

5-31-2001

Barret, Odessa

University of Southern Maine

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/aa_hiwimi

Recommended Citation

University of Southern Maine, "Barret, Odessa" (2001). *Home Is Where I Make It Oral History Project*. 17.
https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/aa_hiwimi/17

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Items From the Collection at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Home Is Where I Make It Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

Transcript
"Home Is Where I Make It":
African American Community and Activism in Greater Portland, Maine
Interview: Odessa Barrett
Date: 31 May 2001
Location: Portland, Maine

When and where were you born?

I was born in Port Arthur, Texas, 1948.

Can you tell me something about your family background?

I am the sixth child, third girl, in a middle-class, blue collar family of 7. My maternal grandparents were Native American and French, and Spanish and African American, while my paternal were Native American and African American.

Can you tell me your parents' names and something about them?

My parents: Ernest H. Edwards from Oklahoma and Cora L. Barnes Edwards from Louisiana. My father was a Mason, a church deacon, and a truck driver for Gulf Oil Company. In those days this was considered a "really good" job. My mother was a seamstress who worked out of our home. We owned our own home and half a city block near the high school.

How many siblings do you have and where are they now?

There are 4 females and 3 males in my family. Two of my brothers live in Arlington, Texas. One is a retired police detective from the Port Arthur Police Department and the youngest is a retired programmer from IBM in Texas. The middle son is in Fresno, California. He is an electrical engineer retired from Silicon Valley. I have 3 sisters, all of whom live in Texas. The second oldest and the youngest have settled in Arlington/Irving area and the oldest lives in Port Arthur still.

What was life like for you as a child?

Life for me as a child was bitter sweet. I was between the youngest boy and girl so I was never alone. Church was the focal point of our lives. It was a time of "White Only" restrooms and drinking fountains, but we were spared a lot of that because we owned our own car so public transportation was not a worry for us. Traveling food for us was a basket of fried sausage and biscuits if it was morning and fried chicken and bread if it was lunch time. We learned to use the bathroom before we left and take in few fluids because we had to hold it until we could find a restroom. We are talking about a 3-hour drive. We lived in a spacious 3-bedroom house on a corner lot where we grew vegetables and flowers on one side and fruit trees (orange, plum, fig) and flowers on the other. Our playground was the athletic field for the high school that was across the street from our house: the track run, the tennis courts, and baseball diamonds. We lived on the west side of the tracks, the whites lived on the east side. There was no public transportation for our side, so people who worked as domestics walked or were picked up by their employers. I was not affected by this when I was young because my parents were very protective. I became aware as I got older.

What is your educational background?

I graduated with honors from Lincoln High School in Port Arthur. Received a Diploma in Comptometry in Oakland, California, and received an Associate in Business Administration and Computer Science. I have a Continuing Education certificate in Behavioral Science, am a Certified Mediator through extension at USM, and am trained as an Educator on HIV/AIDS.

How did you like school?

I loved school except for math. Science and English were my best subjects. School personnel all knew my family because we lived so close. My older brothers and sisters had been before me, and my parents were very involved, so I didn't get away with much.

What kinds of jobs have you had in your life?

My first job was as a census taker, next was as an assistant to a tax adjustor, a sales assistant at Sears, sales in Singer Sewing Machines and Vacuums. I moved to Maine and took the first job

available: Aunti Leoni's sandwich shop. Then: PROP Fuel Assistance as an intake worker and outreach; YWCA, secretary to Street Program and Fair Harbor for girls; Maine National Bank, OCR operator; Coca Cola, System Operator; Filene's, sales; BJ's, for a card company; J.E. Gould, picker/computer operator; Family Crisis Services, HIV Educator; City of Portland, Health Promotion Specialist; Co-chair of the state's HIV Community Planning Group.

I did census work. I've done all kinds of work. I've worked in department stores, I've worked in fuel assistance, up here. I worked in a pizza place. I worked at Maine National Bank. I worked at Coca-Cola as a systems operator. And then I started working for family crisis, and then I started working for the City of Portland.

Can you tell me about your own family?

My own family? I have two adult children and two grandchildren.

So you are married?

No. I have been married.

You have been married.

A few times.

How many children did you have?

I have two. I have a daughter and a son.

Where are your children today?

They're right here in Maine, Portland, as a matter of fact.

What are they doing?

Well, my son works, has two jobs, working in a restaurant and he goes to USM for engineering. And my daughter is a health care provider.

Can you tell me something about your grandchildren?

Well, I have a 15-year-old grandson and I have a 12-year-old granddaughter.

Now I'd like to talk to you about family and community traditions. How long have you been in Maine?

I've been in Maine since October of '79.

When and why did your family come to Maine?

My then husband came up here to go to school for marine engineering, and I followed.

How do think that living in Maine affected your family's life experience?

Greatly. When I came here, there weren't very many Blacks, so there was no real sense of community. There was no place where you can go and see yourself en masse. So my kids, being from the South, had already had their sense of identity so it was really hard for them because they either had to teach people who they were or struggle to maintain their own identity.

What are the differences that you find between living in Maine and other places in the United States?

Massive. Maine is like being on the other side of the world. Maine is like, I don't know; I've never a place where a mass of people have not known other races, have not been really integrated into other races. Maine was—when I came here—people were still asking questions about Blacks. About your hair, about everything. Questions that people just weren't asking in the '70s anymore, and they were still asking these questions. Because people I was meeting had not even met Black people before; they had seen Black people on television, but had not met them before. And other people that I was running into had seen Black people when their parents had help come up for the summer, and had only known them as little monkeys, so it was really a weird trip.

In what ways were you involved in your children's lives to help them succeed in life?

In what ways was I involved in my children's lives?

Yes, to help them succeed in life.

I was there. I taught them pride in themselves. I taught them to have faith and to be strong. And I taught them that there was a direction that was uphill and that there was another direction that was downhill, but I would wish that they would choose the uphill direction.

What was your experience raising children? What differences do you think there are between then and now?

The experience of trying to keep your children secure in who they were was very hard.

What are some of the most important holidays that you celebrate?

Christmas and Thanksgiving. Or Thanksgiving and Christmas. [laughter] Fourth of July. The regular ones I guess.

What special traditions do you and your family have during these holidays? Were these traditions passed on to you by your parents or grandparents?

Well, special traditions. We get together for Christmas Eve and prayer is a very big part of everything, and that was a tradition that was passed on. We pass on the tradition of food, preparing food for holidays. That's a big tradition.

What is the most important lesson you've learned from your parents?

From my parents? That my strength was good, and that I was beautiful inside, and that beauty is only skin deep.

Do you ever have family reunions?

Yeah.

What are they like?

Well, we've had only two family reunions on the Edwards side, which is my father's side of the family. They were wonderful. It's weird that when you grow up, you either go to one side of the family or the other side; you either go to the mother's side of the family or the father's side.

Well, we went to the mother's side of the family because they were the closest in the area. And my father's side lived far away in California and stuff, so we were closer to my mother's side of the family.

How often are the reunions held?

Well, every two years. But, like I said, we were closer to my mother's side of the family, so this reunion offered us the chance to meet the other side of the family, the Edwards side, and all the offspring.

What can you tell me about your neighborhood?

That I grew up in?

Yes.

Oh, well, it was all Black, and it was on the west side of town. It was one block away from the high school and it was mostly single family dwellings, with rental property in the rear.

Everybody knew everybody; everybody took care of everybody. We really were a village, you can say, because anyone was allowed to chastise you; any adult was allowed to tell you when you were wrong or right, and could go back to your parents and tell your parents what they had said to you. And your parents kinda paid attention to that then.

Did your neighborhood have any traditions or annual activities that drew people together?

Oh, we had a lot of traditions, but the one that stands out most is that for Christmas we had neighborhood themes where different neighborhoods had different decorations, but the whole neighborhood had the same one. And our theme was Silent Night, so we had this big star and moon with blue lights in the front yard. Every year everybody had it. So, that's the way it was.

The next topic I want to ask you about is activism and leadership.

Okay.

What community or religious groups have you participated in during your life so far?

Well, I've participated in a lot of groups. Religious groups. I've been affiliated with Green Memorial AME Zion since I first came, but I've done some, I guess, listening to Sun Yun Moon, whom I believe has a good message. And also I have participated in listening to Guru Maharaji; I like listening to all truths. So, I've been a part of that. I've been a part of the NAACP; I've been a part of the community planning group around HIV prevention; I've been a community mediator.

What roles did you play in the groups?

Members.

What were some of the contributions that you made in your community?

In my community? Community is a really hard descriptive word for Maine and me. So, I don't know what you mean by community exactly.

Like, your neighborhood basically, who you moved around with.

In my neighborhood?

Yeah.

I only know my next door neighbor in my neighborhood. I know my upstairs neighbors. I know just the immediate people in my neighborhood. I'm not very active neighborly.

Can you tell me about any particular challenges that you or your family faced?

Any particular what?

Particular challenges.

Just the challenge of being Black in Maine. Just the challenge of ignorance and the challenge of other people not knowing. Having to explain who I am and why I am or why my hair is or why my--anything. Just explaining. That's a challenge.

How did you face and overcome the challenges?

By meeting them, just meeting them face on. And being who I am and not letting anything change who I am or my outlook.

What is the relationship between your family's success and your participation in the community?

My family's success and the participation in the community? Like we say, it's back to that word community. That just doesn't resonate too well for me. That whole thing of community and family success. I don't feel like I've been in a community here, not very much.

What are some special and unique things about the African American community here in Portland?

Well, when you say African American community here in Portland, then that would put me in my church realm or in my other activism.

What was the question again? What are some special and unique things about the African American community here in Portland?

We do get together. And when we get together, it's great. There's not much that I can say. Sorry to disappoint you on that one.

That's okay. Were you involved in the civil rights movement?

Was I involved? No. Not directly.

Do you have any specific memories of the time period?

Oh, God, yes. Only what I saw on TV, though.

What did you see on TV?

Oh, you know, the bad parts. Like the turning of the fire hose on children and protesting. But I grew up in a period where there were faucets that were designated for Blacks and whites, and bathrooms that were designated for Blacks and whites, so that memory is still there.

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview about your family, your community, or your personal leadership?

About my family, my community, or my personal leadership. It's really hard to feel that you have leadership when you're disenfranchised, and you don't want to claim any leadership if you don't feel that you have any followers. What's a leader without followers? I don't know. But the whole experience of being here in Maine has illuminated me, has opened up avenues that I never knew existed because I just didn't know what it was like to have to explain your very existence. It's just been a difference, a real difference.

Well, thank you for allowing me to interview you today. This is the end of the "Home Is Where I Make It" interview with Ms. Barrett.

Thank you.

You're welcome.