

Episode #4 transcript - Jamesetta Doby - Asbury UMC DC Oral Histories podcast

Asbury United Methodist Church, Washington, DC

Narrator: Jamesetta Doby

Interviewer: Adelle Banks

Host: Kelvin Childs

Podcast episode recording date: December 2, 2020

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INTRO CLIP:

“I remember the day, when the word came that in the fall our pupil race would change, that we would be working with young men and young women and children, of course, from other races.”

WELCOME TO THIS EPISODE OF ASBURY UMC DC ORAL HISTORIES, FEATURING INTERVIEWS FROM ASBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN WASHINGTON, DC.

THESE EPISODES ARE DRAWN FROM ORAL HISTORIES OF MEMBERS OF ONE OF WASHINGTON’S HISTORIC BLACK CHURCHES. ASBURY HAS BEEN AT THE CORNER OF 11TH AND K STREETS, NORTHWEST, SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 1836. THESE CHURCH MEMBERS SHARE THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH BLACK HISTORY, NATIONAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON, DC, AREA.

THIS EPISODE WILL FEATURE JAMESETTA DOBY, A WASHINGTONIAN WHO WAS A PUBLIC EDUCATOR FOR 44 YEARS. SHE ATTENDED ASBURY STARTING AS A YOUNG CHILD, ATTENDING ITS SUNDAY SCHOOL AND JUNIOR CHURCH AND REMAINED A MEMBER FOR MORE THAN 90 YEARS UNTIL HER DEATH IN 2019. IN CONVERSATIONS IN 2015 AND 2017 WITH INTERVIEWER ADELLE BANKS, SHE DISCUSSES HER MEMORIES OF WASHINGTON, HER WORK AS A DEMONSTRATION TEACHER GUIDING NEW STUDENT TEACHERS, AND THE NEEDLEWORK SKILLS THAT CROSSED GENERATIONS OF WOMEN IN HER FAMILY.

WE START WITH JAMESETTA DOBY’S KNOWLEDGE OF HER EARLIEST YEARS WHEN SHE TRAVELED TO HER WASHINGTON CHURCH WITH HER PARENTS.

2:09

Adelle Banks: How did you actually get to Asbury? Did you walk to the church? Or how did you travel to it?

Jamesetta Doby: On occasion before my parents were able to get a car, my father, mother, and I -- well, they pushed me in a baby carriage for a while. I can recall walking down R Street, turning, going down First Street to -- what was that -- New Jersey Avenue.

Then out New Jersey Avenue till you get to K Street. Pass the library and walk a short distance, and you'd be at the church.

AB: How long a walk was that?

JD: A long walk. It took us over an hour.

AB: So you walked an hour to church, went to these different activities, and walked an hour home?

JD: Unless someone invited us. 'Cause my parents were not able to afford a car.

AB: And there wasn't a streetcar option or something else?

JD: Streetcars were available, but they didn't take us close enough. Streetcar went down North Capitol. We would transfer, when we did ride a streetcar, at H Street. Take the car on H Street and ride west and get off at -- I guess it was 11th and H. And then we had to walk north to the church.

3:50

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[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JAMESETTA DOBY GOES ON TO RECALL LEAVING WASHINGTON TO ATTEND COLLEGE IN SEGREGATED ALABAMA, AND THE TRAIN RIDE TO GET THERE.

JD: I left Washington, D.C., September 1943. I went to Talladega College, which is in Talladega, Alabama. And I was at Talladega College until 1947. I graduated with a degree in teacher education. Those years going to Talladega I will never, never forget because that was my first experience in a facility that showed their preference for race.

When I went in 1943, people of color were unable to ride in all of the coaches to Alabama. My roommate and good friend and I rode in the coach that was right behind the engine. We were unable to eat in the dining room, so our mothers prepared lunch boxes.

5:51

We had chicken and hard cooked eggs and various things because we left here Union Station at 7 o'clock in the evening. And we did not get into Atlanta, Georgia, until the next morning. We had to go from Atlanta on the back seat of the bus. If there were more than eight -- six or eight of us, we were allowed to sit in those two seats just in front of that long back seat.

And we would ride that distance. I don't remember exactly now how much -- how far it was from Atlanta to Anniston. Then we would be met by a bus from Talladega. If we wanted to go to Birmingham, Alabama, just for a day, you were unable to try on hats, gloves, any wearing apparel because we were people of color.

But yet Talladega had a faculty that was interracial.

7:48

Immediately graduating from Talladega, my mother said -- and father -- you will go to graduate school. There was no discussion. I applied to go to Ohio State. At that time, people of color were unable to stay in the dormitory, and my mother said I don't know anyone right there, so you will have to apply to another school, which I did.

8:36

Left in late '47 and went to Philadelphia to the University of Pennsylvania, which was altogether different experience for me. I was unable to get a room on the campus, so I lived with a family.

AB: Was it that you were not allowed to live at the University of Pennsylvania's dorms at that point [inaudible]?

JD: We didn't -- I don't think that they had any dormitory space.

AB: So it was more of a space issue than discrimination?

JD: Yeah. A space issue. With Ohio State, it was because of pigmentation.

AB: And you never got there.

JD: No, I didn't want to go. I really, as I look back over it, am blessed that I did not go. I had wonderful experience in Philadelphia. Plus Philadelphia was closer, and I could come home for Thanksgiving. I couldn't come home when I was at Talladega 'cause that was -- that's an overnight trip. [brief soft sound of emergency vehicle outside in the background]

But as I look over the educational experiences that I have had, I am so blessed that my mother and father at that point in time must have been able to put elastic in those few pennies they had because both of them -- now, my father just finished high school. He was not college. But my mother did finish a teacher institution.

10:39

I took graduate courses for two years. The University of Pennsylvania would not confer the -- the degree because I had had no prior teaching experience. So I applied for a substitute position in Philadelphia, and I was very, very fortunate because I substituted for a while and then I was offered a position: Meade School, 18th and Oxford, Philadelphia. I rode the streetcar -- haven't seen a streetcar since -- to Meade School. I was there for two and a half years.

11:42

AB: Was it unusual for a woman of color to have a master's degree at the time you did, especially in this field?

JD: Now, that, I don't know.

AB: Okay.

JD: There were in the classes at the University of Pennsylvania -- there were a lot of women in those classes. I was the only person of color for -- in many classes.

12:08

MUSIC

[NARRATION/BRIDGE] JAMESETTA DOBY HEADED BACK TO WASHINGTON AND BEGAN TEACHING AT WALKER-JONES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. SHE SPECIALIZED IN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION AND SOON WAS A ROLE MODEL FOR OTHERS.

JD: Students from -- or young men and young women, I guess I should say, who were into teaching would come and bring their classes to observe some of my teaching techniques. On one occasion, the principal suggested -- and the supervisor -- that I go to Truesdell Laboratory School. Truesdell was a school where young men and young women wanted to teach came and took observation classes as well as first-level teaching classes. I stayed for -- at Truesdell for a long period of time.

I taught teacher education courses at the University of the District of Columbia for a long, long period of time until I retired.

13:50

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JAMESETTA DOBY RECALLED BEING PART OF THE DC SCHOOL SYSTEM IN THE WAKE OF THE 1954 BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION SUPREME COURT DECISION THAT DECLARED SCHOOL SEGREGATION UNCONSTITUTIONAL. MORE THAN A DECADE AFTER THAT DECISION, SHE BEGAN TEACHING AT WHAT BECAME THE UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA AFTER A MERGER INVOLVING PREVIOUSLY SEGREGATED SCHOOLS.

AB: Were you involved with education when the schools were segregated? You mentioned being at --

JD: Yes. I remember the day, when the word came that in the fall our pupil race would change, that we would be working with young men and young women and children, of course, from other races.

I was teaching at Walker-Jones School, First and L, [NW] on the day that schools were desegregated. I think it was the afternoon when I heard the news. And the principal gave the message. I think she had it on the radio and gave it to a child. And that child went to all the teachers and brought it. Now, when I was in --

15:37

AB: Excuse me, was the announcement from the Supreme Court case or was it something else that made it an announcement for the D.C. schools? What do you remember about that?

JD: All I remember is I was at Walker-Jones School when the announcement was heard. And interesting, I have had I don't know how many -- I've had them from South Africa. I've had students -- I've had a couple of students from Hong Kong. I've had just ordinary Caucasian students. And I have come to the conclusion -- I'm not a physician, but as I think back, the only difference in race is the pigmentation. My blood --

AB: Your --

JD: -- is red. Their blood is red. If I have a cut on my arm and she has a cut or he has a cut, the blood is the same color. Their interests, our interests are the same, generally speaking.

AB: So it's only the pigmentation of the skin that's different.

JD: Pigmentation of the skin.

17:47

AB: So originally, you only worked with other Black students and teachers?

JD: I had -- when I was demonstrating, I had a couple of students who were Oriental. And then I had some students who couldn't make up their mind whether they wanted to work on the elementary level or on the junior high school level. What they wanted at the laboratory school was the experience working with young children and then deciding whether or not they preferred young children or middle age, junior high or senior high. But I really, really, really enjoyed working at the laboratory school. Sometime I would have a room in the back of the room, 35, 40 youngsters who were in teacher education. And many of them were of the -- of the other race observing me. There were times when I had taught summer school and young men and young women who didn't know the parts of speech. And they would come to be refreshed of various areas in the English language. I did it because I really, really enjoyed. And I say today 'cause I have a granddaughter who's teaching. And she's doing very, very well. Stay in teaching because you help youngsters to develop an appreciation for where we are, who we are. And that is a lifelong thing.

20:08

JD: And teaching is very, very rewarding. Christmas time, I get card -- Christmas cards from young -- from young men and women that I taught years ago. About two months ago, I got a telephone call from a young lady. She thought I had gone on, and someone told her that I was still -- and she's taking me to lunch sometime this summer.

20:50

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[NARRATION/BRIDGE] AFTER A QUARTER CENTURY OF TRAINING TEACHERS, JAMESETTA DOBY RETIRED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA IN 1992. HER RETIREMENT FEATURED TWO OF HER FAVORITE THINGS – TRAVELING AND CROCHETING. OVER HER LIFETIME SHE TRAVELED TO FIVE CONTINENTS. AND SHE WAS AN AVID MEMBER OF HER CHURCH’S CROCHETING FOR CHRIST MINISTRY.

JD: I have enjoyed my retirement. I have done extensive travel all over the world, even to the southernmost tip of South America. And I highly, highly recommend travel so you can see other cultures and develop an appreciation for other cultures and the products that come out of. I have always been interested in needlework. My believed that you should be able to sew on a button, put a hem in a skirt, and also needlework. And my mother taught me when I was seven years old how to knit using two needles and how to crochet using one needle.

To this very, very day I am still crocheting.

22:44

My mother was a home -- home economics teacher. You don't even hear the word anymore. And she taught me some of the needlework that she had been taught. My mother's grandmother was a slave.

And she taught or was taught how to take flour sacks and sugar sacks -- of that time were made of inexpensive cloth -- and make bed sheets or simple blouses for me or anything that they felt that they could use.

From my mother's experiences, I became interested in various kinds of needlework. And I think that was one of the focuses I had when I was in Hong Kong, when I went through the Panama Canal and went to the Islands of San Blas and met the Kuna Indians. The Kuna Indians were described as very primitive people. And when I went there, I could not believe the beautiful, beautiful needlework that those quote primitive people did.

24:51

AB: When was it that you visited there? [Sounds of emergency vehicles in the background]

JD: I've been twice. I don't remember offhand, but I was still working 'cause I traveled during the summer months. And [sound of emergency vehicle in the background] then [narrator clears her throat] a group of us [honking in the background] around -- around the same age after -- it was 1947, we organized a club of ladies to play [the card game] canasta. And we enjoyed just being with each other. And we decided that we wanted to see other places than Washington, D.C. So we went to New York every September. Saw all of the Broadway shows 'cause we would go on Friday, spend the night, and come back Sunday. And after a while, we said let's travel overseas, and we did so.

AB: So this was in the '40s and '50s or later?

JD: That was early '50s.

AB: And you started by playing -- what did you say you were playing?

JD: Canasta.

AB: What is that?

JD: It's a card game.

26:39

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[NARRATION/BRIDGE] WITH THE EXCEPTION OF HER TIME AWAY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, JAMESETTA DOBY SAID SHE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF ASBURY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, WHERE SHE WAS INVOLVED IN SEVERAL OF ITS CHOIRS OVER THE YEARS. HER FACE APPEARS IN A GROUP PHOTO ON A HISTORICAL SIGN STEPS AWAY FROM THE FRONT DOORS OF THE CHURCH. SHE SPOKE OF SOME HER CHURCH AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS BEFORE CONCLUDING THE 2015 INTERVIEW.

JD: I cannot recall being away from Asbury if I was here in Washington other than maybe a short illness, bad cold, or whatever illness I would have. But all of my life -- my picture is on the corner of 11th and K [on a historical sign] with my mother. I think I was about eight years old. My father is in that picture. It's a picture of the congregation.

He -- he's back there with the men somewhere, and my mother and father -- now, I believe that after all these years that I'm the only child on that. And I think I was about eight.

28:37

AB: How would you describe Asbury's music and what it means to you?

JD: Asbury's music has always been, in my opinion, beautiful. We've had good soloists and -- and people who had not been specifically trained in vocal lessons. God gave them vocal cords so that they could render music. And I feel that the little singing that I have done and still do -- not as a soloist -- was a blessing. And I'm a person who believes when you have blessings in specific areas, you have it for a purpose. And you utilize because if you do not care for your blessing or use your blessing, you may lose it.

29:49

As long as I am physically able to drive that old piece of car and come to choir rehearsal, I will participate in the Vacation Choir.

30:10

AB: Can you tell me, of all the things we've talked about or something we haven't, of what are you most proud?

JD: Well, I don't know whether it's proud or grateful for all, all, A-L-L, blessings that I've had. I've had good blessings. Not perfect, but good blessings of health.

I've had good blessings of my membership in this building for 90 years. I've had good blessings of my relationship with my husband. I've been blessed with two children who have not given me any trouble. And I have friends who stay in tears. So my whole life I am grateful. And I get on my knees every day -- every night, I guess I should say -- and thank the Lord for the blessings that he has given me.

AB: Can you tell me what your faith has meant to you? What your faith has meant to you or how it has sustained you.

JD: My faith, that's my everything. That's my everything, you know. I guess I don't focus on the word. My word that I use more than anything else is blessing.

32:30

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33:35