Oral History of Shirely Williams interviewed by Markayla Moore on 07/22/2018 in Huntington, West Virginia.

Interviewer: Okay, it started. What stories did you hear about your early ancestors whom you never knew?

Shirely Williams: What?

Interviewer: What stories did you hear about your early ancestors whom you never knew?

Shirely Williams: No, let's see. Like a grandfather and grandmother lived in Millersburg, Kentucky and they had a farm. Raised chickens, and pigs, and vegetables. They didn't have any type of schooling, so one day they were cooking on their cold stove and the house burnt down. So they rebuilt a house that had dirt flooring.

Interviewer: How long did that take?

Shirely Williams: What?

Interviewer: To rebuild all of it.

Shirely Williams: Took about a year or so. Yeah. Let's see. There's really nothing else that I can remember.

Interviewer: What was school like for you?

Shirely Williams: Well, when I was going to school at the all black Booker T. Washington, in Ashland, Kentucky, that's where I grew up. I lived on 30th street, and a block up was an all white school, but by then it wasn't integrated. So we had to walk 30 blocks to Booker T. Washington school.

Interviewer: That makes us young kids seem so lazy.

Shirely Williams: Huh?

Interviewer: That makes us young kids seem so lazy when we don't like to walk places.

Shirely Williams: What?

Interviewer: Us kids, how we don't like to walk places.

Shirely Williams: Oh, I know.

Interviewer: That makes us seem really lazy.

Shirely Williams: Well you know, walking was nothing to it. We never thought anything of it, and we had excellent black teachers at Booker T. Washington. So when school was finally
integrated, see I was in the eighth grade. Yeah. My mother died when she was 34 and left eight of us.

Interviewer: Wow.

Shirely Williams: So my dad and other siblings moved to Huntington, and I was wanting to finish my school year out. So my mother's cousin kept me until the school year ended, and then I went on to Huntington to Douglas High School. Excellent teachers there. I've learned so much from the black teachers. In a way I wish it was still like that.

Interviewer: I don't see many black teachers now.

Shirely Williams: I know.

Interviewer: There's a couple at Huntington Middle and Meadows. Well no, when I was there, there was no black teachers in Meadows.

Shirely Williams: Well they made sure you were active and everything.

Interviewer: That's how I am now.

Shirely Williams: I just loved it. I just loved it.

Interviewer: What was the best advice a family member have given you while you were in the house?

Shirely Williams: While I'm in what?

Interviewer: What is the best advice a family member gave you when you were living in the house?


Interviewer: What did you do on Christmas, Thanksgiving, or birthdays?

Shirely Williams: Well, on Thanksgivings we always went up to my husband's mother's house, but she's deceased, but we still I organize everything, call everyone, have them bring a certain dish. Then Christmas, I'll have something here at my house. Birthdays, you know, we celebrate everybody's birthday. My husband, or kids, or grandkids.

Interviewer: Where did you work?

Shirely Williams: Back in 1963, when I moved to Huntington, well, let me go back. After I spent a year at Booker T. Washington, then we moved back to Huntington, and I graduated in 1963 from Paul Blazer High School after everything was integrated. Then I moved to Huntington in '63. I worked at Maidenform. It was the bra factory for 10 years, then I took some time off and had children. Then when they were in school, I worked at the
Huntington Dress Factory. Where the police station is now, and I worked there for 10 years. Then, I decided to go to Marshall, get a degree. I did that in information technology. It was a two year associate degree, and I was offered a job, but my husband wanted me to stay home so I could travel with him and do whatever. So that's the way its been ever since.

Interviewer: Do you still make traditional family foods?
Shirely Williams: Oh, of course. Turkey, dressing, green beans, you name it.

Interviewer: Then I have some back up questions.
Shirely Williams: I just love the holidays.

Interviewer: Me too.
Shirely Williams: In a way it's sad because most of our loved ones have deceased, but the generation goes on.

Interviewer: Yeah. Can you tell me about race in Huntington, was it segregated?
Shirely Williams: Race in, what?

Interviewer: About race in Huntington.
Shirely Williams: Race in Huntington. Well, you know I have no problem. I haven't run into anything that would hurt me. I haven't been called any names or anything, but a lot of people, black people, do start trouble instead of walking away. Yeah. They just want to start trouble. The same with whites. Same way.

Interviewer: What did people do for fun?
Shirely Williams: Well my husband and I play golf, and go to the casino in Cross Lanes, and we have gatherings at church, and we used to go skating though that was years ago.

Interviewer: I go skating too.
Shirely Williams: We go to parties. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember when times were tight? I mean, do you remember when money was tight?
Shirely Williams: When I was growing up, my father was laid off so he would get commodities. You know butter, dry milk and peanut butter. Stuff like that, which really helped when he was laid off. Yeah.
Interviewer: What's one of your fondest memories living here in 1950s? How was it different from the 70s or 80s?

Shirely Williams: 1950. Let me [inaudible 00:08:33]. Well, at that time there were a lot of places where blacks couldn't go, but now it's changed a lot. Philip Carter, who teaches at Marshall, is an example where they picketed the White Pantry and other restaurants back then.

Interviewer: It said, tell me about your parents or your family's background.

Shirely Williams: My dad was from Millersburg, Kentucky. He didn't go to college. He went as far as the eighth grade, and my mother was adopted and never found her biological parents. We even drove down to either Lexington or Louisville to see if they had any record, but they said back then they didn't keep records of black children who were there without knowing who their parents were. So we didn't have any luck. My mother even tried to find her biological parents, but never could, but like I said, she was adopted and loved. She met my father in 1942, then they got married and I was the first one born.

Interviewer: What street did you, oh you told me that. What did your, oh you told me that too. Where were your parents originally from?

Shirely Williams: Well like I said, we never did find out where my mom was originally from. She was adopted, like I said, but my dad grew up in Millersburg, Kentucky. So that's all I know about that.

Interviewer: What was your favorite place to eat?

Shirely Williams: Home. You mean back then?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Shirely Williams: Home. Like I said, blacks weren't allowed in restaurants.

Interviewer: What other relative did you have contact with growing up?

Shirely Williams: My aunts, and I met my biological father in '63, and I met my half brother in '63. We stay in contact. My biological father had passed, but I've met my half brother again after, gosh, 30 years. He lives in St. Louis, and I have a half sister I've never met so I plan on going back to St. Louis and visit my half brother, and meet my half sister.

Interviewer: What is your favorite place to shop? Where was your favorite place to shop?

Shirely Williams: At the time it was Smart Shop in downtown. Oh, they had fabulous clothing. Fabulous, but like I said, everything has changed. A lot of the stores either closed down or they moved to the mall.
Interviewer: Yeah. The mall's not even in Huntington.

Shirely Williams: I know. You know they tried ...

Interviewer: It's called Huntington Mall.

Shirely Williams: They tried to get it in Huntington, but a lot of the people didn't want it in Huntington. That would've helped the economy greatly. I don't know what was wrong with them, what they were thinking about.

Interviewer: What is your fondest memory of living here?

Shirely Williams: Let's see. Going to church, going to parties and just mingling with people. You know, when my husband was mayor we had to attend a lot of functions. Most of the time, he and I were the only two blacks at the functions.

Interviewer: Yeah. What were your duties around the house as a child? What were the other children's duties? How did the duties break down by gender?

Shirely Williams: My brothers helped my dad with the lawn care, and my sisters and I, we cleaned the entire house, and washed clothes, dry them, fold them, and I would cook a lot because my dad would work from three to 11. So as soon as I got in from school, I had to start cooking. Yeah. Like I said, I was the oldest of eight. Four boys, four girls.

Interviewer: What did people do for fun? Did you go on dates?

Shirely Williams: Now what?

Interviewer: What did people do for fun? Where did you go on dates?

Shirely Williams: Oh we would go to the drive in, and to the movies, and we would go skating, and go to the park have picnics. Yeah.

Interviewer: Describe a time when you felt most proud of someone in your family, self, community.

Shirely Williams: Oh my husband. He's the wind beneath my wings. He has lifted me up so many times.

Interviewer: Describe the house you grew up in. Describe your room.

Shirely Williams: Now what?

Interviewer: Describe the house you grew up in. Describe your room.

Shirely Williams: Oh my room was huge. My room was right where I could look out the window at the front yard and everything. We had a porch that went all the way around. I loved that.
Interviewer: Describe what your siblings were like. Who were you closest too?

Shirely Williams: Well I'm closest to my sister Barb, and what was the other question?

Interviewer: Who were you closest to?

Shirely Williams: Yeah, my sister Barbara.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's all that I said. I said describe what they were like.

Shirely Williams: Oh they were fun. We'd do a lot of things together.

Interviewer: When did you learn to cook, who taught you?

Shirely Williams: Well my mother did. I'd watch her cook and clean, and things like that. So that's where I got that from.

Interviewer: Were there any special family foods or recipes?

Shirely Williams: No.

Interviewer: I just about asked you all these question. So there's no more questions. There isn't any more questions that I see.

Shirely Williams: Okay. You know, I love doing history. That's my passion. I've got a collage here that I take when we have our reunion every year, every other year in Columbus. Our next one is the first week in August next month. We always take a group picture, and this is the most people who have come.

Interviewer: Wow. That's a lot.

Shirely Williams: Oh yeah. You know, my brother died in '72, and he had a little girl. She was about three years old. Her name was Alice. We kept trying to find her. I kept putting ads, they lived in Youngstown, Ohio. I kept putting ads in the paper trying to find Alice, so I hired a detective and he found her. About eight years ago. So, my husband and I went to Youngstown to meet her and her family. That's her right down there. Right here with her kids and husband. See I was looking for Alice Johnson, but I didn't know she had married, but she's Alice Shepherd, but still the detective found her anyway and she came to the reunion one year. We all just cried. We didn't think we'd ever find her. I didn't think I'd ever find her. That's my dad. I put a family photo album together, which is down here. All kind of pictures of family members, and I did a bio on my biological father's side and my other dad's side. Yeah.

Shirely Williams: That's my stepmother. She died in 2016. This is my brother who dies in 1972. So that's her dad. Yeah. Then I have another brother who died in 2014. So, our first reunion was in Ashland, Kentucky where we're from, and we would go have a reunion at the
Dawson Park, so that's a picture of one of the reunions. Like I said, I just love doing albums.

Interviewer: Yeah. That's a cool ...

Shirely Williams: In fact, I'm in the process of doing a historical album now. You know about the lynchings back then, and football players, basketball players back in the 20s and 30s. That's my passion. That's why I wanted to get with Mr. What's his name when he was over there, in [Rered 00:20:12] Center. I want to get with him and see what kind of information he has. This is my husband, and his brother and sisters. That's Jimmy, and that's Joe. Johnny, Eddie. Eddie's wife Deanna, Johnny's wife Karen. That's me. Rita, Jimmy's wife, and Sandra, and Joyce, and Fred. These two are Joe's sisters. Sandra has never been married. Yeah. So, back then, my husband and I, and our committee had started a golf tournament called the Edna Golf Classic, and it lasted for about 17 years.

Shirely Williams: I don't know if you're familiar with any of the black golfers.

Interviewer: No.

Shirely Williams: We had Chi Chi Rodriguez, Jim Dent, Lee Elder, and Morgan Thompson, but he wasn't black, and Tammie Green, who was white. Back in May of this year, we were inducted to the African American Golfer's hall of fame in Florida.

Interviewer: Wow.

Shirely Williams: So, we're a part of that.

Interviewer: Where did you and your husband meet?

Shirely Williams: Have a seat. Okay. When I worked at Maidenform, I had to ride a bus downtown, then ride another bus to Maidenform, and the same thing going back home. I'd have to catch a bus from Maidenform to downtown, and then from downtown to where I lived. One day, I saw this handsome guy walking down fourth avenue. One day I was on the bus, and something said, "Woman, get off this bus and see where he's going." So, like you say, I was a stalker but I wasn't. I followed him into Kresge's, it was a dime store back then. Then, the blacks would always have a social at Marshall's, and he was there, and I was there with some of my girlfriends. One of the male guys I was friends with was friend with Joe. I said, "Well Porky, introduce me to him."

Shirely Williams: So he did, and then I said, "Why don't you come to my girlfriends house party next week?" So he brought him, and he introduced me again, and Joe bowed to kiss my head. I liked to, everybody in the room liked to have fainted, so after that, we were married a year later. Yeah. Two and a half years later we had our twin daughters, then the year after that we had our other daughter, then the year after that we had our son.

Interviewer: So how long have you all been married?
Shirely Williams: Going on 54 years.

Interviewer: Wow.

Shirely Williams: Yeah, we had our 50th wedding and celebration back in May of 1950. I mean 1950, but 2015. I get the things mixed up. So, I had invited 600 people. 500 came. We had it down at the hotel, former Plaza, but they changed the name to something else. So we really had a good time.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to tell me about anything?

Shirely Williams: I love my grandkids, my great grandkids. We have 17 grandkids, and five great, and four foster. Most of our grandkids and great grandkids are biracial. It doesn't mean a thing to me. I don't care what color you are, I still love you. I'm happy with my husband, and we travel. Play a lot of golf. So, he had his reunion in Tappahannock, Virginia a couple of weekends ago. That was enjoyable. See, they have theirs every year, but on my side, we have ours every other year in Columbus, but his, we've had it in Florida, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland. I could go on and on. So I just love his family like I love my own. Yup.

Speaker 3: Hey young lady.

Interviewer: Hey.

Speaker 3: How you doing?

Interviewer: Good. Thank you.