THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Oral History Interview

with

Winona Morrissette-Johnson

Interviewer: *Stephanie Johnson*

Narrator: *Winona Morrissette-Johnson*

Location of Interview:
Lloyd House, 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

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Transcriber: *Dr. Donna M. DeBlasio*

Summary:
Winona Morrissette-Johnson was born and raised in Alexandria. She had a career in banking, was a teacher in the Alexandria City Public Schools, and later followed in her father's footsteps, becoming a mortician and owning her own funeral business

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General	Funeral business; mortuary training; growing up in Alexandria; segregation; teaching in Alexandria
People	Bell, Philip; Diggs Bell, Phyllis May
Places	Phillip Bell, Sr and Winona Morrissette-Johnson Funeral Service; St. Mary's Academy; American Academy (mortuary education) New York City, New York; Mount Comfort Cemetery

Winona Johnson [00:00:02] Hi, my name is Winona Bell Morrissette-Johnson. It's August 5th, 2026, and I am here at the Lloyd House.

Stephanie Johnson [00:00:14] My name is Stephanie Johnson. Today is August 5th, 2026, and I'm at the Lloyd House. And today I will be interviewing for oral history, Ms. Johnson. So, Ms. Johnson, we're going to talk about your early memories and childhood and teenage years. Where were you born? We'll start with that.

Winona Johnson [00:00:44] I was born at Fort Belvoir Hospital; I think it was called the DeWitt Army Hospital, 1953, August 9th.

Stephanie Johnson [00:00:57] What are some of your first and earliest childhood memories?

Winona Johnson [00:01:03] I remember growing up as a child on Alfred Street, South Alfred Street. I can't remember the number, but I can tell you the location. The location of our home was right down from where the Alfred Street Baptist Church is. There were a series of town homes that were sandwiched between the church and there was a--sort of a juke joint, I think it was called Billy's. Was it Billy's? On the corner and our home was right in the middle. It was a long house and it had a backyard where my father raised pigeons. He was into pigeons. And there was a number of them in the backyard. We also had borders in that house. It was a multi-generational house where my grandmother, my great-grandmother, her husband lived, along with, at some point, I believe, the children of my grandmother lived.

Stephanie Johnson [00:02:18] So, I heard you say your father raised pigeons.

Winona Johnson [00:02:23] He did. He was a pigeon lover.

Stephanie Johnson [00:02:26] Was that annoying to you all, or, I mean, how did he actually collect these pigeons?

Winona Johnson [00:02:32] Well, I was very young, so I'm not quite sure what my father did with them, but throughout his life he was very attracted to birds in general. I remember--you know how in funerals we have the dove release? Well I even remember one time the dove came back. It didn't go back to its homing spot, but it remained at the funeral home and my father kept the pigeon at the funeral home. So, he had a fascination with birds and horses. He was an equestrian.

Stephanie Johnson [00:03:09] Can you recall businesses that were in your neighborhood?

Winona Johnson [00:03:15] Across the street--now this is my very, very young years-- across the street was, I think it was called Howard. It was a store. It was run by a man named Mr. Howard. It was across the street. Around the corner was, of course, my uncle's business, the Lewis Funeral Home, was around the corner on Wolf and Columbus Street. When you go--that was the south side; of course, when you go north there was a drugstore, I think we called it Mrs. Blue's, that people would go to. I remember Little Jim's Carry Out, where we would go and get hamburgers and fish boxes and things like that. My childhood was spent in two areas. My first part of my childhood, with spent on the south side, living in that home with my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and a couple of borders actually. We had people who spent their lives living with our family. And then we moved to the north end of town on a street called Boyle Street. It was just one street. So, there wasn't a lot of traffic. So, we used the street as our playground. Matter of fact. If you drove your car up there, we would look at you, like, "What are you doing here? This is our playground." And we played games, and I had a normal childhood. A lot of people, I talk about how much we played in the streets. We played red light, we played dodge ball, we played Mother May I; we played everything. And then we had a porch, our home had a porch. And so, after we finished playing outside, we'd go to the porch, and I'd play jacks and paper dolls. It was a neighborhood. My neighbors were my friends, and we played.

Stephanie Johnson [00:05:21] Can you describe your friends?

Winona Johnson [00:05:27] Describe them. They were the neighborhood kids. We were all about the same age, actually. But they were much more, let's say, athletic than I was. I was the last to be chosen on any team, but I was out there. And I think we enjoyed each other. I loved riding my bike. And I had a friend, we called her Pee Wee. And we rode bikes together. And then I had friends who I would skate with. We had those kinds of skates where you had to put them on your shoes, and they would fall off. And I have friends who--my next-door neighbor was very close to me. And she kind of looked out for me because she was a little older. And I do remember that my parents would allow me to walk. I did a lot of walking. And I remember my parents allowed me to walk places with the older kids. I don't know. I guess they allowed me tag along and I was the baby of the group. So, my next-door neighbor, her cousins lived two blocks away from where I lived on Boyle Street. I remember at night we would go places. There was a Burger King that was right across from the GW school, you remember that? And they served hot hamburgers, like 15 cent hamburgers, I think it was. And we would go up there in the evenings. I would walk with my friends up there and we'd get hamburger and French fries, eat that, and come back home.

Stephanie Johnson [00:07:12] Did you attend, excuse me, did you attend GW or what school? What was your education? I mean, elementary and middle school. So, you didn't go to GW?

Winona Johnson [00:07:26] No, I didn't. My first grade, I was at Lyles-Crouch, because I was on the south side of town. And I walked to school, believe it or not. I was just what, six years old or so. Didn't know anything about school. I was getting dressed. Because prior to that, I just stayed at home. I didn't go to nursery school or kindergarten or any of that. I didn't have a formal education before the first grade. And because I lived in a multi-generational house, my grandparents and everybody took care of me, my cousins and so forth. So, my mother was dressing me one morning and she said, we were going to school. And I was like, what school? Very surprised. My first-grade teacher's name was Ruby Watts. She is still alive, Miss Watts. I just went to her birthday recently and that was a wonderful experience. So, Miss Watts was my first-grade teacher. Then we moved to the other side of town, so I attended

Charles Houston from the second through the fifth grade. After that, my dad placed me at St. Joseph. It was a four-room school on Columbus Street. And I was there for two years. It only would go to the seventh grade. After that, I went to St. Mary's on Green Street. It was an elementary/middle school. And that was my first real experience with integration. It was primarily predominantly a white environment. First time I ever had a white teacher and white fellow students. So, I was there and then everybody was taking the test. They had an entrance exam to go to one of the high schools, Catholic high schools. So, I took the test and was admitted to St. Mary's Academy. I attended St. Mary's Academy on Russell Road. It's not there anymore. Actually, I'm considered part of Bishop Ireton alumni at this point. So that's where I graduated.

Stephanie Johnson [00:09:48] Can you give us a roundabout if you had to put it, what year, I heard you talk about segregation/integration, can you talk about that a little bit?

Winona Johnson [00:10:01] I was in a segregated environment up until the seventh grade. So, I entered school, I guess in the early [19]60s.

Stephanie Johnson [00:10:17] Did that have an effect on you, like, this segregation and the era in which things were going on?

Winona Johnson [00:10:25] I remember so much about it, but not a lot about it. And I say that because I do remember things like the library, the school system, retail outlets, places I couldn't go in town. I remember these places. Right here on Washington Street, there were a lot of places that we just weren't welcome. The library was segregated. I remember the movie theaters were segregated. One of my most traumatic remembrance is the recreation center was segregated. And I live right behind the Cameron Street, or what's called the Durant Recreation Center. So that pool that was there was a pool that was only for white kids. But I live right there. So, in the summertime, they would have swimming lessons and the pool would be open. We would have to walk down to the pool and look at the kids in the pool, but we couldn't go in. Our little noses would be up against the pool watching them enjoy the water. I would go to the Johnson Pool, which was a little walk from where we lived. My friend Collette, who was my neighbor, would take me up to that pool. She could swim really well, and they had water shows up there. I don't know if you remember, they had water shows where the kids who could swim did all kinds of things. And so that was my memory of going to the pool. But segregation, I didn't really, I wasn't really touched by it because I lived in an African American community. So, it wasn't until I really started school at St. Mary's that I started to realize the differences. I think I was pretty much protected, that I started to realize what it was like.

Stephanie Johnson [00:12:25] You touched base a little bit on your typical day at home. Let's move a little further on that typical day at home, let's say teenage years. What would be a typical day for you as a teenager?

Winona Johnson [00:12:50] As a teenager? I was sort of a quiet teenager. I have some friends, mostly the friends that I had met through St. Mary's. And yeah, that's where the base of my friends in teenage years was. There were only two of us, two Black students in my particular class at St. Mary's. And probably throughout the history of St. Mary's, they probably had two or three going forward. And we became friends. And from that friendship, there were a couple Black students that were ahead of me, and we became friends. And a lot of that time, one of my girlfriends who was ahead of me at St. Mary's, a Black young lady, her mother brought her to St. Mary's every morning because her mother taught in

the Alexandria City Public Schools. So, a lot of the time I spent in high school I spent in DC, because that's where she lived, meeting other kids that went to private Catholic schools. There were a lot private Catholic schools in DC that were majority Black. And I got to know a lot those kids. And a lot my friends in Alexandria, their parents were in those elite organizations like Jack and Jill and so forth. So, you would've thought I was in Jack and Jill too because you know I they just brought me in with them, so I'd do a lot of those activities with the. In the neighborhood is really amazing because then by high school all the kids--we didn't play in the streets anymore. Matter of fact they didn't see me anymore because I wasn't in the school bus. I wasn't going to the public-school system. I sort of probably disappeared to a lot of people because I wasn't around those kids anymore, but I was kind of propelled into another group of students. I spent a lot time, had a good time. We partied together and had a great time together, really. My grandmother always said, life owes me nothing, because I really enjoyed my teenage years. And then when I graduated from St. Mary's, I made a really crucial decision. My father wanted me to go directly into a mortuary science program for college, but I didn't want to do that. He was going to send me off somewhere in the Midwest. I decided because I'd had that experience at St. Mary's being a minority, that I wanted to go to an HBCU. And I chose the one I wanted to get to. I chose Fisk University in Nashville. And some of my friends who had similar experiences chose HBCUs as well. So that's what I did.

Stephanie Johnson [00:15:57] So yeah, we're going to pivot a little bit because I do want to incorporate your dad in some. So, your family history, can you describe your father?

Winona Johnson [00:16:21] Yes, I can. This could make me cry. My dad--for the most part, my dad, for me--I think I look at pictures of my father every day. They're all around me. I keep them around me for inspiration. But to describe my father was kind of an emotional moment for me because you'd have to be there. You really would have to there to experience my father. He was, he could be, I think he was a joyful person. He was very joyful, and he loved life and he loved Alexandria and he'd loved the community. And though he was strict, and he had a very, very professional, very strict. And he had a joy for life that he tried to impart to us. And the things that I remember he tried to impress upon me through--he had a subtle way of impressing. He didn't tell you straight out. He had a way of kind of going around the subject, but you got the message. One was keep your friends close. And he would do that because he knew all of my friends. And if he didn't see a friend for a while, he would ask me, "Hey, where is so-and-so?" And consequently, I have friends that are 50 and 60 years in duration, because my father impressed that friendships are important, and you keep them for your life, because that's the friends, that's what he had. He had friends that he kept for life. He also was very big on education that's why he didn't have people…. Somebody told me once that we were rich. We weren't financially…. He was a mortician and people had that impression about it, but my father made the sacrifice.

I understood that he was making a sacrifice to send us to these schools that he sent us to because he had a real strong belief in education, getting us the best education that he possibly could. So, we all went to private schools, but I also realized that he was a sacrifice, so I was supposed to, you know, later in life if I would say something crazy, he would say, "You're an investment." He was investing in me for the future and I understood that. Because my father had put this money forth and gave me whatever I needed, I tried to make him proud and do as much as I could with the resources that he had provided for me. He was funny, he could be funny, and he could really scary too. That's a part that people don't realize that. If you did something that was wrong, he drove the point home so you wouldn't do it again.

And there's a couple of things I remember, and I tell him, “No,” my dad--I did that one time and he told me not to do that, and I've never done it again to this day. Then, he was a family man, not that he set around a lot watching TV or doing any of those things that fathers do. Matter of fact, when I first got married and my husband was just like sitting around the house, I was like, “Why are you just sitting here? Why don't you go get a job or something?” Because my dad had multiple jobs. Not only was he a funeral director, but he was an electrician, a carpenter. He did a lot of what they call trade embalming for other funeral homes. He was always working. I don't know if people realize that. He’d come home and eat with us, but he was right back out. He worked a lot. That was my memory of my father.

Stephanie Johnson [00:20:59] Can you describe your father's family history?

Winona Johnson [00:21:07] My dad was raised by a single parent; her name was Grace Bell. I didn't realize who my grandfather was until I must have been a teenager, when I realized this man that would come by occasionally, and I called him uncle, was really my grandfather. And I don't know when my father realized that that was his father, but he was primarily raised by my grandmother and her father and her mother. Then there were a whole lot of sisters that my grandmother had that had an influential part of my dad's rearing.

Stephanie Johnson [00:21:57] You describe a little bit of your father's work. How do you think the--well I know, like I told you--being young and hearing people talk?

Winona Johnson [02:22:22] What did they say?

Stephanie Johnson [02:22:23] Your dad was more so like…one story I know in particular, a friend of mine had passed. She died as a teenager, and her parents couldn't, well, they couldn't afford her funeral. And your dad basically gave them the funeral free of charge. And I think that's what stood out the most for me as a kid growing up in Alexandria. His more so giving. I could tell you several other stories, you know, and then, like, the craft. I'm going to say he was very crafty with his, with mortician’s skill, yeah.

Winona Johnson [00:23:13] Because, he was one of the best that ever, what they call the GOAT. Yeah, even today, being the daughter of Philip Bell in my profession carries a lot heavy weight that is on my back that I have to live up to; more so the professionalism. My dad was the ultimate professional when it came to his career. You mentioned, something about my father and his generosity to people. It came with a price, though. That's the one thing that people don't understand. My dad--he would go into his pocket, I remember as a kid, and we didn't want anything big, maybe just go to the movies. And my dad would go in his pocket and he'd have some crumbled up bills and he would hand it to you and go have a good time. He left him maybe with nothing. I remember that about him. But it came with a price. He couldn't pay his bills. You have to understand that when you give away a funeral, there's a casket involved. That casket costs money, okay? So that means that out of dad's pocket, he had to pay for a casket. The people who worked with him or for him, they had to be paid. So, he put himself in a lot of jeopardy by doing those type of funerals. Today, I still will, if I find that there's an urgent need, I will, you know, try to help in some way. But people have to understand that when businesspeople don't get paid, they put themselves in a lot of financial and personal jeopardy. And so, when I came along after-- that's why daddy sold the business. You realize daddy sold The Lewis Funeral Home in the [19]90s. One of the reasons why is for him to get from under that pressure that he was under.

And when we started this business in 2009--the business we have now, the Phillip Bell in Maryland--one of the things that I think was important to me was that he allowed me to be out front and get that pressure off of him because he wanted to help, he wanted do well, but it was putting him, he couldn't pay. People always said, "Your dad was such…." I said, "But he couldn't pay his bills." You know, he was helping all these people. And some people would promise to pay and never would. I mean, there's a choice when you say, okay, "I'll do this for you." But then there's another time when he wasn't promising to pay, but they just didn't pay. I think that's one of the things that I was happy that in the end, and he worked really hard, he was able to enjoy life because he didn't have to work. Once he decided he wasn't going to do that anymore, he got a check from this business. He could go out and do gardening, you know, enjoy life. Those last few years; he was able enjoy his life a little bit.

Stephanie Johnson [00:26:44] Well, you know, when I look back, being an Alexandrian and looking at the different—I mean, I know he took a hit financially. But people talk highly of him, despite, you know, his loss. I mean, I'm sorry he took those particular losses. But he was a people person, that's what I gather. He was more so like that.

Winona Johnson [00:27:18] He was a visitor, too. One of the things that I remember people talk about is that he would visit people in the community. He wasn't just back at the office, but he would go visit his friends and sit and have a drink. I was in somebody's house not too long ago, and a guy pulled out a bottle, because he didn't drink. He said, "You know, this bottle's been here. It was always there for your father when he came by to have a drink," and I was like, "Oh wow, that's been there a long time, huh?" Yeah, so he was one of those people. One time I asked him, because of the influence that I had, most of my friends when I went to St. Mary's, they didn't live in the city of Alexandria. You know, we've had that gentrification thing that's been slowly moving Black people out of Old Town and elsewhere, but when I grew up, Old Town was primarily African American, and everybody else lived on the West End or [inaudible] Drive or whatever. And I asked daddy one time, I said, "Why haven't we moved, you know, to another area?" And he was like, "No, this is my community, and this is where I'm going to stay." He was adamant about that until…he loved Maryland. Don't you love Maryland? And when they put that Wilson Bridge up, that was his idea and he wanted to move to Maryland, and he finally did do that. But growing up, no, there was nowhere better than Alexandria down on this area.

Stephanie Johnson [00:28:49] So, did you ever take your friends into the funeral home?

Winona Johnson [00:28:53] We had a party there once.

Stephanie Johnson [00:28:57] Were you scared?

Winona Johnson [00:28:59] No; first of all, I didn't know what daddy did, you know, the prep room was not a place where we went. That's where the bodies were actually taken and prepared. When I saw bodies, they were generally in what we call the chapel. They were prepared, dressed, and casketed. Occasionally, you know, as I grew up, and we moved to another funeral home, I would go down into the prep room. But growing up, no, I didn't realize what my father did until I went to mortuary school.

Stephanie Johnson [00:29:35] Did you live in the funeral home or not?

Winona Johnson [00:29:37] No, we did not live in a funeral home because my father thought it was too restrictive for little kids to live in funeral home. Because you have to be quiet. I did live in a funeral home on Patrick Street. I did live there with my son when I came back to town years later. But no, he

always said, “I don't want you to live in there because it's restrictive. You have to be quiet.” If there's a funeral going on and you're cooking and stuff, you have to, you know, be respectful. So no, we never grew up in a funeral home. We grew up living with--inside my house, once we moved to the other side of town, everybody moved with us. So, I grew up with my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my mother. And we all lived in this two-bedroom townhouse on Boyle Street. And across the driveway was my aunt and her family. Next door to her was my other aunt and husband. So, it was sort of like a compound. And they all helped each other.

Stephanie Johnson [00:30:48] Can you describe your mom?

Winona Johnson [00:30:55] Oh, mommy! I think, I always say thank goodness my daddy married my mother because I think my life would have been a lot different without that union. My mother was a teenage mother. She had me very young, like 17 years old, and my dad decided that they would get married, that they should get married. And she was very smart, both my parents were very smart. But my mother, when I saw my mother, she kept it quiet. My mother didn't graduate from high school, but she decided to go back to high school years later. I think I was about five or six when I looked at the diploma. She graduated from GW at night. And in an era where people decide to do GEDs, my mother said she wanted to go back and get her diploma. So, she graduated from high school. My mother was a very kind, beautiful woman. She put up with a lot. I think, you know, how many people, their whole marriage would live, you know, she resigned to live in the basement, because that's where their apartment was. My parents lived in the basement of the house. My grandmother and my great-grandmother had the main bedroom in the house, and then we had the other bedroom. And my parents lived the basement. And this was how my mother lived, until I went off to college. So, this is a woman who had put up with so much with living conditions, even though it helped in a lot of ways, too. Having that multi-generational support was very helpful. But my mother was the one who filled in the blanks. She always made sure that we were dressed nice and our hair was just right. And she pulled that. If I put on something and my mother didn't like it, you had to go back upstairs and change, and we'd have these conversations.

Every landmark in my life, my mother was there. When I had my first child, my mother was there. I nursed my mother toward the end; she got feeble. She could sing. This is the thing that made me cry. My mother worked for the Alexander City Public Schools her whole life, retired in her 50s. She put in the time early, retired, and went to Bible College. She was an evangelist at the end of her life, and when I saw my mother walk across that stage with her diploma, something she didn't get to do with her cap and gown and got that degree, I mean. I couldn't stop crying. I was like, it was like a dream deferred. You know, Langston Hughes says, what happens to a dream? Well, my mother deferred her dream all those years. And she lived out the last part of her life as an evangelist, preaching. She worked for my father, you know, for funerals. She preached some funerals. I'd take her with me. I took her everywhere. I took my mother everywhere. So, she lived with me toward the end. We still have the little thing that you put on the stairs; takes you upstairs when she got too weak. Yeah, we still have that lift. She was a very sweet woman.

Speaker 3 [00:34:49] What was her full name?

Winona Johnson [00:34:51] Phyllis May Bell. She's a Diggs, actually. She was a Diggs, her maiden name.

Stephanie Johnson [00:35:00] You said your mother yielded and allowed her elders to more so have a room upstairs and she lived in the basement. So, was the role as parenting from both? Grandma, great-grandma, and mom?

Winona Johnson [00:35:26] I had it from everywhere. My grandmother--okay, my mother and father were, when it came to raising us, they were a unit. Okay, you'd go back and forth. “Can I do this?” “Ask your mother.” “Can I do this?” “Ask your father.” They were a unit, and this continued throughout my whole life and their lives. They were a unit when it came to raising us. But I also had the benefit of being raised by my grandmother who-- grandmother, her name was Grace Bell; my father's mother. She probably had an eighth-grade education. She was a domestic. And she worked for some of the prominent families in Alexandria for most of her life, as did my great-grandmother. They were both domestics. My great grandmother retired; my dad retired her. So, she was at home primarily every day. But my grandmother was this really smart woman who I felt if she had had opportunity, educational opportunity, could have been a doctor or something. But my grandmother, because she spent time in some of these wealthy families in Alexandria, she had an idea of what quality was and she passed that on to us. She was a domestic, but she saved her money because she really didn't have…her role in the house was to pay, buy groceries, and make sure that those things were accounted for. But she also took charge of my health.

I was a sickly child. She found the best pediatrician there was in Washington, D.C. at the time. His name was Roland Scott. He was also head of the sickle cell anemia program at Howard. My grandmother, who did not have a car, who would work all day long, would come home from work, load me on a bus, take me in the cold. I mean, this went on for years. I think I had to go twice, I think had to go twice a week or something. She was the one who would load me on a bus, take me to DC, and his office was on 14th and Gerard, so that's two bus rides. And she would take me there. He was so popular and would just be sitting in his office maybe for another couple hours before we could even be seen by the doctor. Then I was getting these desensitization shots and I then would have to sit another hour or so because they have to wait to see if you're going to have a reaction. And then we get back on the bus, two busses, to get back home and sometimes we didn't get home till you know ten or eleven o'clock and then sometimes she would stop us at this drug store there was in D.C. I guess 14th Street or somewhere. And we'd have a milkshake and a hamburger before we came home. So, my grandmother, she was just the sweetest woman, but she also raised me. And so, did my grandma, Theresa.

Stephanie Johnson [00:38:35] So were these your dad's?

Winona Johnson [00:38:37] These were my dad's, this is my dad mother, Grace, and my dad's grandmother, my great-grandmother, her name was Theresa Bell. She was an Anderson. She came from Catlett, Virginia.

Stephanie Johnson [00:38:52] So, do you know how your mom and dad met?

Winona Johnson [00:38:58] They did. They went to high school. Daddy, you know, graduated from Parker, was it Parker-Gray? Yeah, Parker-Gray. They met at Parker-Gray. My mother didn't, of course, graduate from there. That's where they met.

Stephanie Johnson [00:39:13] Oh, I did that wrong. Okay, you said that you were married. Can you describe where you met your husband at?

Winona Johnson [00:39:26] Mr. Morrissette or Mr. Johnson?

Stephanie Johnson [00:39:29] Oh, that's what Morrissette, I thought Morsette was a middle name, okay, yeah, let's start with Morrissette. The last name Morrissette, so is that like Morrissette, is that French?

Winona Johnson [00:39:44] Could be. Well, I met Mr. Morrissette, Ron Morrissette, in college. He'd attended Fisk. We reconnected some years later. We dated briefly, but we reconnected some years later. I lived in Connecticut and he was there training. He was in insurance and I met him.

Stephanie Johnson [00:40:10] Can you tell us, like your career, were you a teacher?

Winona Johnson [00:40:16] Well, yes. That was one of my careers. I've had several.

Stephanie Johnson [00:40:22] Did you go to college for teaching?

Winona Johnson [00:40:23] No.

Stephanie Johnson [00:40:24] What was your major?

Winona Johnson [00:40:25] My major in college was political science.

Stephanie Johnson [00:40:28] Okay, so how did you end up opting to teach and what was it?

Winona Johnson [00:40:40] So, after my marriage ended with Mr. Morrissette, I had a little boy, my son, my thoughts were I always wanted to be an attorney. And I thought, well, my marriage has ended, I'm coming back home, so maybe I'll go law school. And a very wise older woman told me that I shouldn't do that because I had this little boy. My son was about three years old when I came back to town. And the reason I keep Morrissette attached to my name is because my son's name is Morrissette, Wesley Morrissette. I went back. I wanted to find something that I could do that would allow me to stay close to my son because this wise lady told me that if I went to law school I would probably be shifting him off to other people to take care of him because I'd be so focused on trying to advance my career. So, I started subbing, and then later I started doing homebound, which was going into people's homes in Alexandria, young people. Because at one point, when you were pregnant, you had to leave the classroom and stay at home until you had your baby, then you came back. So, the majority of the girls that I taught on homebound were kids who were having babies. But there were others that were very sick. It's surprising how many children are very sick, so I'd go to Children's Hospital; there were people who were chronically ill at home that I serviced, and I did that for a number of years.

Because my office that I would visit in Alexandria Public Schools was in the central office, I ran into the head of--I guess he was head of human resources, and he said, “So, where do you work?” I said, “Oh, I'm a homebound teacher. I don't really work anywhere in the system. No school, I'm just going to people's houses.” And he turned to this lady at the time who was in charge of, I think, getting people certified. And he looked at her and he said, “Get her certified.” That's what he said. She gave me a list of things I had do. One was [to] take the national teacher's exam. So, I took it. Took it all in one day and passed it. I was shocked myself. But I guess I think I have an innate ability to teach, so I did that and was hired at TC, first as an African-American Studies teacher, and later I taught, because I had a poli sci degree, I was later certified to teach government, so, I taught advanced placement government, general government, and African American Studies most of my career .

Stephanie Johnson [00:43:59] So you went from teaching, and then you, so what was the process of you taking over your, well, you talked about it a little bit.

Winona Johnson [00:44:05] Starting this business with my dad?

Stephanie Johnson [0044:10] Yeah, your dad's business. Did you go back, well, I'm quite sure you had to go back to school.

Winona Johnson [00:44:23] Didn't go back. Okay. So, you know I had this dream of being an attorney. The dream to be an attorney started when I graduated from Fisk. I graduated Fisk with a B.A. in poli sci. And I was going to go to law school, took the test and all that, LSAT. And I was talking to one of my professors and I said you know my family has this business in Virginia. I don't know if I should be preparing myself for that as well and he said, “I think you should.” So, I finished college in three and a half years. Most people take four, but I finished in three-and-a-half years.

Stephanie Johnson [00:45:06] Mortuary school?

Winona Johnson [00:45:08] I finished college in three a half. This was at the end of my college career. I started thinking about which direction I was going to go. Was I going to go to law school? Or what. And my professor recommended that I go to mortuary school. So, okay. So, the decision I made, I had that half a semester off. I decided during that period that I would go ahead to mortuary school. I attended American Academy.

Stephanie Johnson [00:45:45] Where's it located?

Winona Johnson [00:45:46] In New York City, the same school my father attended. He graduated from American Academy in 1956 and then I graduated twenty years later in 1976. When my dad was in school there, my mother and father were married. He was still a young man and I was just like a toddler, but we lived over a funeral home. Oh, I did live over a funeral home. We lived over a funnel home in Brooklyn while my dad was in school. And then I went to school in New York. It was like a year, a year long program. My father found me a lady who would take in students. She was also a mortician, had a business. So, I lived on the—did I live in the funeral home? I lived on the third floor of a funeral home as an adult while I was in mortuary school. I lived in Lennox Avenue. My room overlooked Lennox Avenue and I was between 124th and 125th, so I saw a lot of action. I'd get up every morning and go downtown to school. And I was there for the year, finished.

And that's what I was saying. It wasn't until I went to mortuary school that I realized what my dad really did in that prep room, because I thought it was going to be just textbook. I was good at that. But when they started talking about morgue, I was like, “What do you mean morgue?” So, we actually did our practical work out of Bellevue Hospital in New York City. Basically, John Does, people who had not been claimed and there were advanced issues with that. And some people had sick stomachs, but I was able to manage that, and I graduated my dad my mom came up packed me up took me back home and at that point I had to decide what i was going to do. I decided not to work. So, after I graduated from mortuary school, I had to make a decision. And the decision was not to go into the family business right away. My dad was still very active in the business.

Stephanie Johnson [00:48:31] Can you give me about a year? What year?

Winona Johnson [00:48:32] 1976.

Stephanie Johnson [00:48:33] [19]76; you did say that.

Winona Johnson [00:48:40] So I was a year out of college, and I did a little substitute teaching for a while and then my cousin, Stevie--this is on my father's side--was in human resources in Connecticut. At that time, I guess everybody talks about DEI, they were trying to recruit minorities for a bank training program, and my cousin recruited me. I moved to Hartford, and I trained. I went through a bank training program. Eventually, when I met my husband, and we moved to Houston, Texas, well, I became a bank officer. That became my training. They kind of gave you everything you needed to know. And I became an assistant treasurer in a large regional bank, working out of the energy division. I helped finance those jack up rigs off the Gulf of Mexico. I did that until I had my first son, who passed away shortly after birth. And then came Wesley. And that's when I changed the direction of my life. Because before that, I was very ambitious. I thought, I'll do this and work in corporate America. But after I lost my first son and had Wesley, I decided I wanted to raise him. So, he became the focus, pretty much, for the next few years of my life. And, of course, when that marriage ended and I moved back home, that's when I went into teaching.

Stephanie Johnson [00:50:31] So, you kind of like travelled.

Winona Johnson [00:50:34] I've lived other places.

Stephanie Johnson [00:50:41] Yeah, good experience.

Winona Johnson [00:50:43] Well, that's why my dad, he always said that. He said that a family business is for lazy people. He was proud of the fact that I had gone out into the world, and that has been helpful. Right now, running my business, I learned so much from being a teacher in the Alexandria City Public Schools. I gained a lot of skills--people skills, technology skills, patience. I learned so much from working in other professions that I've brought back to our family. And my dad wanted that for me. He was very proud of that.

Stephanie Johnson [00:51:18] So, can you explain the process of taking over your father's business?

Winona Johnson [00:51:24] Well I don't look at it as if I took over my father's business. My dad sold the Lewis Funeral Home to a lady named Johnson, and this business that we started in 2009 was a collaboration between the two of us, basically funded with my money, so that my father could continue to live a life that he was accustomed to. He talked me into it. I didn't want to do it. But I was happy that I did it. And he had his lane, and I had--in the beginning, in 2009, when we started this business, he had his lane. He was the embalmer. And I was the administrator. I took care of everything else. And then later, when his health started to fail--because you know, my dad, he had about five strokes, and it affected his speech. He had aphasia. I don't know if you've spoken to him later in life where he would have to think about what he was saying; it was kind of delayed. And then toward the very end, he could barely talk. That last stroke really took him out. But as I said, as long as he could, he was there. And I really felt that I was just doing this until, my father decided he didn't want to do this anymore, this business. I didn't see any longevity to it, because I said that to him one day. I said, “Dad, once you know you are no longer in this business, I don't think people will call me” and he said, “I don't see why not.” You know that was the way he said it and surprisingly people do find me, you know people do call me because of my father and the work that he did for them.

Stephanie Johnson [00:53:26] So what are some of the challenges that you face in the business?

Winona Johnson [00:53:33] I think the challenges that I face in general are the challenges that...my personality. I had the same challenges when I was teaching. I have a drive for excellence. I wanted excellence for my students. I've demanded excellence of myself. And I own it. And that can be a problem, because it's very stressful. The biggest challenge for me is just making sure that the families that call me and that I serve are pleased with the service I provide.

Stephanie Johnson [00:54:19] Well, I have used you, several times--myself and my kids already know if you're around, they're to send me to you. Your warmness, your gentleness. Your demeanor kind of like reminds me a little bit of your father.

Winona Johnson [00:54:45] Sometimes people say that.

Stephanie Johnson [00:54:47] Your compassion, some funeral homes don't, I mean, I'm just being honest. Not because I'm more so, well, one I did use for another family member, but I personally never really had dealings with Lewis Funeral Home, per se. My dad's people use another funeral home, local work. I'm not going to say they were really competitive, greening your father. They were friends. Yeah, but that's who they use. So, I got to, my experience with your dad was through other family members. And I didn't get to use him, per se, but I did get to use you. And I see the similarities for the deliverance of service.

Winona Johnson [00:55:53] That's the training.

Stephanie Johnson [00:55:55] Yeah, and you know, people are high in emotions at that time, you know? And when somebody can just kind of like, guide you through the process of, and allowing the emotions to be what it is. You know, and I know you see a lot of it, you see the sadness, you see the anger and whatever else might.

Winona Johnson [00:56:18] And the family issues. Sometimes families don't get along and you're in the middle of something that you don't want to be in the middle of, so you have to be gentle. It's a gentleness. One of the things I try never to do is never say no. You know, what families, unless in my professional opinion, it's something that they need to be aware of because I try whatever it is you want to do. I try to help facilitate that. You know, some people [inaudible]. I can't do that; I don't want to do that. I want to help families achieve whatever goals they have for the memorialization of their loved one. And again, that's the challenge of my job is just to do that.

Stephanie Johnson [00:57:07] Can you describe a specific funeral that stands out in your memory as of late?

Winona Johnson [00:57:12] A couple of them. One was, you know, I did Coach Boone. Do you remember? *Remember the Titans* Coach Boone? Well, that was probably one of the biggest funerals that I was in charge of. He always came to me and said, "When I die, I want you to have my body." And I did. And it was a very huge send-off. And then the other one was a relative of mine. It was a young--I think she was a teenage girl--and her father passed away and passed away together. And the mother lived here. So, we brought the bodies back here. They couldn't see them because they had been in the house so long. We had to have them in a sealed casket. But the turnout, the flowers, it was unbelievable because she was a high school student and he was very popular, and the family was very popular. That one stood out. I mean, the procession to Mount Comfort from the church, which was right across the street, took a good hour to get the cars out with police escorting them.

Stephanie Johnson [00:58:35] I heard you say for those who can't get to see their loved ones.

Winona Johnson [00:58:41] That's rough.

Stephanie Johnson [00:58:44] Yeah, I think that would be very traumatic, but then I heard you say something about seal; so, you're using something different.

Winona Johnson [00:58:53] Well, now they do, they didn't have that at the time, but there's something called bio-seal.

Stephanie Johnson [00:58:59] And why are you using that? Bio-seal.

Winona Johnson [00:59:02] Because sometimes people aren't found for a long time. You know, they could be in a house. Nobody did a wellness check, so they stay in the house and the body starts to break down at that point. When that happens there can be odor and odor is contained with the bio-seal. Most these people they're not viewable You have to find another means of identification besides visual. And so, they do bio-seal. At the time of these two passings, we just put them in a sealer, you're familiar with sealer caskets. When you see the funeral director close the casket and put a key at the bottom and start to crank, that's creating a vacuum and a seal inside that casket. It sort of contains what's in there. It kind of helps with the odor as well, But now they have something else too.

Stephanie Johnson [01:00:01] So emotionally, does that affect you? Like, when you can't prepare a body the way you normally would, what about decomposing? Is that a harder task than doing a regular body?

Winona Johnson [01:00:22] Of course. Some you can save and some you can't. I was able to save a case; she was on the verge. She was on a verge. I mean within hours with something called tissue gas. When tissue gas sets up, it's not retarded by, you can slow it down a little bit by being refrigerated or cooled, but it's a chemical process that's taking place in the body and it's hard to stop unless you catch it right then and there. I caught one. She had spent time--she passed away in the house. Then because she passed away in a house, a medical examiner needed to see her. So, I couldn't remove her from the facility of death. So, they took her to another facility. She sat there for a day or so, but she'd been in the house for who knows how long. And by the time she got into my funeral home, I could see signs that she was getting ready to be irretrievable. There is a point of no return. But we were able, it was amazing, you know, to be able to see the chemicals at work; they brought her back.

Stephanie Johnson [01:01:33] So how do you contain yourself on the emotional level, like, how do you can, I don't know, I can see myself like.

Winona Johnson [01:01:42] It is the greatest gift.

Stephanie Johnson [01:01:45] How do you contain yourself?

Winona Johnson [01:01:47] I buried both my parents. You have to understand that they were both in my custody from the time that they, well, from the time I took over. My dad died in the hospital. My mother passed away at a rehab. She was about to be released. She died at the rehab center, and I was out of town. I had someone pick her up and take her to their facility until I got back to town. But, in both--I just felt like, who else would be able to do this but me? It was the greatest gift God could have given me, that I was in charge of both my parents' funerals. The same I felt with my kids. I taught both

my boys; they were both in my class. And I thought, if you can't teach your own child, who can you teach?

Stephanie Johnson [01:02:39] Well, I heard that saying before, too.

Winona Johnson [01:02:40] Really? Yeah. People were like, wasn't that strange? I don't think it was strange for them. And I don't think it strange for me either. It was just, that's who I am. I was their teacher, you know, at home. And they understood the difference between mom and teacher. The kids thought they knew things. They didn't know a thing. They knew I was going to be harder on them, my expectations. And for my son, he was such a troubled child, you know, my biological. I have AK's son who I raised, and I have Wesley, who's my biological, Wesley. Both of them were challenging. We called them the Blues Brothers; but we raised them together when we got together, AK Johnson and I. And we've been married 32 years, I know. And those little boys, they were a challenge. My son was really, you know, just hard to raise. And I kept telling him he was a part of Du Bios' "Talented Tenth. " I was like, "You know you're a part of Du Bois' "Talented Tenth," and that really stuck with him. One day I was coming across the Wilson Bridge because they were both educated--we lived in Maryland, but they were both educated in the Alexandria City Public Schools. And one day, he said, "Mom, am I still a part of the Du Bois?" I was, like, yes, honey. And you know he has excelled. I was the helicopter mom. I pushed a lot because I lost my first son at birth. So, when God gave me another child, but today he's an assistant U.S. Attorney. Works for the Justice Department. And he does well. And part of it is because I wanted excellence for him. And Ali does well too. He works in the government as well.

Stephanie Johnson [01:04:44] So, I told you that I used your business before, so if you can go back to when working with me with my mom's funeral, how was that for you working with my family?

Winona Johnson [01:05:01] I can't honestly--I remember, you know, you live right there on, was it this, the family that lived on Patrick Street? In the house? Okay. There's not a lot I can tell you except for I remember the family. The family, you're a very close-knit, warm family, and you were warm to me. That's also important to me, how I'm received. And afterwards you're so appreciative because don't you have a brother that works at Nissan? Is that one of your brothers?

Stephanie Johnson [01:05:36] Yes, that's my twin.

Winona Johnson [01:05:38] That's your twin?

Stephani Johnson [01:05:39] Yes. Steven.

Winona Johnson [01:05:41] Yeah, I would take my car there and he would say, he would tell, "This lady, she can really, really help you, and you know, she did my mother." Yeah, he was. And then it was someone else in your family.

Stephanie Johnson [01:05:56] You did Rosalind, my cousin. We were on a trip. And my uncle, and yeah.

Winona Johnson [01:06:05] But I remember your family very, very much. And Michael. And Michael, your brother.

Stephanie Johnson [01:06:11] Yes. Everybody knows Michael. [Laughter] But you know, that's what I'm saying. If it gives you nothing else, to know that you're loved by the community that you serve. We're very proud of you. I'm proud of you. Thank you.

Winona Johnson [01:06:37] I'm proud too, to serve. I'm trying to continue the legacy of my father and I'm proud that people still call me. Not as much as they used to tell the truth and the reason is because I'm in Dunkirk, Maryland.

Stephanie Johnson [01:06:54] I think it's not that people don't want to use you, I think they look at the distance. You talk about the legacy, who's next, who's in line for this, who is in line for the after you, who will be in line?

Winona Johnson [01:07:17] To be continued, I can't say right now. I have a couple of people that I'm looking at.

Stephanie Johnson [01:07:25] So that means you're prepping them?

Winona Johnson [01:07:29] I'm considering what the next generation of this will be, where the future of my business will be. Theoretically, in Maryland, they have something called the spouse who can take over. My husband has been working with me very closely since his retirement, so he knows a lot. He could probably continue that. In Maryland, the spouse can assume the business, if they so choose; however, Maryland has a little different rule in terms of—Okay, I have an establishment license. The establishment license in Maryland allows me to serve families as a business. And then I have a personal license that allows me to operate as a funeral director. I can be a funeral director. I have license in DC. I have a license in Maryland, and I have one in Virginia. If I didn't have a Virginia license, I couldn't come into Virginia and hold the funeral. You have to be—like the same with doctors, and you have to be licensed in each jurisdiction that you serve. Again, that was something that my father also had. He had three licenses, and so that was a legacy. He told me, "You know, you're going around the Beltway, you need all three." And every time I got the rest of my laurels. I got Maryland first, and he bugged me to get Virginia. Then he bugged me to get D.C. So, I don't think being--I don't know, I don't know. Because you have to be licensed to run a funeral home in Maryland; you have to be licensed. That's what the PA stands for, Professional Association. You have to be a licensed professional in order to run a funeral business in Maryland. Not so in Virginia. In Virginia, you can own a funeral home but not be a licensed funeral director. You just have to have a licensed manager to operate. That makes it a little bit more complicated. I have to find someone who is licensed, who will be able to take over my business. So, I'm looking at it from that perspective. And when people, a lot of people want to work in this business for some reason.

Stephanie Johnson [01:10:08] I think they think it's lucrative.

Winona Johnson [01:10:12] Yeah, but I'm of the belief that if you want to work with me, you have to show me that you're serious. Which means what? Got to go to school. I asked them, I said, "So are you matriculating? Are you going to school?" "No, I just wanted to…" I said, "Look, I'd need licenses." I need people who can stand in for me, you know, who can do the work when I'm not there or help me do the work and you can't do that without a license. I do have people that work with me that aren't licensed.

Stephanie Johnson [01:10:49] You mean licensed to embalm?

Winona Johnson [01:10:51] Licensed to everything. You can't even go into someone's home and do a contract if you're not licensed. Every aspect of this business requires that you be licensed—embalm. I can't take a body into a cemetery unless I'm licensed. So, how can you help me, you know, if I got to be there, and you just want…And the most important thing, it's a very personal, you are dealing with

people's personal business. You know, a lot of personal stuff is transacted, and your seeing people at a time at their most vulnerable, you now, these are dead people who are defenseless, and, you got to take care that you are protecting them from the outside world. I'm not just going to let any Tom, Dick, or Harry walk through my prep room and see what's going on. I can't do that. No. So, unless you're serious, showing me that you're serious, and most people aren't.

Stephanie Johnson [01:11:50] Yeah; but I think like I said, I think a lot of them think that undertakers make a lot make a lot of money. But they don't look at the overhead.

Winona Johnson [01:12:04] A lot of money passes through their hands, but most of it is passing. Yeah, it's passing through. It's not really, because as I said every time you buy a casket, they want their money and the suppliers, and they go up every year. You got to buy chemicals and pay staff, insurance.

Stephanie Johnson [01:12:26] So, hypothetically, in this day and time, 2026, what is that medium cost that a funeral can cost?

Winona Johnson [01:12:43] I would say, you know, there's several types of funerals. The one that, what they call traditional funeral, where you take in a body, prep them for viewing, take them to a church, have a service, and then deliver them to a cemetery for burial. My fee would probably run anywhere-- depending on the casket that you provide-- my fee would probably run anywhere from $7,500 to $9,000. The cemetery's another story. Cemeteries today are the fastest rising cost of a ground burial. If you look at Mr. Click Bethel Cemetery, that's probably most reasonable around here, which is, I think he's at $4,000, maybe $4500.

Stephanie Johnson [01:13:40] He done moved up.

Winona Johnson [01:13:41] Yeah, he realized, yeah. And he doesn't require an out-of-burial container, which is a vault or a liner. But every other cemetery in this area does, so that's another expense. If you go to someplace like the Dignities, Mount Comfort and surrounding, you're looking at $12,000, $14,000 just to be buried, and I don't think that includes the headstone or any of the other things.

Stephanie Johnson [01:14:09] I have property there.

Winona Johnson [01:14:11] Well, hopefully my grandmother is buried there, and all of her people and I'll be buried at Mount Comfort.

Stephanie Johnson [01:14:25] So do you think that...Eventually, what do you see more of? Do you see the actual burial right now or are people going cremation way?

Winona Johnson [01:14:32] The other way you can, I was mentioning, that's the traditional way. What we're seeing a lot of these days is the traditional, where we take in the remains, we prepare them for viewing, we take them to the church, they have the service, and then we cremate. Now that can run you, because graves are so expensive, people can't afford to do both. So that would run you somewhere between $7500 and $9,000.

Stephanie Johnson [01:15:06] Okay. Is that like double-dipping?

Winona Johnson [01:15:10] Well, you're not, first you're renting a casket. You're not buying a casket.

Stephanie Johnson [01:15:17] Okay, you say rent. Is that legal? I mean, yeah, is that, I don't know, that's not the word I wanted to use. I don't want to use the word legal, because it is legal, because you're doing it, but health-wise, what is it? Yeah, is it healthy?

Winona Johnson [01:15:32] Yeah, they have these caskets, they're rental caskets, and they have an insert, and the insert comes out at the end. It's a box, and it comes out, and that's what's cremated. Or you can get a crematable casket.

Stephanie Johnson [01:15:48] Oh, okay, okay. So...

Winona Johnson [01:15:52] But those you have to buy; they get a little bit more expensive.

Stephanie Johnson [01:15:56] So in closing...

Winona Johnson [01:15:59] Oh, let me mention that cremation. The other one I'm seeing a lot more of, because people don't have insurance and they don't any money, is a direct cremation. And that can cost you slightly under $3,000.

Stephanie Johnson [01:16:14] Is that the younger generation or just in general?

Winona Johnson [01:16:18] And then there's another thing that's coming up, people are asking me about more, is composting. That instead of being buried, they're allowing themselves to break down in a machine and then you become compost. And then, so like fertilizer, and then instead of ashes giving back ashes, they give you back a container of your body having gone through that chemical process of composting. People are looking at that. They just put a new facility in Maryland for that. And I've only had one so far, and that was a green burial because there are people who believe that putting chemicals back into the earth is not a good thing. And so, with green burials you don't embalm. You use biodegradable materials for burial. And then there are cemeteries that do that.

Stephanie Johnson [01:17:24] So how do you preserve the body from smelling?

Winona Johnson [01:17:28] Well, you keep them refrigerated. You don't hold them long for them--but, you know some of the green burials, I have problems with that, by the way. There are some that keep them in their home. You know, in the olden days, bodies stayed in the home. You know? That's what happened in the same home.

Stephanie Johnson [01:17:42] Cooling board, right? They used cooling boards.

Winona Johnson [01:17:45] Did they? Yeah. It was only going to last for so long. I have a problem with transporting unembalmed bodies personally, you know, because some families handle it themselves. You know, they'll keep them in the home, put them in a box, take them to the funeral home. That makes me nervous. Take them to a cemetery. That makes be nervous. But when we handle, I've only, as I said, I have one lady. And it was a compromise that the family made, because... She really, she had a strange, you know, request, but they made a compromise. They said, well, we'll take you to the funeral home. I kept her refrigerated and cooled until the time of her service. And that morning-- the cemetery that she chose, which was a green portion, was in some part of Philadelphia. So, we dressed her, put her in the basket that the family picked out, and drove her to Philadelphia, right outside of Philadelphia and buried her. And that was her wishes, pretty much.

Stephanie Johnson [01:18:58] Oh, that was one of my questions I had to ask you before I close. So, do you see the cemetery is going to be a thing of the past?

Winona Johnson [01:19:17] I don't I don't think cemeteries will be a thing of the past, but I see people not being able to afford cemeteries. I see less and less people being able to afford a ground burial. That's what I think. The same is true, they make predictions about a lot of things. They were saying that at some point, in classroom experiences in colleges, because the cost of a college education on campus is becoming so, that at some point in classroom education will become a thing of the past. Because people won't be able to access it.

Stephanie Johnson [01:20:02] Two questions before we close out. What are the most important lessons you learned in life? That's the first one. And then the second one would be, how would you like to be remembered?

Winona Johnson [01:20:24] I think I'd have to go back to my youth, sitting on that third floor of that funeral home back in Harlem years ago and I determined that the most important thing for me in life was to be happy. Happiness was the key. I can say that that has been my motivation. And how do I want to be remembered? I want to be remembered. as Nona, Noni--if someone calls me Noni and there are some, you know, I turn around because these are people who have known me back when. Nona has been someone that has come along later. But I want to be remembered as a teacher, as a wife, as a mother and a friend. I think I've held all of those roles at some point and another, and they all mean something to me. So, I think that's it.

END OF INTERVIEW