we give a little round of applause for Jenn over here? Our new library director.

[Applause]

I had no idea when we brought Jenn on that she would double as an emcee so well. So, thank you. This is awesome. And I want to echo what Jenn had said. I want to first thank the Committee on Solidarity for their work in putting this together as well as the Portland Historical Society, and also our Portland Library. Because a lot of work went into this. I know. I am excited. I just met some of our panelists recently; some I already knew. But I am very excited about this. So, for those of you who don't know, I did grow up in this town and so I thought I knew everything . . .

[Laughter]

. . . just about. And when we were in elementary school, they probably still do this, but they would take a bus ride through the town and they would show us all the historical

areas of town and talk about the history. But this part was not on that tour, and I have a feeling I am going to learn quite a few things today. This is so cool because this wasn't that long ago either. And I am so glad we have panelists here who can talk about their experiences in the Town of Portland and their history. Because I was thinking, well, this is a part of Portland's history. But, as Reverend Woods just told me, this is America's history. It is not just Portland's history. And, it is so important that we remember that history and I am really looking forward to that today. So, I want to thank all of you guys for coming and sharing your time and your stories. That's it for me. I can't wait to hear what they have to say. So, I will get out of here. Thank you all.

[Applause]

I get to introduce Mr. Bob McDougall who will be coming up and he is the facilitator of today's presentation. So, I will let Bob take it away. Thank you, Bob.

[Applause]

BM: Welcome to our panel discussion. We have been looking forward to this for a long time. The first order of business that I have been asked is to remind everybody that there are going to be cards passed out for you to write questions that will then get passed forward. So, I assume somebody has the cards to pass out? They are already passed out. Okay. Is someone collecting those?

JB: Liz and I can help collect them.

BM: Okay, that's in progress. So, the next order of business is to introduce our panelists. I am going to start with panelist number one. Barbara E. Shaw. Born and raised in Portland, Mrs. Shaw attended Portland Central School, Valley View, Portland Junior High School, where we currently are, Portland High School in the Class of 1969. She grew up and lived at 3 High Street, which is right where the Anderson Farm Supply property is, and

then moved to Middletown in 1975. Her mother, Eugenie, passed on to her to always help and care for everyone in need. Portland will always be home for her.

Our next panelist, number two, with the distinguished black hat with gold trim, is David Roane. David was born in Harlem, New York City, on March 3, 1942. David moved to 3 High Street in Portland in 1945 and in 1948 the family moved to Veterans Terrace, Long River Village, for two short years. But he then returned to live at 3 High Street. Mr. Roane attended Portland Central School, Valley View, Portland Junior High School, and left Portland High School while in the 9th grade to attend Vinal Regional Technical School in the electrical trade over in Middletown. He was in the class of 1960 over at Vinal. In 1960 he also joined the United States Marine Corps and served until 1964. It was during his first month in the Corps that he learned that his birth name was David Roane.

After a brief discussion an explanation of why he was raised with the last name of Shaw, his mother and he agreed that he would keep his birth name, David Roane. After serving the majority of his time in the Corps in Yokosuka, Atsugi, Japan—sorry for fumbling the pronunciation there—he served briefly in Camp Pendleton, San Diego County, California. And in 1966 he returned back home to Portland where he met and married his wife, Barbara Jordan, who also was raised in the Bottom, as it was called by residents who lived there under the bridge. As well said by his baby sister, Barbara Shaw, their mother, Eugenie, passed on to them to always help and care for everyone in need.

Our next panelist, number 3 in the bright yellow sweater, we have Reverend Laurence Woods. He is the Senior Pastor of the Church of God's Grace in Middletown. He is married to his friend, Marie Woods of Bronx, New York for fifteen years. They have together four daughters, one son, six grandsons, and two great-grandsons. Laurence is the son of the late Pastor Lorenzo L. Woods and Lady Janese Woods. Laurence has three brothers and one sister. He lived in Portland for the first twelve years of his life, before moving to Middletown and graduating from Woodrow Wilson High School in the class of 1969 where he played football as a running back and received many awards for his

outstanding performances on the playing field. He also ran track for three of his high school years, but football was his passion and he was nominated as one of the top football players in New England. He was a perennial selection for the New Haven Register Allstate Team. Upon graduating, he received a football scholarship to the University of Nebraska where he played football as a running back. After college, Laurence tried out for several professional teams such as the Detroit Lions of the NFL, and the Detroit Wheels of the USFL. Very determined, he went on to play as an undrafted free agent for the NFL Kansas City Chiefs farm team and played for other farm teams affiliated with the NFL such as the Detroit Giants and the Michigan Indians. Laurence retired from the workforce in 2021 and shortly began to adhere to the call of God. Walking in his father's footsteps to preach the word of God. Laurence and Marie started the Church of God's Grace in October 2021 in Middletown. Laurence is the founder of Mancave Ministries of Connecticut where he mentors as well as ministers to men of all walks of life. In addition to loving to fish and attending live jazz concerts, Laurence is himself a jazz musician with a group he created called "Smoov."

[Laughter]

And he performed as a bass player when they were in concert. Laurence is additionally known for his delicious famous barbeque spare ribs—sorry, no refreshments after this— . . .

[Laughter]

. . . which people came from surrounding areas to enjoy. He loves cooking at his place called The Boneyard, and Laurence is proud to be part of the history of the Black Bottom Community.

Our last panelist, number 4, I know her by many names as we have had the privilege of going to school together for many years. Patty, Patricia Hall Jemison. Also known to many as "Weebit." Ms. Jemison's family has a deep connection to Portland and

Middlesex County. Her mother, Lillian Jones, was born on Freestone Avenue, and her father, Charles L. Johnson owned Auto Body Repair on St. John Street in Middletown. Of their eight children, four served in the U.S. military. Ms. Jemison attended the American International College in Springfield, Massachusetts, and worked as a prevention specialist and was a master teaching artist of dance, stepping, and Double Dutch for grades K through 12. Developing and training teams for competitions in exhibitions, including the Double Dutch competitive team at Gildersleeve Elementary School.

In addition to working at Wesleyan University College Prep, Ms. Jemison was employed by a number of Portland businesses, including Standard Knapp in personnel and payroll, by the Portland Dukes as a cheerleading coach, and by Tommy's Pizza during her college breaks. Ms. Jemison has held many roles here in our town, developing Tykia Modern Dance for the Portland High School, as a Midget Football Cheerleader, playing on the Portland Women's softball league for the Portland Housing Authority team as a shortstop in center field, and serving as community liaison for Chatham Court where she is still helping to put together the Chatham Court reunions. Please save the date of July 27, 2024. All are welcome at the next reunion. Her dreams for the future of Portland include utilizing her talents and skills for the Portland Youth Programs, to be a professional presence for black and white students. And to see more people of color in the Portland School System. It wasn't on the bio, but she was a proud member of the Portland High School class of 1980.

[Laughter]

With that, we can move on to some of the questions we have. I guess the index cards are being reviewed and will magically appear here shortly.

So, the first question for the panel and we will hear it from one end of the table to the other, but let me read it off first.

“Geographically, the area of Portland where many black families lived before redevelopment came in 1976 was the south end. The streets between Bank Street, lower Main Street, Bransfield Avenue, Wolcott Avenue, and Airline Avenue. What did the residents name this area of town? Or, what did you know this area as?”

BS: Can we start with Weebit, because they lived there? David and I were the last.

BM: Fair enough.

PJ: Today was the first day I heard of the Bottom. I didn’t realize that. We called it Under the Bridge. We lived under the bridge. And, the street names, again, were street names, but it was fondly known as Under the Bridge to us.

BM: Okay, very good.

LW: I agree, but before I answer that question, whom do I send my speaker’s fee to?

[Laughter]

BM: That would be the library.

[Laughter]

LW: Yes, it was affectionally known as Under the Bridge. But as time went on, we referred to it, or I referred to it as Black Bottom.

BM: Why?

LW: Well, I looked around and everybody was black.

[Laughter]

LW: And we are at the bottom under the bridge.

BM: Okay. I didn't want to overlook the obvious. This next one is directed toward Barbara and David.

"Your mom, Eugenie Shaw, lived and worked in Portland in the late 1960s and the early '70s. She was the first executive director of the Portland Housing Authority. Tell us some of the history of the area that you remember your mom telling you.

BS: Well, as far as the history, she did not have to tell me. I was there. My mother worked for Community Action of Greater Middletown, which was known as CAGM. She was the senior neighborhood worker in Portland. The first office for CAGM was in the VFW building, which was at the corner of Bransfield Avenue and Lower Main Street. It was my mother, herself, Lucille Wray, who was a neighborhood worker and she lived under the bridge. Their office was one small room and then the big room was a pool table. So, on Monday mornings we would come in with the smell of cigarettes and alcohol. So, we would have to clean up and spray to get the smell out. My mother started many programs for the residents that they would come in. There was a 4-H Club where the kids could come every week. They did different projects. She started a family association. There was a summer program. There was lively stuff, and basically, everything was held in that one room. There even had a group of Wesleyan students that came in and taught African dance. And one of the students that came was Barbara Payne. And she loved doing the African dance. Her movements. She felt it. And out of all of them that were in that class, she was the star. And that was the beginning of working with the community.

Then, a group of Portland residents, and it was called the Portland Foundation, decided that we needed a bigger space. We could not do everything in that one tiny, tiny, tiny building. So, with the help of Johnny Anderson who at that time was the First Selectman, who grew up with my mother, they got together with the Portland Foundation. The

Portland Foundation was made up of dedicated Portland people that were concerned and were on the same page as my mother.

And I would like to mention the members who worked so diligently to get the Martin Luther King Center. It was Ann Hibino, T.J. Palmer, Dick and Priscilla Adami, Lorraine Noone, who happened to be the social worker for the Town of Portland School System, Holly Barry, that was head of the Visiting Nurse. And Edwin Geigus.

The town, with the First Selectman's support and this Portland Foundation group, were able to get, then it was the Strong and Hale Lumberyard building. They had to move it. My brother can explain that because he was involved with that more than I was. That became the Martin Luther King Center, and at that time my mother, we became autonomous from CAGM and my mother was the director. When we moved into that building, we had a ceramic class for the residents, and at that time Garvin Ceramics, it was a business that was located under the bridge. They provided all the supplies. The residents did not have to pay for anything. So, lamps were made, figurines, whatever we wanted. There was never a problem.

[End of Audio 1 – 23:22.6]

BS: It was very important to her. And, because of the Portland Foundation, they were able to give a scholarship to George McGill that lived down under the bridge, to go to college to be an artist. And this was done by this volunteer group that was very concerned of the area. This was a thriving area. There were homeowners, renters, but it was one big community that everyone looked out for everyone. There was no problem. Not just African Americans lived there. On Airline Avenue there was a brownstone apartment building where there were white people that lived there. The Estabrooks lived there. The McKenzies. I have a resident that lives in my building, her aunt and uncle lived there because they were Irish and they came to Portland to work in the quarry. So, it was a mixed community. They were homeowners. Business owners. This was a thriving community that was taken away.

DR: She said everything, so I've got nothing to say.

[Laughter]

I was sayin', when is she going to pass over to me?

[Laughter]

But no, she's our baby sister. Our big sister is out in the audience. She did a very good job. One thing that she left out was that our mother was part of that Portland Foundation that also started Quarry Heights. Quarry Heights was down on Main Street here. It was the first low-income housing project and the only one in Portland. And she ran that also. My mother was, we didn't know as children, maybe my older sister, Gerry, but she was soft-spoken. People listened to her when she talked. Both black and white. Wherever they were growing up in Portland. And we, my baby sister and I, we grew up like most white people here in Portland. We knew, we never called it the Bottom. It was Under the Bridge. When we talked about down underneath the bridge, we talked about Smitty's and places like that. My mother made sure that we went to church down there and when you say going to church, we are going down underneath the bridge. And I have two younger brothers, and we were happy. We were happy to get down underneath the bridge to our community. To see our folks. We learned a lot. But she was, I can honestly say, she was well-respected in this town by both black and white, whatever color you were. And I think she got a lot of that from her grandparents, Nelson Smith and Maddie Smith. Nelson, a lot of you probably heard, Nelson worked for St. Mary's School. He was the custodian of St. Mary's School. He also dug the graves down at the cemetery, St. Mary's Cemetery down on Marlborough Street. He would dig them by hand. And then his nephew, his brother's son, John, used to dig the graves up at Gildersleeve. Up there. So, our family goes way back and we all got a history of what it should have looked like—let me rephrase that—what it looks like now. We get along better. When my mother was at CAGM, before that and growing up here as a kid, going to the schools here, Portland was

a very prejudiced town, to be honest with you. Very, very, very prejudiced town. At that time. But because of her, we, her children were able to cope with it.

LW: Can I say something?

BM: Sure.

LW: To that. My recollection when I was growing up here in Portland and David had already alluded to that. When black families came to Portland, there were, I think, one or two locations that we could only live in. All right? We were red-lined. All right? We were directed to the worst part of town. Okay? Under the bridge. If we could do some time travel and go back there, right now you would have said, how could people live there? We lived in squalor and I think they have some pictures of some of the buildings. But, the thing about it for me was, coming up here on the Main Street and looking around, and seeing how the residents of Portland were living. The white residents. And I would say to myself, why do I have to live like this? Why am I relegated to this area? And that was because the resources that people under the bridge had were very limited. If we did get employment, it was the worst part, and I think Continental Can was one of the biggest employers for the city at that time. I remember when we lived here, it used to be on the river. It used to be a cannery. And, the minorities worked at the cannery scaling fish. I ate more fish growing up than I do now. Because we were paid a mere pittance, and our pay was taking home fish. So that was a supply that we could depend on. And in certain areas, we did farming and whatnot. But living there it gave me joy. Even though it wasn't the best of places to live. All right? As David said, and all the panelists have said, it was a homogeneous society. Everybody there took part. It was nothing to go next door and say, hey, I need a couple of eggs, I need some sugar, I need some milk. We shared in that community. Even though we were lacking, but collectively, together, we were able to take care of the need of that community. Because we were not allowed to share in the, with the fruits of what the town provided, because it was not provided to us. So, when people, when Pratt Whitney came in, Wilcox Printing, a lot of the minorities that were in the Bottom moved out. Because they had a better opportunity. Because Portland did not

give, it was a closed community when it came to the minority residents. Do I have any hatred? No. Because that's just the way it is. I know better. Okay? I didn't experience a lot of racism until I got to Middletown. Okay? When I was on the fields of playing ball, because the minority students were bussed to the better schools, at that time was Woodrow Wilson High School. The Middletown High School was considered the ghetto school. So, if you were a good athlete, which I was at the time, I went to Woodrow Wilson High School. At Woodrow Wilson High School, I didn't know my middle name started with "N." Because that is all I was referred to. And as a result of that, I took my aggressions out on the playing field. Which motivated me to be as good as I was, because I couldn't go downtown and fight somebody who called me that name, because I'd go to jail. So, I took it out on the field. And I grew up with that aggression. Because it was the only outlet that I had to blow off steam. When we lived in Lower, there was a field right in the center of where we all lived. That was a gathering field for all of the youths to play all kinds of different balls. That was our afterschool program because we were not allowed to participate in afterschool programs that Portland had. So, we were very creative in a lot of things. Very creative. Because we were not allowed to participate fully as residents of Portland.

Someone has a question? I'm sorry. Go ahead.

BM: No, you are doing good.

[Laughter]

LW: I don't mean to monopolize. But I am just trying to give you a clear view of what we grew up with. Okay? Limited resources. But you know what? Here's the thing. I didn't know that I was poor. I didn't know that. I was happy. The only thing I had a problem with when Christmas time came, I always got summer toys in the winter.

[Laughter]

How do you use summer toys in the winter with snow on the ground? Always got a bike, when I got a bike, was always in the wintertime. But the community was, we loved one another. We looked out for one another. It was always trying to help one another. It was a home and everybody knew everybody. I could go into anybody's home and I was accepted. The doors were always open. I think we had a couple of streetlights down there. We would all gather around the street lights and when the lights went off, we went home. Your mother didn't have to call you, because she knew where you were. Right in the center of that field. We could look out the window, or the people who lived on Airline Avenue would come over and see where we were. But those are some of the greatest times. I think that gave us our foundation to where we are today. Because that generation grew up with respect. This generation, they are gone. Some of the things that we did I tell our kids. "That's corny," No, that was fun. We didn't sit in the house playing video games. We got up in the morning after school on Saturday, we had to do our chores before we could go outside. And then when you went outside, you stayed outside. It wasn't this running in and out of the house. Oh, no. My grandmother said, "You come in; you stay in. You go out, you stay out." That was part of our culture. When Portland had their celebration, Under the Bridge had a celebration, too. And I wish some of you could have experienced that celebration. My grandmother, who was the matriarch. Everybody knew Nancy Walker. Am I right? Everybody knew Mother Nancy Walker. That was my grandmother. She would organize, okay, festivities for the community during certain holidays. We would have cookouts. We'd have barbeques. I mean, the community, she would head it and everybody would participate. For me, she used to have an ice cream churner that you had to do by hand. And boy, let me tell you. That was my job. Why? Because when I got finished churning that ice cream, she would give me the paddle. And I would sit there and just eat that paddle. Those are of the some of the finest. We played kickball, there would be barbecuing. I mean, of course, you have your other guys. I had that other element there. But they did it respectfully. They did it respectfully. Smitty's was the hangout. And Smitty's and what was that other little grocery store there that we would just go buy penny candy?

: [Inaudible]

LW: Does anybody remember that?

: Bitsy Milardo's

LW: Yes. Yes. Yes. We used to go there to get that penny candy before we'd go to school. And in the wintertime, there was a hill underneath the bridge that would be where we'd go sliding. Do you remember that?

: Yeah.

LW: I guess weren't fortunate to have sleds, so what we would do, we'd get cardboard boxes, because we'd go over to Continental Can and get the cardboard boxes and take them over to the hill and slide down the hill. And when they got wet, we'd throw it away and go get another box. Life was fun. It was hard. But it was fun. I don't want to monopolize. Because it was just a great experience here.

[Laughter]

BM: Patty?

PJ: Do you have a question? We are answering questions from the audience.

BM: Okay. Here's the next question that comes up.

"Who founded the True Vine Church? And what year was it? What can you tell us about the church?"

PJ: That was before my time.

[Laughter]

PJ: But I did participate in activities at the church. I remember your older sister, the Davidson family. They came all the way from Cromwell. Sometimes I get so emotional. And, all the kids of the neighborhood were in attendance. I will never forget our first choir robes. They were blue and red. And that's where ____ comes in. We never needed anything. I don't remember my parents paying for those. I don't remember anything except for showing up, being involved, and knowing how to give it back when it was my turn. And if you want to elaborate some more, Barbara?

BS: As Patricia just said, True Vine Holiness Church was in the center of Under the Bridge. And also, when Laurence was talking about that circle, there was a big tree. Sundays after church, the members would go out. My sister can attest to it. And the kids would run around. They would eat around that tree. Now, True Vine Holiness Church, the original church that was there was built in 1935. The church was formed in 1923. The land that it was built on, because Maybelle Davidson, who grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, moved here and she worked for Tracey Hubbard, of Rogers and Hubbard's Bone Mill. And that is one reason why Laurence was saying no one wanted to live there, because of the bone mill, because it stunk. No one would want to live there. But that's where that community was. Just put them down there and be forgotten.

Before the church was built, they were given permission to use, first they called it the Top Diggins, which is now Middlesex Avenue that is up here by the Portland Fire Department, in the field. They held church there in a shack. Then, they were given permission by Wesleyan to use a building that was eventually moved to Cross Street, which was the original Cross Street M.E. Zion Church, which is now on West Street.

In 1919 Maybelle Davidson married Major Taylor and moved to Portland. And along with Reverend J.J. Banks, then of Portland, Mr. and Mrs. William Bell Mickelan (?) of the offices of Rogers and Hubbard and they were giving land that was east of the sewer on the river edge. And there, too, they were given a vacant shed on the Hubbard property. And then the first church was built in 1935 by church members and donations from the

community. And then, of course, when they dispersed the community, they told the church that they would have to go also. And so, the church moved to where it is now at 398 Main Street. Which was a battle. Because the residents in the area took the church to court to say that we could not relocate there. Of course, they lost. And that, to this day, that's where True Vine Holiness Church is located. At 398 Main Street.

BM: Thank you. Our next question here is for Mr. Roane.

"I grew up close to Long River Village, Laurel Street. Can you share some of your memories growing up there and your feelings when it was raised under?"

DR: Yeah. We were only there, our family was only there a short period of time. We weren't there but less than two years, wasn't it, Jerry?

: I can't ...

: Two years.

BM: How long were you on Laurel Street?

: On High Street?

: No, Laurel Street?

DR: We were there two years and . . .

: Most of the time we were on High Street.

DR: Yeah. What I remember about that is . . .

: I was born in 1933. That's when we were living on Laurel Street. Two years later we moved to High Street. The Rollers owned that. And they had a tavern and a store. Where the Anderson Farm is. And he owned four houses there. And his mother lived next door to us. Mrs. Anderson. And I don't know how my grandmother got that rent, but Mr. Grover rented our house and that's why we weren't living Under the Bridge. And also, I just want to add one thing that my mother did, and I know I'm bragging. But she also had a work program. She got the first black workers in Pratt Whitney.

[Applause]

DR: What I remember about that particular area was that during those days, there was Long River Village and then there was Veterans Terrace. Veterans Terrace was regular army barracks. The walls were real fences. So, if you said hello loud, everybody heard. And it was just the one street, Veterans Terrace.

[Siren noise, then laughter]

That was her telling me she's listening. That was her telling me I'm talking too much. But real quickly, we only spent a short time and I even tell people now when we are talking about Middletown, Veterans Terrace, and Long River Village were really, even though they were street by street, they were really two separate places. I recall when we did . . .

[End Audio 2 – 23:24.3]

PJ: So, our family is down there under the bridge. I did. And when Chatham Court was erected, it took a part of our souls away when they had us move and relocate. I grew up in a house; I had a yard. We had two cars. And then I moved to a neighborhood where people are just right there. That bothered my self-esteem for a long time. But I had the self-confidence that overrode that. I wanted to say my mother was prejudiced. Always has been. She has eight children. But she did not raise us to be prejudiced. She said you

treat people the way they treat you. She was treated differently. So, she didn't allow us to be disrespectful to a person. Never. I was always the only black girl in my class. That was very difficult for me. I used to plead with my mom. "Mom, please. Can I go to school with some black kids?" That's what I said. "Mom, can I please go to school with some black kids?" Nothing better than an old smart black woman. She said, "Let me tell you something. Those white teachers are teaching those white kids and your black behind better be listening."

[Laughter]

That is why we remained in Portland. I also wanted to say Under the Bridge was dangerous. You could get hit by any kind of truck between Valley Oil, Kerr-McGee. Very dangerous. It was no place for a kid to play, but we took over our community. We used to play kick soccer in the middle of the road and when they came by, they had to wait. We finished our turn, we ran our bases, and they had to wait. And I guess these men had a schedule to meet, so they'd throw us money. That would get us off the road.

[Laughter]

But I also wanted to say what was even more dangerous, when you put us in Chatham Court, our schools were on the other side. There was always a railroad track to separate. Even 66 has a railroad track. At least four people were hit by Route 66. I'm the only one that survived. We had to go to school. If we missed that bus, we had to cross Route 66 where there was not a crosswalk. No one thought about that. It took two kids to be hit and dragged down Route 66 before they got that crosswalk. I was coming home from majorette practice, and I got hit by a car by Cumberland Farms, and I ended up past Subway. I was in a wheelchair for two years and Miss Wallinsky came home from school and taught me. I also say, my first connection with having feelings or understanding of the white person, personally was the Flood family.

: Yes.

[Applause]

PJ: I want to give them a hand.

[Applause]

To this day, we are very close. When I moved to Cape Cod, and then came to visit and had dinner with me, it was so wonderful. So, they came under the bridge, and they had a playground. If it wasn't for the Flood family, who took us to their homes, let us go swimming in their pool, brought us back home, see if there was a need, I wouldn't even have had to know that white people could be kind.

But my white friends, my mother said you can't go to their house and they can't go to yours. That was a rule. But my friends came anyway. They were something else. I also want to say that black history started from the day I was born in my household. We didn't need Portland schools. We didn't need anything else, because my sister was part of the Black Panthers. Delores Tutti Hall. She met the Black Panthers at Wesleyan. So, when I went to school every day when I came home, we had to drop our clothes, put sheets around our heads, and towels around our bodies, and we did African dance. Then, our homework, then outside.

I never went to school on Martin Luther King's birthday. I always celebrated it. Because we knew better. What I learned from Portland's black history angered me. All they ever showed us was the slave ships. They didn't tell us about not one great person. I already knew. Tutti taught us. I also said there was racism when I grew up. And, I don't what it was about me, but no one ever called me the "N" word, because there would have been a problem. But it would have had to wait until 2:30 because my mother taught us if anything ever happens, you better do it after school. Because I would find out.

So, my sister, there were no black books in the library. My sister did a sit-in in the library to get black books. That is how Portland got its first black book in the library.

[Applause]

So, she taught me how to maneuver, negotiate, and do anything I had to do that I wanted. It was possible. There was a way to do it. So, one day I went to school and they had the word “Niggers” in the dungeon. They are spray painting it. I said, “No sir. No, they didn’t.” I went to the principal. I said you got two choices. I don’t know how old I was. I said you got two choices. You either add another “G” or you sandblast it. Because I’m not moving. They had to sandblast it. They shouldn’t have had to done that. I’m grateful for Portland. I love Portland. My spirit is Portland. Portland made me who I am today.

BM: Thank you very much, Patty.

[Applause]

BM: We are just about out of time for this portion of our program today. So, I thank Barbara Shaw, David Roane . . .

[Applause]

BM: . . . Reverend Laurence Woods, and Patricia Hall Jemison. And I will turn it back over to Jenn Billingsley from the library.

JB: Thank you so much. We do have one final piece of our program. And I did just want to say that your questions for us. We knew that an hour was not going to be enough for everybody to tell their stories. So, we are hoping to continue to work with the historical society and the Committee on Solidarity, and the library to do other things, hopefully recording some more of Portland’s oral history. So please know that your questions, they are going to be used in other different ways. Hopefully. That is our dream. But I did want

to invite up to the stage Middletown's—oh my gosh, please forgive me—Portland's Poet Laureate.

[Applause]

PJ Naji is taking over where we left off. Either from his mother, his aunties, and he is doing what we used to do. So, I want to give him a hand for that.

[Applause]

NCP: All right. Let me adjust this. I'm really honored to be here. I'm part of this new generation. I've been built from what they started. So, it's really a big honor for me to be here. Especially, you know, my mom can't be here. So, I'm like the representative for her. Because she would be on this panel right now. And so, it's hit my heart, really. Not crying and stuff.

[Laughter]

It's time for me to deliver something from my heart. I am the Poet Laureate. So I wrote a poem. I wasn't really sure about whether I could be here, so I only had like two weeks to really write this up. I had a problem with my wisdom teeth packed for a couple of days, so don't mind me if I slip up or anything. All right. Let me just try to read this to you guys. All right?

When we are born
Our sand begins to tip
Running repeatedly with no dam to plug the drip
Every second ticks and tocks to an eternity trip
We watch through our reflections
Live behind the skin we are in
We continuously move forward
However
We also consistently reflect on
Where we have been
Numerous become victims
To the choices of others
Perpetrators against our own sisters and brothers
Some act like different cultures
Have never been discovered
Even though they see
Humanity comes Multi colored
Will we ever agree on how we begun
We are one
The fear of life is beginning to run

A parallel emotion
To the fear of death
Many have fallen
To the volcanic overflow of stress
So, Bless the ones who try but
Are not able to be their best
Please place beats of
Positivity underneath their chest
I am honored to breathe
The formula created for each breath
I confess from the depths of my soul
I cherish the length of life and
I will
stay humble as my story is told

Naji Chester-Payne

NCP: Thank you.

[Applause]

JB: The only thing I would like to do is ask for one more round of applause for our incredible panelists.

[Applause]

[End of audio: 11:16.6]