

Interview: Lileah Harris
Address: Cedar Rapids, IA
Age: Unknown
Student: Kiarra Morrow - middle School
Organization: Four Oaks Bridge
Date of Interview: March 24, 2010

Kiarra Morrow: Hi, my name is Kiarra Morrow. And I am at Four Oaks Bridge interviewing Miss Li-

Lileah Harris: Lileah.

KM: Lileah Harris, on March 24, 2010. Are you from Cedar Rapids?

LH: No, but my mother lived here for a while. I went to the really old Washington High School. No, I'm from Waterloo.

KM: When did you move to Cedar Rapids?

LH: My husband came here after he graduated from medical School, and he interned at St. Luke's. And we liked it and wanted to be near my mother, who was still living in Waterloo, because she had lost my- My dad had died, and she was alone. So it turned out to be a good decision.

KM: Where did you go to school?

LH: I started out at a school in Waterloo called Grant School, which has now been transformed into a magnet School in Waterloo. I went to East Junior High, East High School. And my first two years of college were at what used to be called Iowa State Teachers' College. It's UNI now. And after two years of college, my husband persuaded me that we should get married. And so college ended for quite a while, but I did finished college, but much later.

KM: What is your happiest memory as a young person?

LH: Well, there are lots of them. We had a pretty close family. My sister that's just a little older than I am and liked to do a lot of outdoor stuff like hiking, and that kind of thing. But I was studying piano pretty seriously growing up. So that took a lot of my time. I liked being with my friends, of course. I'm not giving you a very good answer. But I had a lot of things to do and I was pretty busy.

KM: What were the challenges you faced as a young person?

LH: Well, of course, we grew up in a world that was full of segregation. No matter where you lived, if you were African American. My dad was a doctor in Waterloo, but he had patients of both races. But he had lots of white patients. But there were a lot of things we couldn't do growing up in Iowa. I don't even know if you want to hear that, but there was a lot of discrimination.

I walked home-walked to junior high. You would go past East High. There was this place called Klondike's that would not let you eat ice cream in there. And I knew you could file a Civil Rights case. Iowa had a law and people didn't take advantage of it then. But I was in junior high and I went up to their office and filed a case against their ice cream place. Nothing came of it, but I thought I had done something.

Movies, you could go to movies but they generally would try to direct black kids to sit in the balcony and not sit on the main floor. And again my parents said, "Don't sit in the balcony." We were kind of drilled to think that way. My dad was president of the NAACP for a while. Let me think. For a while restaurants were pretty much all closed. A big problem was traveling, if you were trying to take a trip. Because there were not hotels or motels. You either had to stay with friends or, you know. That was true even when my kids were growing up. And my husband went to Howard University in Washington, D.C. And we would drive back to Iowa.

And sometimes he would pull over on the side of the road to get a nap, which is not a very safe thing to do. And our social lives were different. As I said, Grant School was mixed racially. And I had several kids who were whites who were very good friends of mine. And we would walk back and forward to school together, and so on. But as soon as you hit junior high it changed, because it was the social thing. They had their different friends, and the kids started dating, and that sort of thing.

In fact, when I graduated from East High the principal called in two of my- I had two really good buddies who were black and they were athletic and very popular. But occasionally they had danced with white girls at School parties. And the principal called them in and told them they were not to do that at the prom. The prom was going to be at the Electric Park Ballroom in Waterloo. It's still there. And I called my friend who was the student council president, Tooty Fredericks. He became a lawyer later. He actually-he was white-became a Civil Rights lawyer. And I said, "Let's go talk to Mr. Hoffman. This is ridiculous." And we asked him why he was telling them that. He said- He wouldn't really tell us.

Then he said, "Lileah, you can always behave as you always do." I was considered-I was a good student. I was considered the top of the bunch, I guess. It was ironic because my father ate with the principal, Mr. Hoffman. He ate with him at one of the clubs out of town.

It was just so ridiculous, a lot of things. I don't like to talk about it too much because I almost feel like crying when I think of that. But we were shutout of a lot of stuff. And I'm sure there's stuff still going on. I spoke over at Jefferson quite a few years-maybe ten years ago-to high school

students. And they said, "Why did you put up with all of that? Why didn't you fight it?" And so it was a different time.

KM: Was there a person who mentored or encouraged you when you were young?

LH: Well, my parents were wonderful mentors, and very strong on getting a good education. My mother- My dad was busier with work, with working with sick people. But my mother spent a lot of time getting to know the teachers, and you know she was PTA president, in spite of our school. Grant School was about thirty percent African American, probably the highest ratio in Waterloo. The teachers were chosen to think they were actually asked if they minded teaching black children. But most of the teachers who came really wanted to. So we got some extraordinary good teachers. Especially in some of the social studies, literature, music, and the arts. So I had a good education and great school.

KM: How have you been involved in the African American community in Cedar Rapids?

LH: Well, a lot of it is through my husband's patients. But other people have gotten to know me. Because my mother, as I told you, went to high school back in the '20s, early 20s. And so there are old families who had been here when she was here. So that was sort of my early connection. The Smith family, Phoebe and Vernon Smith, I have known all my life. I know him. I didn't know her until they got married. But they were immediate friends and have been good friends of mine all these years. So I don't know if you know them, but he is no longer living.

KM: Was there...

LH: I go to-am Catholic, so I didn't go to a black church. So that's one thing I didn't have, you know. That connection which was good to have.

KM: Was there a particular event that caused you to be involved in the community?

LH: We came here when he graduated from Howard in '47-no, '57. '47, that's high school. '57 he interned at St. Luke's, that was a year, and he would go in his office and start practicing. And a number of other doctors were encouraging him to stay here. So that was-but the patients didn't run in in a big crowd at first.

He had the luck, or we had the luck, of the house that they gave us to live in when he was interning. It was right on A Avenue. It's torn down now. There's so many things over there it doesn't look the same. But he was right across from the hospital. And the nurses knew that we were there, and if they needed somebody quickly in the emergency room they often called him, because he just had to come across the street. The emergency rooms weren't quite as organized as they are now. They weren't quite the same thing. And that gave him a good start to getting patients, because they liked him, and so when he started practice some of those same people became patients.

He worked here. He just retired. I don't know if you even know my husband at all. He retired in 1999. So, he was here practicing from... Let me get my dates right, here. I have to think about when people were born. The twins were born here, right. And they were born in '50, when he was interning, so '58, I guess.

Well, we had a big problem finding a house, after my husband's intern. We were looking for a house. We were living in a house that was owned by St. Luke's. As an intern they let- They had houses for interns with families. And we were over on A Avenue and we started looking. And most of the real estate people wouldn't even show us a house in a mixed neighborhood.

But we were close friends- I'll try not to make this a long. It's along story. My daughter is making a documentary about this story. The Armstrong family became friends. Mr. Armstrong had a department store here. It's no longer downtown. That was, you know... And he wanted to help us. He was giving a lot out on Bever Avenue to his church, as part of a donation to St. Paul's Methodist, and he wanted us to have the lot. And so there's a big story about it.

You can get the old newspapers and read about it. You can, but there was a lot of objection from people. Some of the people in the neighborhood. Not all of them. And it was quite a little fight. But we did- We bought the lot and built a house.

KM: How have you expressed change in the African American community in Cedar Rapids?
Experienced change in the African American

LH: Change in the African American community. Well, there's change in every community. You mean just the kids, you mean? Or adults? Or are you trying to

KM: Just the community.

LH: Just the Community. Well, since the '60s there has been a lot of change everywhere because the laws were changed. So there was no longer- We were no longer restricted from doing so many things. There was a very active group here, a lot of them were NAACP people. But there were people from all over the community who were working to get rid of the segregated living, and a lot of people who were trying to help us with our house, too. There's a human relations committee, a group from Marion and Cedar Rapids, that work to do that.

So, but, you know, the movement that was going on in the whole country affected us here too. We had demonstrations, a lot of us. I didn't give as many talks as my husband. He was quite active as a speaker. He would go to small towns in Iowa and, you know, speak try, to make people see why they should not be prejudiced. And we got a thing going on during that I did help with, because we opened our homes to mixed race, sort of like a tea thing on Sundays. We had an exchange and you would have 2 or 3 families of another race.

We would have a white race, and we did quite a bit of that. I can't remember what we called it. But that was all going on in the '60s. I was on the human rights Commission, too, which is different now. It's not like now, it's the civil rights commission. But we were pretty active.

KM: What are you most proud of in your life?

LH: Well, my children would probably have to be number one. I have twelve kids, so have a lot to be proud of. I'm proud of the fact that I went back to school, after mine were almost all finished. Not really intending to get a degree. But I got-i became interested in the Russian language. And was taking it at Coe, and then Coe dropped it. So I had-to continue had to either go to Cornell or go to the University of Iowa and a friend of mine. It's a long story. I'll try. I know I'm talking too much. But anyway I decided to try it. So I went down to Iowa City, and I was afraid to drive on the highway. So that was one of my big problems.

But I started down there in the fall of '88 just to take Russian. I wasn't planning to get a degree. I wasn't going to do that. My advisor there looked at my transcript with the courses had taken just for fun out at Kirkwood or Coe or someplace and she said, "Why don't you just put all that together and get your degree?" So I ended up picking up courses that I needed that I hadn't really planned to take. And graduated in '93 when was the age of 62. So I'm proud of it.

KM: Thank you, Mrs. Harris, for this interview and all that you have done for our community.

LH: Oh, well, I thank you, probably, too. But thank you for talking to me, taking time to talk to me. It's always nice to have someone interested in what you've done.