THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY
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CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Oral History Interview

with

Henrietta Johnson

Interviewer: Francesco De Salvatore

Narrators: Henrietta Johnson

Location of Interview: Charles Houston Recreation Center, Alexandria, VA, 22314

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Transcriber: Robin Reeder, Reeder Transcription Services

Summary:

Henrietta Johnson reflects on growing up in public housing projects in Alexandria. She discusses the schools she attended in Alexandria and the neighborhoods where she and other family members lived. She also talks about the different states she lived in, including Alabama and Michigan.

Note:

This recording is part of the Samuel Madden Public Housing Community History Initiative, which was conducted from 2023-2026. This Initiative collected ten oral histories from current/former public housing residents, and other community members connected to public housing.

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General	Public housing; Seventh-Day Adventist Church
People	Holloway, Clark; Pancoast, Irene L.
Places	Alfred Street; Charles Houston Recreation Center; Charles Houston School; Coney Island; Dickinson Detention for Men and Women [Michigan]; Euille Street; Highland Park Community College [Michigan]; Lyles-Crouch School; Parker-Gray High School; Patrick Street; Peterson-Warren Academy [Michigan]; Princess Street; Royal Street; The Berg

Henrietta Johnson [0:00:03.0] Okay. My name is Henrietta Johnson. Today is February 18, 2026, and I'm at the location of—well, this used to be—this used to be Charles Houston. This is where Charles Houston School was, that was the—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:00:23.3] Parker-Gray, right?

Henrietta Johnson [0:00:24.1] No. Not Parker-Gray.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:00:25.6] [inaudible 0:00:25.6]

Henrietta Johnson [0:00:25.8] Charles Houston School sat here. That was the other elementary school, and Lyles-Crouch was on the south side on Wythe Street. They also have tore that old building down from Lyles-Crouch, and they got the new building. Ironically, when I lived on this side, I had to go to Charles Houston. And when we moved on the south side, I had to go to Lyles-Crouch. I was fortunate enough to go to the old building and the new building.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:00:52.3] Both of them, right?

Henrietta Johnson [0:00:53.1] And when I got to the seventh grade, then I had to come back up this way to go to Parker-Gray, because it was only one high school.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:01:00.0] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:01:00.4] You see.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:01:01.5] [inaudible 0:01:01.5]

Henrietta Johnson [0:01:01.7] And, mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:01:02.1] Let me just briefly say, just—I want to mention my name really quick. My name is Francesco De Salvatore. Today is February 18, 2026, and we're at the Charles Houston Rec Center here in Alexandria, Virginia. So, sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to make sure I said that. And yeah, if you want, can you maybe talk a little bit more about your childhood here in Alexandria? Can you share some memories?

Henrietta Johnson [0:01:25.7] Actually, I really enjoyed here cause I wasn't born here. My grandfather came to Alabama, where I was born, and he brought me back here with him. And I was just out of kindergarten. I was old enough to go to the first grade. [Phone ringing] Oh, Lord—that's family. I'll call them back. But I was—what? When I moved here, I had just got out of kindergarten with my grandfather, and I started at Lyles-Crouch in the first grade at the old building. I can remember all my teachers' names too. Then my mother moved here, and they moved on this side of town. And then I had to go to Charles Houston, which was right here where this place is now. I had fun. We wasn't destructive like kids are now. You understand? We made mud pies, and mud cakes, and stuff like that, and just had a lot of fun. These kids is more—well, how can I put that? We didn't fight like that. There was nobody getting shot or stabbed to death or beat up badly. That wasn't so. You know.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:02:48.5] What did—what was the area—what did you call the area that you grew up in? Growing up, what do you guys call it?

Henrietta Johnson [0:02:57.6] Either you was at Charles Houston, or you was at Lyles-Crouch. You know what I'm saying? Cause that's where the playground was. They had a playground. Yeah right. We was at different places, and we just played.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:03:08.1] Right, right. In terms of the neighborhood that you grew up in, what did you guys call it?

Henrietta Johnson [0:03:13.6] We just called it whatever street you lived on, or we would just say the projects. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:03:20.0] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:03:20.4] Mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:03:21.7] Cause you lived in public housing—

Henrietta Johnson [0:03:23.3] Uh-huh.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:03:23.9] Okay and—

Henrietta Johnson [0:03:24.7] And then we moved out, so but—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:03:26.0] What was the street? What was the street?

Henrietta Johnson [0:03:27.7] We—I stayed on Alfred Street in the public housing with my mom. And then when she got tired of living in the project, we moved on Alfred Street like I told you, the big three-story brick house. It was an old house. In fact, I was really scared cause me and my sister's room was all the way at the top by the attic. And I used to think stuff was gonna come out the attic [laughs] and get us. But it was good. Nobody ever got shot or killed. And you might have a little fight, and that was it. You know what I'm saying? Nobody went home and got something and came back and shot you or stabbed you to death. None of that happened.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:04:05.5] What are your memories when—in your first home on Alfred Street? We know that area—

Henrietta Johnson [0:04:10.7] After we moved out the projects?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:04:12.6] No, no.

Henrietta Johnson [0:04:13.4] Oh.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:04:13.8] But when you were at—when you were living in the projects? In "The Berg?"

Henrietta Johnson [0:04:18.8] We just had a lot of fun.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:04:20.0] [inaudible 0:04:20.0] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:04:20.9] We just had a lot of fun. We played softball, kickball, you know, jump rope. You know what I'm saying? Hopscotch. All those things. We played. We wasn't into all that fighting. You know what I'm saying? And I'll tell you something else. If your neighbor had a job, and she had a kid and didn't have a babysitter, she'd just knock on your door and, "I got to work today." And you just kept the

child. You know what I'm saying? You fed it, and it was just like that. Nobody really got paid for that. We helped each other. You know what I'm saying? We helped each other. It was important to us to just keep everything immaculately clean cause originally the project down there in "The Berg"—it was for soldiers who was married. But then they built Fort Belvoir, and Fort Belvoir, and they gave those public housing to Alexandria. They didn't build those houses. Those were for soldiers who had families. And then Fort Belvoir got built up, and they moved all down there. And they gave the city those projects.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:05:34.5] And that's where you lived with when you were [inaudible 0:05:36.0]?

Henrietta Johnson [0:05:36.7] Right when I was—when I was very young. Yes.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:05:38.7] Do you have any memories of the projects?

Henrietta Johnson [0:05:41.3] Yeah. Everybody kind of mind their own business. Everybody was—because they had inspections in your home, you had to keep it clean. I mean, actually, they would inspect your home to make sure you was keeping things up. They was not gonna have mice and roaches and all that stuff because you was—had a nasty home. You had to go. They would put you out if you didn't keep your place up. And like I said, the grass was just like the grass would be at the White House. It was kept up. We wasn't allowed to play on the grass. We had the playground, so we had to go to the playground and play. You know.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:06:23.3] Do you remember—I mean, I know you were very young, so I don't know if you remember. But do you remember what your house looked like in the projects? Like, do you remember the—

Henrietta Johnson [0:06:31.7] Yes. We—I always came in through the back door, and that was the kitchen. And then the living room. And then you had a closet in one corner of the living room, just like hang up coats and stuff, and then you go up the steps. But if you came in the front, you could go straight up the steps if you had, you know, the upstairs. And it was a bathroom. It was only one bathroom, and you had a bathtub. And that's how we cleaned ourself. I can't remember—I don't think we had a shower. I can only remember taking baths in that tub. You know what I'm saying? And my mother—you had to wash the tub out before you got out of it. And if you didn't, you had to go back and clean the tub out. But and they had the towel on the floor. It was that brown specky towel. Well, it was okay. It was easy to keep clean. You understand what I mean? Some people went to another level and waxed it, which made it shine. And, you know, was that—but people cared about it. People kept their houses immaculately clean cause for one thing, if you didn't, you got put out. You know. You just can't tear up. You know what I'm saying? And you need a roof over your head. And people pretty much looked out for each other, and it wasn't rare that you had other family members there, like cousins, uncles, and aunts. You know. They were very proud of their homes down there, then back in the day.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:07:58.8] Did you have other family members living there?

Henrietta Johnson [0:08:01.3] Mm-hmm. I had a sister who lived down there on Royal Street. We lived—the houses was in the middle, and then the houses come down the side of it. Mom stayed in the house in the middle, and my sister stayed in the house on the end. You know how you in the middle, and then the houses come. She stayed right there facing Royal Street. Her house—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:08:22.8] And this is while you were a kid?

Henrietta Johnson [0:08:24.6] Mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:08:25.2] Oh, okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:08:25.5] That was my oldest sister.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:08:27.1] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:08:28.8] My mother, by the way, she had six boys first, and then she turned around and had six girls. So, she had 12 children. I'm the baby.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:08:36.3] Wow! Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:08:36.8] Yes. And so, it was just, you know, they would, like I said. We were very proud of our home. And like I said, it wasn't really a project. It was where the soldiers had lived who had wives and children. And after they built Fort Belvoir out, they gave all those places to Virginia for low-income families that didn't, you know, have anywhere to stay.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:09:02.8] So roughly like what were the years you lived in public housing down in "The Berg"?

Henrietta Johnson [0:09:08.8] In public housing, it was in like 1955.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:09:12.7] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:09:13.3] Like that, you know, cause I was born in 1948, and I was in Alabama till my grandfather brought us all back here.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:09:19.9] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:09:20.0] Because he had a house on Wilkes Street across the street from the old Lyles-Crouch School. He brought us here from Alabama. And like I said, I had just got out of like kindergarten. You know? And then Alabama, how they did that, somebody would have the kids and teach you your ABCs and the sounding of the letters. And you know what? I'm gonna tell you. It makes it easy to read when you know the alphabet. You know the sound of the alphabet. You sound the words out. You just—it just seemed like we learned faster than these kids do. I mean, these kids got an awful lot of play in them, or they—I don't think they get the attention or the help at home that they need. Cause everybody is working and everybody busy, and you just can't leave it up to the kid to do the homework. I always had a sister or brother—somebody to help me.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:10:18.1] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:10:18.6] You know what I'm saying? And if I did it by myself, somebody would check it make sure I was—I had it right. And just had them did it so I could go outdoors and play. Everybody took that kind of stuff serious. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:10:31.6] When you were living in the house—in public housing, like who were some of the neighbors that you remember? Like what were the names—

Henrietta Johnson [0:10:38.8] Ooh, I remember all my neighbors, but actually, all of them gone. They dead. You know what I'm saying? The parents are dead. The children are like my age.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:10:48.4] Who do you remember from that era, like?

Henrietta Johnson [0:10:50.7] I remember—let me see. My aunt, where I lived in the project, or I had cousins that lived there. And let me see? Aunt [inaudible 0:11:03.9]—she stayed on Montgomery Street. Let me see? Peggy stayed on Alfred Street. That was one of my sisters.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:11:13.4] This is while you lived at—as a kid there?

Henrietta Johnson [0:11:15.0] Uh-huh.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:11:16.5] Or after?

Henrietta Johnson [0:11:16.9] It was—well, at one point, all of us had a place. Like my sister, Peggy, lived there. My Aunt [inaudible 0:11:23.6] is—when we came here, she's the one that helped us get our names on the list to get one of the places. But they done tore down the projects where she lived at already. And let me see? One of the twins lived in the project, and she stayed on the Pitt Street. Her house was closer to Pitt Street. And oh.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:11:48.1] It's really a lot of people.

Henrietta Johnson [0:11:49.3] Mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:11:49.7] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:11:50.2] Mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:11:51.0] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:11:51.2] But everybody got along. Nobody was getting shot or getting beat up or—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:11:56.1] Do you remember, like, there being any social gatherings? Or like was there—

Henrietta Johnson [0:12:00.3] Oh yeah! We had lots of that, like for the 4th of July, everybody barbecued something and be on the playground. Everybody shared food. You know. And they had sodas, but we made a lot of Kool-Aid back in the day, cause that stretched farther than trying to buy everybody a soda. We called them soda pop then. Everybody made a big pitcher, and you just shared everything. You know. It's the holidays, everybody kind of just hoping you had to, you know, you ate. Everybody had something. You know what I'm saying? But, you know, they don't do things like that now. But I guess, you know, but I really—this used to be—this where this place is now—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:12:48.6] Being Charles Houston—

Henrietta Johnson [0:12:49.5] Charles Houston.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:12:50.6] —Rec Center?

Henrietta Johnson [0:12:51.3] Uh-huh. We had another recreation center that was on Pendleton between Henry Street and that street right there. And it was just a little white recreation center building. You know what I'm saying? And that's where we would go, and they would have little dances for us. And we would have like little Easter programs. You know. You get up and say a little speech, or they was always doing something to keep us busy. You know what I'm saying? Then they tore that down and built this after they tore down Lyles-Crouch—not Lyles-Crouch, but Charles Houston. Things just changed. I'm just telling you, things just changed. I look at those houses across the street, and some of them been there for a minute.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:13:45.1] Right. What's it like seeing all this change? You know. Seeing public housing that's being torn down or just seeing, you know, seeing the area change? Like what—

Henrietta Johnson [0:13:53.3] I know you know—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:13:54.0] —what was it like new?

Henrietta Johnson [0:13:55.1] I know that you have to make changes sometimes. You know what I'm saying? But I couldn't understand why you couldn't just gut out those brick homes. Bricks is bricks. You know what I'm saying? Gut them out and redo them. You know. But they saw fit to tear them down. Maybe it's other things they want—other ways they want to build them. You know what I'm saying? But it's like just getting rid of a lot of history. I have never gotten over yet them tearing down our school, and we had a swimming pool over that way for—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:14:29.5] Which school?

Henrietta Johnson [0:14:30.8] Parker-Gray High School. That was the only high school in Alexandria that the black kids could go to, and we were devastated when they tore our school down. And we had a swimming pool up there by the school that we could go. Man, you would walk from the south side in that heat to go to that swimming pool. You know what I'm saying? It was just—it just nice. You know. Alexandria have always been, I'll, say really a good place for black people, cause it was primarily black people. You know what I'm saying? Now we had a court—I think the court was on Patrick Street, like the boys got the girls in trouble. Miss Pancoast, she only dealt with the boys who got girls pregnant and wasn't taking care of them babies. You know what I'm saying? And oh, it was—it's just so many memories that's not going on now. The courthouse is still there. I don't think—I think Miss Pancoast, Judge Pancoast, was the only judge that ever worked in that particular courtroom, because her court was about men paying child support. That was her job. And if they didn't pay, she jailed them. You know what I'm saying? And a lot of young boys got themself in trouble, cause I guess they just didn't want to use them rubbers. You know what I'm saying? But Miss Pancoast wasn't going for it. She was a hard lady on those young men, and you get a job and support that baby. Because it wasn't—they had welfare and all that, but you had to go the whole nine yards to make sure you didn't have no support for those kids to get on the welfare. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:16:15.0] What are your memories of going to school in Alexandria? What [inaudible 0:16:18.3]—

Henrietta Johnson [0:16:18.3] I loved going to school. I really loved the school. When we moved from this side on the south side, and Parker-Gray was the only high school, you had a long walk. Cause there was no buses that picked us up.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:16:30.8] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:16:31.0] We could have rode the red buses, but we had to pay for that. So, you just left early enough in the morning to walk from the south side to Parker-Gray High School. You know what I'm saying? Cause your mama didn't have no money for bus fare home and all of that. You just walked back home in the evening. That's kind of what we did. You know. We'd be in groups. It's not like you're walking by yourself and somebody could just bother you. No. If you lived on the south side, all of us got together and walked home. And every morning you just—you know where they was gonna start at, and you just met up. And you all walked to school together. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:17:09.9] What—where are all the school—like, can you tell me each school that you attended in Alexandria?

Henrietta Johnson [0:17:14.4] I attended Charles Houston when we moved to this side—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:17:17.1] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:17:17.3] —from the south side. I came to Charles Houston. My grandfather actually built the house on Princess Street. I'm gonna tell you what happened to that. His church was across the alley from where the house was built. Now, when Grandad built 1210 Princess Street, it was $40,000. And that was—I was in the third grade when he built that house. When the man got finished with the house, he told my grandfather, because my grandfather was in his—he was 75 when that house was built. And he told my grandfather, "This is your home. You have to go down to City Hall and register your house—your home." And he said, "Don't give this paperwork to anybody." Well, as most black old people have trust in their pastors, he went and told his pastor he had to go down there to register his house. Pastor [inaudible 0:18:19.0] took the paperwork, went down there, and put everything in his name. After about four or five years in the house, he told my grandfather he lost the house for taxes. My grandfather was already over 75, so ironically, he was exempt from that. So, we moved to Georgia because he had property down there in Macon, Georgia—he and I. We—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:18:43.8] How old are you when this happened?

Henrietta Johnson [0:18:45.6] I was—when that happened? Let me think. We living in that house. I was in the fifth grade by then.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:18:53.4] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:18:53.8] And I was going to this school.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:18:56.2] So you had—were you—so did you move from "The Berg," or you moved from when you were living—

Henrietta Johnson [0:19:00.7] I moved from—see, my mom and them decided they wanted to go to Michigan. I didn't want to go with them when they left and went, cause she had sisters and brothers up there. So, I stayed here with Grandad, and we stayed in that house I'll say about two years. And the pastor told my grandfather he lost the house for taxes, and my grandfather was old and uneducated. And he didn't realize he was old, and he was exempt from paying those taxes. But the pastor had put everything in his name. We—he and I left and went to Macon, Georgia—him and his brother had a farm down there. And then I went to school in Georgia. And then when he caught back up with my mom and them that moved back up this way, and he found out they was here, he and I moved back here. Every time I pass 1210 Princess Street, I get very angry. Because we were the very first family to live in that house, and his name was Clark Holloway, my grandfather. He had that house built from the ground up, and then to have—it's like two bedrooms upstairs, and there's a complete—I could tell you every inch of that house—the basement—I can tell you everything about that house. And when I pass that house, it just makes me sick—that his pastor took that house from him. And his pastor had impregnated a woman, and her child was raised up in that house. I've never forget that. And when I pass that house, I get just sick about it. It's still there. It's a beautiful home—beautiful home. I could tell you every inch of that home, but—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:20:41.4] What was your grandfather's name?

Henrietta Johnson [0:20:42.2] Clark Holloway.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:20:45.2] What are some of your favorite memories with him?

Henrietta Johnson [0:20:48.4] That he—we always went to Coney Island with the church every year.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:20:53.2] Oh.

Henrietta Johnson [0:20:53.6] You ever been to Coney Island?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:20:55.4] [inaudible 0:20:55.4]

Henrietta Johnson [0:20:55.5] We would—he would cook—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:20:56.8] Where? Where?

Henrietta Johnson [0:20:58.4] And it's like the beach part of New York City.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:21:00.6] [inaudible 0:21:00.6]]

Henrietta Johnson [0:21:01.0] Uh-huh. And the church always would rent the big buses, and me and Grandad would go. And I'm gonna tell what you he fixed—bread pudding, fried chicken, biscuits, and we had fruit, because he'd say, "We can't take cooked vegetables cause we don't have no cool," you know.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:21:18.9] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:21:19.0] But the friend chicken and the biscuits and stuff like that, and the fruit, and we always had something to drink, even though the sodas would be a little warm. But that bread pudding—man, he would make a big old pan of bread pudding. That was our dessert, and we would always go every year to Coney Island. And you play on the beach. You know what I'm saying? And you go back to the bus and eat some of your food cause you didn't want to have all that sand in your food.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:21:48.7] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:21:48.9] And then we would go back to the beach and lay down. He would bring a quilt—not a blanket, but a quilt, you know, a homemade quilt. And Grandma had made that quilt, and so we would take quilts. By then, Grandma had passed, though, but every year we would go. He would take me to New York, to Coney Island. And I have said for ages, "I'm gonna go and see if Coney Island was like it was used to be." And what they was really popular for was their hot dogs. And they had this—what is that thing where you ride it and it goes down and—merry-go—not the merry-go-round. You're in this little car, and it takes you up and down the hills. You know what I'm talking about? And they had the biggest one in Coney Island. Oh, what is it? Oh shoot! I almost thought about it. You know how you go up here, then it turn around and go like that. And what is it called? They have them now. I just can't think of the name of it. But anyway, we learned how to walk up under there. People had like dropped purses and stuff all down under there. I have you know me and one of the neighbors, a little girl named Marie, used to—Grandad would always let her go with us cause that was my best friend on the block. We would walk under there. We found more money under that thing than you could even imagine. I'm serious as a heart attack. Where people, you know how they be throwing their hands up while the thing is going down the thing, and they dropped their change? Man, we was filthy rich! Grandad said, "Where did you girls get all that money from?" "We got it up by"—he said, "But you all are not supposed to be up under there. You might get shocked or something." "Well, we was just curious." You know what I'm saying? And we just walked under there. Every year, every time we went, we would always find money under there. I'm serious as a—boy, that was like free money.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:23:48.7] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:23:49.9] And we just had a lot of fun, and we ate a lot of hot dogs cause they was selling hot dogs and stuff like that on the beach. You know what I'm saying? Grandad would say, "Where you all get that money from?"

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:02.3] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:02.6] "Where you all get all that money from?" "We found it."

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:05.1] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:06.0] The rollercoaster. You know what I'm talking about?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:08.6] Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:08.6] Yeah. You know how it be going—well, people has stuff, and you know how they hold their hands up? All their stuff would be hats—you find nice hats under there—all kinds of stuff you found under there.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:19.3] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:19.9] But now, if you go up there, they got that all stringed now. You can't walk under there like we used to when we were there. Cause once me and her learned that you could find money under there, we was raring to go every year.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:33.3] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:33.7] But I had a good childhood. Actually, I did. I ain't gonna tell you I didn't get a lot of spankings cause I was always into something I shouldn't have been. But—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:44.5] What was it—so you obviously you—so you graduated from Parker-Gray. Right? And then what—

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:48.9] No. I didn't.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:50.1] You didn't?

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:50.3] I didn't graduate. When I got to Parker-Gray, we moved again.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:54.1] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:54.9] And we went to Michigan.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:24:58.2] Okay.

Henrietta Johnson [0:24:58.4] And I graduated in—I graduated from the school in Michigan cause we moved there. Cause my mother had a sister up there. And her mom was up there with that sister, and so she went up there, and we got a place on Bassett Street in Detroit. I think that was Southwest Detroit and Bassett Street, and to help take care of Mom and her sister. And then I just stayed up there after that. I went to Highland Park—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:25:33.2] Where in Michigan?

Henrietta Johnson [0:25:36.4] They stayed in southwest Detroit, and I went to Highland Park Community College in—what part—is it still in Michigan? Let me see if I have—if I had my purse, I got my college card in my purse. I'll show it to you, but my purse is—she's bringing my stuff.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:25:56.1] No. I think that—

Henrietta Johnson [0:25:57.0] Oh, she took it in the office? Okay. And anyway, that's in Highland Park—a little college I went to after I graduated from high school. In fact, I graduated up there and went to Highland Park Community College. I got an associate degree, and then we stayed up there for a long time cause I worked at First Federal Savings and Loan, which I stayed there for 30 years and retired. I got married in Michigan. I had my own children there. They went to school in Michigan. And after I got tired of working at the bank, I had one child left, and I had to send her to college. And I started working at Dickinson Detention for Men and Women. What I did was at night, they—the women would come down at night. They did the breakfast food and part of the lunch for the women. Okay. But when we leaving, the men prisoners came down, and that was another shift. Cause my shift was midnight. I got off at 7 o'clock in the morning, and I worked that for 10 years to get my kids through college. And then I quit, but I tell you, them women in prison is rougher than any man could ever be. I have—I was trying to get on this shift with the men, cause the women was worse than [laughs]—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:27:18.7] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:27:19.1] —they was worse than the men. My job was if they had to slice anything, like see, they don't buy stuff already sliced up cause it costs more. It's like bologna. They had to slice that. And I would have to give them a knife, and I would have to—when they finished with that knife, I was responsible for locking that knife up. Because if they took that knife back to they parts—pod where they were, they could stab somebody to death. And their family then could have sued us because we didn't [inaudible 0:27:45.5]. Well, one night after we cleaned up, I couldn't find one of the knives. We couldn't go home. We had to put the prisoners in a room where, when we take our break, we lock them in this little room. And they have lunch and stuff in that little room until we come back from our break. We couldn't find that knife. I was there till 7 o'clock. After 7 o'clock, and somebody said, "Well, did you all take some trash out?" I said, "Yes, we did." So, we went out there, got all the garbage bags, and we got—went through it. They had accidentally threw the knife away. Man, I was so glad to find [laughs] that knife. I'm telling you. It was just something.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:28:24.2] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:28:24.5] And I worked there until my own kids—and my kids went to school in Michigan.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:28:28.8] Where are your—so you had three kids?

Henrietta Johnson [0:28:30.5] Mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:28:32.0] What are the names?

Henrietta Johnson [0:28:32.9] Rochelle, Robert, and Rhonda.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:28:35.1] All right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:28:35.7] And all of them went to school in Michigan, but they went to a private school. They went to Peterson-Warren Academy. I didn't want them in public school cause by then they was starting with the knives and the guns and all that. So, I had to pay for them to go to school.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:28:51.2] What are some of your fondest memories as a parent then?

Henrietta Johnson [0:28:56.6] We did stuff every year at—my mother was Adventist. So, you know we didn't eat pork or anything like that. We always had camp meeting in the summertime. And had camp meeting is like it might be 500 or 600 people up there. And it's like a big camp, and you get up and go to service in the morning. And had activities for the kids, and they had a swimming pool on the campground. And we took them on little trips up there in Michigan, and we liked that. We liked that. We really liked that. I was brought up an Adventist, so I don't eat pork. I don't eat it to this day, but I had fun. I really did.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:29:42.6] Are there any memories from that period of your life in Michigan that you want to share that you haven't?

Henrietta Johnson [0:29:48.8] Yeah. I enjoyed working at the bank.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:29:51.8] Yeah, yeah, yeah. What did you do at the bank?

Henrietta Johnson [0:29:53.6] Well, you know how the bank when they need money, even though you bought the house from them—but until you pay for the house, the house is still them. So, they can sell your home to another mortgage company, but my job was to pull all the homes that they were gonna sell, send you a letter letting you know who to pay your mortgage note to. Cause, you know, I got cussed out a whole lot cause they didn't want to be with other mortgage company cause they originally bought the house from us.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:30:25.5] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:30:25.9] Well, when the bank money gets low, sometimes I pull like a 150 homes, and they sold it to other mortgage companies. It didn't mean you was losing your home. You just paid your mortgage note to somebody else. They didn't want to do that. So, I tell you, I was on that phone for hours every day. "But I didn't give you all permission." "But you don't own the home. If you don't own the home, you don't have a say. They not taking your house away, you're just paying your mortgage note to somebody else." They didn't like that. You know. But they had no choices.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:31:04.6] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:31:04.9] It's just that simple. And you—it's so hard to explain that to people. Unless you pay your house right out, and we don't own it anymore, it's your home.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:31:14.5] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:31:15.1] But if they need money and tell me, "Okay, you need to pull these hundred policies. We gonna sell these homes." I sent them a letter—whoever the mortgage company they was gonna be with, and usually the mortgage company also sent them the little payment booklet. Oh, they would have a baby with a bonnet! I've met so many bitches on the phone. [Laughs]

Francesco De Salvatore [0:31:37.2] I believe that.

Henrietta Johnson [0:31:37.4] And you have to just say, "I'm doing my job. That's what they pay me to do." "Well, that's a right—I" "They have a right to sell it. It's their property."

Francesco De Salvatore [0:31:47.2] Oh yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:31:47.9] You haven't paid for it. And usually, they only did that to the people who was always late with their rent. If you was on time with their rent, they kept you. If you was one of those people always paying rent two or three months behind, you'd catch up eventually, maybe when you get that little tax money you get, you know, from every year. They would—you would be the first ones they would sell, and I tried to explain that to the people.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:32:17.0] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:32:17.4] Never do they bother their good customers. You know what I'm saying? It's the ones who are always late. They'll give me a list. I have to pull that list. They sell those homes, and you got another mortgage company. Yeah. I did that for 30 years. I retired from the bank. Mm-hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:32:34.5] [Inaudible 0:32:34.5]

Henrietta Johnson [0:32:35.2] Yeah. And then I—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:32:37.1] How did you get back in Alexandria?

Henrietta Johnson [0:32:39.0] Well, after I decided my kids was grown and gone, I didn't want to live in Michigan anymore. I didn't want to retire there. When we get snow in Michigan, you could get up to four or five feet of snow any given day. Now they did keep the highway clean, but you was responsible for your driveway and the walk, you know, the sidewalk, or you didn't get no mail. The mailman didn't have to get out of his truck to bring no mail to you if you was too trifling to clean the sidewalk so he could get there. But I said, "I can't retire in Michigan." This snow down here is nothing compared to Michigan. But it's one thing I could say about them. They shovel their snow up and pour it in the river. I don't know why they don't do it, but that's what they did. Their streets and highways are clean. You're just responsible for where you live at. You know what I'm saying? I loved it.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:33:33.2] So when did you move back here? [inaudible 0:33:35.1]

Henrietta Johnson [0:33:35.6] I moved back here after I retired from my job. Let me see. My last daughter graduated from Peterson-Warren Academy, which is an Adventist school. Well, I've been here for 15 years—put it like that.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:33:50.7] Oh.

Henrietta Johnson [0:33:51.1] I've been here for 15 years.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:33:52.3] And what's it like in this new chapter, like coming back here like for you, like?

Henrietta Johnson [0:33:56.5] It's been a lot of changes. Because where I live at on Euille Street, it used to be projects. Now it's beautiful condos, and the homeowners live in the middle. And I have one of the little condos. I got a two-bedroom, living room, kitchen, and dining area, and two bathrooms cause it's a bathroom in my master bedroom. And I just kind of love it. Actually, I live in the same position when we lived in the projects. I live on the same side that we lived in the project.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:34:30.7] Wow.

Henrietta Johnson [0:34:31.3] Isn't that ironic?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:34:32.2] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:34:32.9] On the same side of the street when we lived in the project. They got those nice places. It's a street called Euille Street. It's between Pitt and Royal.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:34:42.5] Yeah, yeah. And what was it like now—what's the community like now?

Henrietta Johnson [0:34:47.6] Well, when I go across the street to the playground, those projects is still there. And so, it's just a lot of memory.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:34:56.4] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:34:57.0] Cause I remember all those projects. I knew people that lived on that side of the street in the project.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:35:02.9] Is it the same playground you used to play on?

Henrietta Johnson [0:35:04.7] No. They done changed that tremendously.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:35:06.8] They did?

Henrietta Johnson [0:35:07.2] Like them kids got one of those towel—rubber towels, basketball thing on the ground. They didn't plan on grass or dirt. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:35:17.2] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:35:17.7] And they had a big old string with to keep the ball from going out the street.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:35:22.2] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:35:22.6] But they clammed on that and broke that down. So, they had to take that down before some of those kids got hurt on it. So now if the basketball go out in the street, they just got to take their time and wait till no cars and run out there and get their ball. But I can look over across the street and see some of the old—because they haven't tore those projects down yet. But actually, I live in the same area where the project was that my mom, and my sister, and us lived.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:35:52.1] As again you mentioned how there's a lot of memories that come up. Like, what are some of those like memories that now come up for you living there?

Henrietta Johnson [0:35:59.8] When I see the kids playing and racing and doing stuff like that, I remember we used to do the same thing. You know. See who could outrun each other, and stuff like that. And it's just so many memories. And they got a little place over there that they help the kids now after school. Sometimes I volunteer over there and help them. What I do is fix the kids' snacks cause they come from school, and they're hungry. You can't learn nothing if you're hungry, so we feed them first. Maybe a sandwich, a thing of milk, maybe a bag of chips, or a little pack of cookies with that. And then we clean that up and just help them with their homework. And Miss Diaz from around that over there, I volunteer over there sometimes when I'm not up here with the crunch bunch. And usually if school is in and I leave here at 1 o'clock and they get there, I usually go over there about 3:30 when they get out of school. And I've even had their little tables set up, and we help them with their homework and stuff like that. But other than that, I just sometimes I just go over there and sit on the playground and reminisce. Cause we got benches over there—a little bench over there. And sometimes I can just see me and all my old friends just playing over there. You know. The kids like to play basketball. It's nice over there, though. But they gonna tear all those places down.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:37:25.8] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:37:26.6] I tell the kids, "You all better remember all this stuff because they say the same thing on my side of the street now. It's gonna be on that side of the street also."

Francesco De Salvatore [0:37:34.8] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:37:35.1] You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:37:36.4] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:37:36.8] I'm thinking about the next five or six years, they gonna get them completed that and tore all those places down.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:37:44.9] What do you hope for, for like—for the city of Alexandria? Like, what do you hope the future holds?

Henrietta Johnson [0:37:51.0] I hope that they change all the projects and give people nice homes and better living situations. You know what I'm saying? And make it where the people can afford it. You know what I'm saying? Make it where they can afford it and eat good too. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:38:09.7] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:38:12.3] We didn't know about like $2,600 of mortgage notes and stuff like that back in the day. You know what I'm saying? We didn't—it's ridiculous. You could get an apartment for $1,000 a month with one bedroom. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:38:29.6] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:38:30.0] It's things have changed tremendously.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:38:33.6] I have one last question for you—

Henrietta Johnson [0:38:35.6] Okay.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:38:37.6] —before we end. But is there anything before I ask that question—is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to talk about?

Henrietta Johnson [0:38:46.4] Well, like when we would come home, like all the kids that had to come to this side to go to the high school—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:38:52.1] Yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:38:52.5] —of course, all the kids that lived on this side would always try to get stuff started. You know. But what we would do is everybody that lived on the south side, they had to go to Parker-Gray. We would stay together. They only bothered you if you was by yourself. You understand? So, we learned real fast—the kids on the north side was gonna bother us. So, we all met outside when Parker-Gray left out, and we went home together. You didn't have to worry about nobody bothering you then, but it was, you know, kids gonna be kids. And we was on their side. We from the south side. "You all have to come over here to the south side." Well, that was the only high school for black kids.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:39:36.4] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:39:36.5] We didn't have a choice. [Laughs] And so we had sent—we came together to school, and we had to walk from the south side. There was no bus to pick us up and was no bus to take us home. We had to walk. It didn't kill us, grant you. But on cold days, you wish—I mean, we could have went to Washington Street and caught the bus to what—Alfred Street and walk straight down Alfred Street to the high school. But your mom didn't have that kind of money every day.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:40:07.9] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:40:08.3] You know what I'm saying? And you was lucky if she had a little change cause it was a little snow out there—feeling sorry for you and give you the bus fare. But you still had to walk home.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:40:18.9] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:40:20.1] And we had galoshes and stuff. And, you know, they properly dressed us. And then when they had coats, they had the snow pants and stuff made out of the same material. So, and by the time you put your boots on, you was good to go. A pair of gloves, a scarf, and hat on your head—you was good to go. I really liked it. It just—I think about all that walking we did, and all them years we walked back and forth to the high school and had to go back the same way home.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:40:51.1] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:40:51.7] And you only walked to Washington Street from the high school if you had bus fare to get on there and go to the south side. You know what I'm saying? Lunch then was 30 cents, and I'm talking about we had a full-course meal. But now I have you know depending on how many children your mother had, that 30 cents was hard to come by. So, you knew you wasn't gonna eat that lunch every day. You know what I'm saying? You either bring your little lunch in the little bag, and we didn't have ziplock bags. We had wax paper, and you just put your little sandwich in there. You know. Fold it up, and it kept our sandwiches nice. You know what I'm saying? And we would either have peanut butter and jelly—bologna was real popular back then. You know what I'm saying? And but the problem was you had to put mayonnaise on there, and hot time that sandwich didn't taste good, but in the wintertime it was fine. But in the summertime, that mayonnaise wasn't so good when you got ready to eat your lunch—been in that locker all day. You know what I'm saying? Yeah. But we survived. We survived.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:42:04.5] If there's a memory you could hold on, you know, for the rest of your life, what would be that memory? I know it's hard, but there's probably many but—

Henrietta Johnson [0:42:12.4] The memory that I wish we could just go back to how faithful we was. We took care of other kids that came from the south side, and we stuck together. And they did the same thing if they came to the south side. They know we was gonna whip them up. [Laughs] So cause they would do us if they caught one or two of us by ourself. But if you was in your group, they didn't bother you, and we didn't bother them. I often think about that. You know what I'm saying? And but we was not—well, we know nothing about no guns and knife and stuff like that then. Just a little fight, you know, punch somebody a few times, then and go home. Nobody got killed. That's what—nobody had to be hospitalized. You know. Kids gonna be kids regardless. We didn't live on the north side, and they didn't want us to come, cause that was the only recreation center. We didn't have a recreation center on the south side. So, we had to come to the north side, and now, while you was in there and with the grown people who was running it, they know they would get put out of the recreation center with foolishness. So, we played together. They had dances. We had games in there. You know what I'm saying? Just somewhere to go and keep yourself out of trouble. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:43:29.0] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:43:29.6] And we did stuff like that. Sometimes they took us places like to the zoo in the summertime on little field trips. You know what I'm saying? And you just had to bring your bag lunch with you. You know. But, you know, for Alexandria, they were really a good place for I'd say for black people to be—white people were very kind. They weren't rude unless you bothered something of theirs, and that was understandable. You know what I'm saying? Cause my mother cleaned homes and stuff like that, and they just loved my mom cause she would fix their dinner [laughs] for them cause they worked. You know what I'm saying? They would just leave out what they wanted cooked, and she would fix their meals for them. And sometimes in the summertime she would tell me, "You want to make some money?" And I'm like, "Doing what?" Sometimes it was just like maybe vacuum down the stairwell and getting that straight, or taking—wipe the stairway, a little thing you hold on to coming down the stairs and dust that off for her. And that, as long as she was giving me a couple of—but you know, two dollars then went a long ways. But I'm telling you, you'd be glad for that little [inaudible 0:44:53.5]. I'd be like, "Ma, you need any help today?" She'd told me, "No. I got to use this to pay bills. You can go with me Friday and help me and make a dollar or two." But you know, a dollar or two was quite a bit of money. As you know, now you can't buy a hamburger for two dollars.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:45:12.4] No, yeah.

Henrietta Johnson [0:45:13.7] You darn near can't buy a big bottle of soda for it—that two dollars would be gone buying one of them big old, you know, them big old sodas. I'm like but money stretched so far then. Not anymore. Not anymore. And I tell these kids now, I tell them, "You guys are not gonna survive if you all don't get an education. You're never gonna buy a home. You're never gonna have a car. You know. You're not going anywhere. You're never gonna travel. You all got to go to school." And it's the truth. It's really the truth.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:45:47.0] Well, I'm sorry I cut you off. I just want to make sure we have enough time after this to talk. But I want to thank you for sharing—

Henrietta Johnson [0:45:54.5] Okay.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:45:54.8] —everything. This has been really great—

Henrietta Johnson [0:45:56.3] Thank you.

Francesco De Salvatore [0:45:57.0] —Miss Johnson.

Henrietta Johnson [0:45:57.5] I hope it—I hope it's something that you could use but—

Francesco De Salvatore [0:46:00.4] For sure. For sure. Thank you.

Henrietta Johnson [0:46:01.5] —I'm gonna tell you. Alexandria was an outstanding place. It's always been a little different between your nationality and mine. But they was not as deliberate as they are. You know. It wasn't like hey—they just wanted you to stay on your part. [Laughs] And we stayed on our part. You know. It was like that. Nobody was trying to kill you or do any ugly thing to you. You know what I'm saying?

Francesco De Salvatore [0:46:29.2] Right.

Henrietta Johnson [0:46:29.6] And so I just—I don't understand it. You know. Everybody just kind of stayed in they place. You know. And we was like in our place. You know what I'm saying? It's you just can't go in people's neighborhoods. You know. Kids gonna be kids. Eating chips, you're gonna throw the bag

down. Naturally, they gonna get upset. If you came through our neighborhood and threw—my mother would have been, "Pick that up, boy, and put it in that garbage can." You know what I'm saying? It is what it is, but life is what it is.

[End of interview] [0:47:04.2]