Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

DONALD M. BARBER

Interviewer: Janice T. Walthour
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[00:00]

JANICE WALTHOUR: Today I'm interviewing Donald Barber and, Donald, will you just tell us a bit of information about yourself?

DONALD BARBER: Okay.

J. W. Your name, your family background, where you grew up, where you went to school—that kind of thing?

D. B. Okay, I'll just give a brief overview and if you need clarification, or just, kind of filling in, just stop me.

J. W. Okay.

D. B. I'll fill in. Okay. My name's Donald Barber. I was born on March 24, 1957. I've been a life-long county resident. I had a brief interlude for like three years where I lived in Baltimore County but for the rest of the time I was here. I mean I was never really kind of left here. I was always around one place or another. Umm, I was born and raised at Sotterley in Hollywood. [Maryland] My parents were both employees of Sotterley. My father worked out in the fields and in the garden. And then my mother worked in what they called the big house, the mansion. She cleaned. And

when the millionaires that owned were around, she would cook and kind of wait on them. That was her job. And so they both were kind of, umm, at the beck and call of the people that owned the place. So they didn't really have kind of a set work schedule. They just had to do whatever needed to be done. Umm, generally my father worked six days a week. He was only off on Sundays. And my mother worked, umm, just whenever she needed to work, which was basically every day. She also did some day work on the side where she would clean some white folks' houses in addition to that.

Ah, let's see. I began school in 1963 at Banneker Elementary School in Loveville. And umm, I was in the class of Mrs. Estelle Lee. I think a lot of people had her. Everybody—all my brothers and sisters had her except for my little sister 'cause she a little bit after when the schools were desegregated. Umm, let's see. I went to Banneker for two years—both of those years I was in Mrs. Lee's class in the first grade and in the second grade. And then, umm, they did kind of like a semi-integration of schools when I was in the third grade where they gave you a choice of whether you went to, umm, your regular segregated schools or if you wanted to go to the school that was close to your neighborhood. And at that time, my parents and ahh, my cousins—their parents—they all decided that we would go to the nearest school, which was in Hollywood. We went to Hollywood School. And then—. Actually, I'm a product of whatever St. Mary's County had to offer. 'Cause I went to Banneker, I went to Hollywood, I went to Leonardtown for middle school, and I went to Chopticon for high school and then I went to St. Mary's College. So I had my complete education right here in the county—never umm, never left here. Umm. Let's see, what else? Anything else that's significant?

Right now I'm employed. I'm the, uh, senior director at a psychiatric rehabilitation program called Pathways that operates in Hollywood. So I'm still in Hollywood, living there and working there. But umm—. That's pretty much my background.

J. W. Okay.

D. B. Oh, I can tell you. Umm. My father was Bernard Barber and my mother—her maiden name was Somerville. She was a Somerville.

J. W. Okay.

D. B. And umm—.

J. W. Okay.

D. B. She's—. Her family was ah—they were right there on St. John's Road. That's where. Her father was Blaine Somerville and her mother's name was, ah, Susie. They were also Hollywood rela—residents.

[03.33]

J. W. Okay. Do you feel that education prepared you for life? How well did it prepare you? You know—in what ways?

D. B. Okay. Actually I think I got a very good preparation for life through my education, because I got to see—. First of all, in addition to the, ah, reading, writing, and arithmetic—what they call the three R's, I also had a great many experiences, umm, what you would call, the kind of social history kind of experiences, from number one, the beginning in a— umm, in the segregated school system where I found that even though the material resources were limited at Banneker when I was there, I mean we didn't have text books. Our teacher wrote the work on the board, chalk board, and we had to copy things on paper, our assignments and things like that. We didn't have—. I never had a textbook in the first grade when I was at Banneker, but what I did have was—it was an amazing amount of support from the teachers. I can recall. One of the most vivid memories that I have, is my first day of school at Banneker. My sister Phyllis had graduated that—umm, in the spring before, and then I started in the fall, and it was just real striking to me that when I started a bunch of the high school teachers came down to see me in the first-grade class and they introduced themselves and talked about how good a student my sister was and that, basically, if I paid attention [laughs] and did what I was supposed to do, I could do just as well. And it was umm—there was a

real family kind of feeling. It—. I can't describe it any other way than that. You felt like you belonged. And umm—. And each of my older brothers and sisters had—each had the teachers and they all were familiar with the family and they knew that my parents were supporters of their children's education. So it was just a—. It was a—it was a good feeling, a very good experience.

Then they integrated schools and I think it was 1965, when I went to Hollywood school and I had an experience that was the other end of the spectrum where you weren't really welcome in the school. It was umm—. I think the teachers were, umm, on the like the leading edge of a kind of a social experiment and they really didn't have proper preparation to handle the things that were going on. But one of the biggest, kind of sharpest memories I have from that was—I think they were told—I'm speculating here—that we weren't going to be as, umm, [pauses, then emphasizes the next word] *smart* as the white children were. That, ah—. I guess they knew that we didn't have any books or materials or anything, but what they didn't realize was that the social support that we had made up for those material things that were missing. But they didn't—. I don't think they were anticipating that. So I think they had lower expectations for what our performance was going to be.

But to back up a little bit. When I was in second grade—. I had a lot of older brothers and sisters so, in order to kind of survive in your house with them, you have to learn things. So I could read and write, and add and subtract, and multiply and tell time and all of that kind of thing that you were supposed to learn in school. You just—. Because of the large age gap between me and my older brothers and sisters, you just learn that stuff of thing at home. Like for example, if you wanted to watch something on TV and you don't know how to tell time, your sister's going to get it. So you know, you just learn survival skills. So ah umm—. When I was at Banneker, Mrs. Lee noticed that I was ahead of where I was supposed to be for, umm—for my class. So what she did was—. I guess that they had like a warehouse or something with text books. And she went and got some books from older classes and just tried to see if I could do the work in them. And I could do it pretty easily actually, up until about the forth grade. So she went and got a whole bunch of fourth

grade books—my math, my spelling and reading—all those kind of books. I had fourth grade books when I was in the second grade. And really, there were no text books, but these were like samples or something they had at the Board [of Education]. And she gave those to me and that was what I worked from. So—. By the time I got to Hollywood school, I mean, you know—they were expecting me to lag behind and the work was a piece of cake. I mean school work was always kid of easy for me when I was a kid especially at that age and, you know, that was no more of a challenge than what I had at Banneker. As a matter of fact, it wasn't challenging 'cause like I say I had fourth grade books when I was at Banneker and when I went back to like third grade books when I was at Hollywood school. And one of the things that was interesting, my mother never threw anything away. So, umm—when she had a stroke and we had to clean up things, I found a whole bunch of my report cards and—one of the things that I think was interesting, my mother was, I guess you would call that person functionally illiterate or something. I mean she could read and write and everything but she was kind of a product of the system that she grew up in. Her job was cleaning people's houses so she could read well enough to distinguish furniture polish from floor polish or something like that. But in terms of reading like a book or magazine and kind of comprehending what the meaning in those was, was a very big struggle for her. And I noticed that on my first report card that I had gotten from Hollywood school, the integrated school, I noticed that the teacher had put that I was working at grade level. And my mother had struggled to write something back like basically, "I know he is ahead of that." You know, and then, of course, the teacher wrote back that "No, he's right where he belongs." But it was interesting to look back and see that—that kind of ah, played out in writing in there. Umm—.

Okay. Well, I mean—I mean—.

J. T. Okay.

D. B. I'm kind of rambling here.

[09:27]

J. T. Oh, How do you think? Now you're talking a lot about what it was like then.

D. B. Umm huh.

J T. How are things different today? Is there a difference in the way your family or society in general feels about education than when you were coming along? And if so, what is the difference?

D. B. Okay. First of all, I think there is a significant difference in the way my family felt about education and the ways things are today. And it probably kind of reflects the society in general because, one of the things that—kind of characteristics that I saw back at that time was the great deal of trust in the teachers. Umm—. Like—. Okay, when I was in school, and particularly at Banneker and I when I attended very early elementary school, they would actually spank you if you were misbehaving. And, you know my parents were telling me, you know, "If you go to school and the teacher spanks you, when you come home, we're going to spank you again." It wasn't like they were going to go to school and challenge the teacher and, you know, "What's going on?" They—. I think because there was more of a kind of community feeling with the teachers, they— 'cause the teacher were part of the community at that time. Where nowadays teachers are imported in or something. 'Cause I can remember seeing some of the teachers in church on Sundays, Those kinds of things where, you know, if there's anything going on, they're going to, kind of, touch base after Mass. You know that there is some continuity between school and home. There was like a disconnect where here you are at school and you do this and at home you do this. There was a continuity I think. And I kind of feel that is not as prevalent today as it was back at that time. And I think it's to the detriment of the students and the learning environment in the schools. Now on the other hand, I think schools have a great deal more technology and just material resources today than they had in those times. And I think they have a better understanding of children that have any kind of a problem, be it a learning disability, be it some kind of a behavioral problem, or be it just having like a dysfunctional home where you can't go home and sit down and do your homework and concentrate and get proper nutrition and the things you need to be able to function at school. I think

there's a better understanding of that now in the schools. So I mean it's not like 'in the good old days'—it's—it's like everything is a trade off. You have some of some thing and less of something else.

J. W. How has your education of lack of education affected your relationship with your family members?

D. B. Umm—. Particularly in my family it was a strong emphasis on education. So I think that the fact that I was pretty successful in school and I was able to go on to, you know, get my Bachelor's from college was—it was expectations. So the fact that I kind of did what was expected of me kind of eased things in the family. But when you say family, it's—that's kind of a loose definition. You have an extended family in addition to your immediate family. And with the extended family, I think that it's been my perception that the people in my extended family are usually kind of proud people who did well in school. I think that one of the kind of cultural problems is people—umm, sometimes it's like [people] downplay the importance of school and they say like, "You're a nerd" or a "geek." "Bookworm" was the term; I think that was the old-fashioned term they used to use. I've been very fortunate to have an extended family that values education. So those kind of distinctions weren't made at that time. So I think it act—it actually helps my relations with family. Another way it helped that even though the older generation of our family seems to be dying out at this point, as I was growing up, they would always—if they had something that was puzzling to them, like some kind of form that they had to fill out or something, I did a great deal of completing people's forms. Like they had to get social security benefits or the Medicaid benefits or Medicare benefits, anything like that, I spent a lot of time. And I guess it kind of makes you have a tighter bond with your family because, you know, when you are small the older members of your family did things to help you out and then it's kind of a way of giving back. You know, a reciprocity where they did something for you and if you get in the position to do something for them, you do that. So I never had any, umm, issue with helping people fill out forms. I was asked a thousand times, but I did it.

J.W. Thinking back as you were talking about your elementary years on a few schools, what was—you used the word a little earlier called characteristics and some of the things you said you know, of families who trust teachers, more of a community feeling, people you saw, continuity between home and school what through the generations do you think you have passed on to your—the children in the family, the nieces, the nephews, what are some of the just basic concepts?

D. B. Define "basics."

J. W. Things that your mother told you about school that your sisters and brothers told their children. Do you have any information—

D. B. Sure.

J. W. —or do you remember anything with that?

[14.52]

D. B. Okay. What we were taught was—. I'll just be blunt here. —is that, yes, there is discrimination. There are a certain number of people who are going to discriminate against you because of your color. But you could choose to be ignorant. If the information is out there and there's a free public school that you can go to and attend, it's your responsibility to go and attend and soak up everything that you can soak up there. And then if people discriminate against you, that's the fact that you can't do anything about. The things that you can do something about, you do the things you can about it and you can possibly put yourself in a position where do don't have to deal with as many people who have these kind of discriminatory issues. In addition, just a kind of concept of just valuing education. While it's nice to be able to drive a Lexus or whatever, the fact that you may have to do with a little less and that's some of your resources and your education carries more of a lasting value than that expensive car or expensive furniture or clothes. Those things are superficial. And the things that you do to fortify your mind are things that you can carry with you. And, one—. I think the biggest that my parents passed on to me that we passed on to, was the value of reading. We were—. My parents didn't have any reading skills. And our parents were poor [long pause]

economically, essentially poor, and like the _____ [inaudible] felt poor. And one of the things they always told us is that whether we were a poor family or not we were going to school. That was taught to us at an early age and then, if you guys could do well in school, then you won't have to suffer the way we did. And then they made whatever sacrifices they needed to. I remember when I was very small my mother bought this leather-bound set of World Book encyclopedias. And I mean they—that was like a trip to the moon for a person with a better—with their economic situation because they had to make payments on the things. I mean they couldn't just buy them. They didn't even have the money to pay for a set of encyclopedias but they were willing to make that sacrifice. So they knew it was bigger investment in the future, *in* [with great emphasis] *our future*, to do that. I think that has been passed down through the generations just that whole concept that education is a value, and reading is the most important thing of all.

J. W. What about homework?

D. B. Homework was inevitable. [both laugh] It was ah—it was your first responsibility out there. We had chores and things to do and as I got older I had a job after school and everything. But homework was just a given. It was just like the air you breathe. It was there. And you did it. And you took care of it. There was no question or argument about it. It was as much a part of education as going to school. You have homework to do, you do it. You take care of your responsibilities.

[17:56]

J.W. Tell us a little about the intergenerational relationships in your family. Would you describe them as close? And how?

D.B. I think the intergenerational relationships within my family are particularly strong. It's an interesting thing to watch. I have no children of my own, but I have many nieces and nephews and then some of these nieces and nephews even have children. And we operate as one family. It's ah—. I don't think—Actually, I don't think some of the younger people in the family even understand [chuckles] what, what people's particular roles are. I'd say I think that this was a, to be

blunt, kind of a mass of family people just relatives. That's the way they see it. I think that it's interesting to see the differences, I mean, [pauses] as each generation comes along it seems that they have less things to struggle against. Well I'm—ah. I should take that—I should change that. —a different kind of things to struggle against. Whereas our struggle was primarily economic and [pauses] and just kind of attaining and maintaining civil rights. Their struggles are against just so many distractions and pitfalls in society. I think there are more pitfalls in society today than there were at the time that we were coming along because umm—there's such a drug culture, prevalent drug culture that has permeated music and print media, TV, movies, everything. And we—. I don't think we had to withstand as much. I mean drugs, and my mother used to say this too, "they had drugs when I was young in school. We just had the sense to leave them alone." That's what she said. And it's true. There have been drugs probably as long as man there has been drugs and alcohol and things like that. And the ability to resist it, I think, is a strength to take—to carry people forward. But what I see now is kind of just culture, and some of the music and things is where drug references are casually made, like it's not even central to the topic or whatever the medium is conveying, but is just kind of part of the environment. And for kids to negotiate that—the violence, I think there's a lot of—a lot more potential for violence today than there was when we were coming along. So I think that the generation of kids that are coming up now need as much support as can possibly give them just to negotiate and to successfully be able to make it.

J.W. This is a question again thinking about what you said about family roles and you just saying that you were kind of a big mass and they know they're related. You know, everybody's there in one big—. Do you think that family roles if there is a role of the uncle, for the aunt, for grandma grandpop, for cousins for supporting one another or has that become one big, you know, family reunion without the special responsibilities—?

D. B. Without the identified kind of roles?

J. W. Yes.

[21:17]

D. B. Well what's happened in my family is that my parents had children over such a broad period of time that the overlap of generations—. I think that is what's kind of led to people not really understanding. 'Cause I have a younger sister and then I have two nieces and nephews that are older than she is. So then there is some overlap there. 'Cause I think that some of the kids don't recognize that I'm their mother's brother. They probably kind of almost think I'm one of their brothers or something. It's kind of strange. Like I have a nephew, I'm 47, I have a nephew that's 45. That kind of thing. Umm where as you—and. Because of the tight-knit nature of the family, those—the feeling that you get is like a sibling, more of a sibling than a person that's in a separate generation from that person. And umm—'cause I mean I know that my youngest sister and my niece that's exactly, almost to the day nine months older than her, are best friends. They function as sisters. That's—that's—. It's just kind of a unique situation because my parents had children over a span of twenty years. My oldest brother was born in 1938 and youngest sister was born in 1961. so that's a long time.

J. W. Uh umm. Is there anything that you would like to air about the difference in children today or people today and how they were? And just in general your whole belief toward improving the citizenry and a community and the African American culture?

D. B. Okay. What I think could go a long way for improving the citizenry of the current generation. I think if more education and emphasis on the political systems, I think—I think people are real quick to give up and say, "Nothing I do will make a difference." When in fact, there was a great deal of struggle. I think another value that we were taught was the value of voting. My parents had to struggle to vote. And they kind see the younger—they kind of view the younger generation as taking it for granted that you can vote when it was something that they had many obstacles to go through in order to vote. So they made sure that as soon as we were voting age we registered. And I mean my mother died, passed away in 1998, and right up until the time that she started to have these severe strokes, she would always call me on Election Day and say, "Did you vote?" I have

voted in every election there has been since I was voting age. And I think that if we could somehow get that political kind of—it's a value. If we could get that political value passed on to the younger generation, I think that would be a big step. Just kind of becoming invested in the system and knowing that there is strength in numbers, and the fact that if they chose to do things with unity, that they could have a much louder voice and get some of the needs met in a way that works within the system and changes the system in a way that it supports them instead of having to be on the outside of the system and kind of approaching with your hand out looking for something.

J. W. Okay.

D. B. Okay?

[24.52]

J. W. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

D. B. Umm. Oh, okay. One of the things that I would like to share; I was recruited for the board of trustees of Sotterley and I currently serve as a member of the executive board, I'm the treasurer of the Sotterley Foundation. I grew up on Sotterley and I started working there at the age of seven picking weeds out of the gravel driveway and picking strawberries in the springtime. And then through the years, cutting grass and just did kind of manual labor at Sotterley. And our father—he worked there as I may have mentioned earlier—and my mother did and my grandparents the generations of my family worked there. And I thought that insightful on the part of the current board of trustees of Sotterley to recruit me as a member in an effort to diversify the trustees. And then the message that comes out from Sotterley, and I think there is a very powerful message there for the children that are of a learning age now because they have a learning program at Sotterley now jointly with the Board of Education, but just in terms of people trying to identify and connect with their roots, I think there's a resource there for African Americans that should be exploited because there is many, many negative images of African Americans in the current media and this is almost a perception of lowered expectations. Even though you have equal rights somebody has to

protect them for you, somebody has to do things for you. But just—. What I would like people to understand is that slaves weren't slaves and then suddenly became people when they were emancipated. That they were people the entire time and they were dealing with an extremely harsh, almost intolerable situation and they showed the diversity and the strength of themselves. And that's another thing I would like to see people learn is that even though the slaves were in a system that held them powerless, they weren't just totally victims. They lived in a victimizing system but they found ways to express their own individuality, their culture, to try to hang on to remnants of African culture that they had. It expressed itself in many different ways. The big positive message that I want people to see is that there are many families that began, even in St. Mary's County, as slaves, but in the twenty-first century they have family members that are very vibrant and positive. Even though the struggle has been difficult there're success stories. And I think these success stories need to be shared with as much or even more emphasis and many negative news stories that you see. News has evolved over the years to be kind of marketed based on sensationalism. So spectacular crimes or something—or something that's threatening seems to gain more precedence. So I don't think that you can rely on the news to present any kind of a positive image of ourselves. I think it's up to us and it is up to us to pass it on to our children through just this examination of the struggle of black people within the community from being slaves up through their struggles to support and raise their families in a way that they could also kind of take part in what we call the American dream, and be successful. And there's many success stories out there and I'd like to see more of them be made available to our children.

J. W. Thank you so much.

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]