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CA-015-003-004

2025-07-24

Oral History Interview Transcript with Lydia Williams

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UUID: EAEE1169-BE12-4D10-9440-70E59A24A2CF

Citation:

River Hill Missionary Baptist Church. (2025, July 24). *Lydia Williams, oral history interview, July 24, 2025*. (B. Hamer, Interviewer) [Oral history interview]. CA-015-003: Oral Histories, CA-015 River Hill Baptist Church Collection, Valdosta State University Archives and Special Collections. <https://hdl.handle.net/10428/7762>

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Interviewee: Lydia Williams

Interviewer: Bonnie Hamer

Interview Date: 07/24/2025

Interview Location: Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA (Phone Interview)

List of Acronyms: LW – Lydia Williams, BH- Bonnie Hamer

Transcript by Alexia Griffin

[00:01]: Lydia Williams: My date of birth is February 1st, 1958. I was born in Valdosta, Georgia at Moody Air Force Base Hospital at the time.

[00:10]: Bonnie Hamer: I kind of want to dive into your childhood first. Is that OK?

[00:14]: LW: Sure.

[00:15]: BH: Can you tell me about some of your earliest memories with the church?

[00:21]: LW: Wow, that would have to be... maybe I was 6 or 7. I have memories of things that happen when I was six or seven. I forgot how old I was when my father was killed in Vietnam, but my mother returned to Valdosta to get assistance with raising us from her parents and they were very integral parts of the River Hill Church and my mother as well and all of my mother's side of the family, that little community where the church is now, most of those are relatives and so, it started when I was 6 or so. My memories of the church saying a Easter speech, going to revivals. At that time, they had choir sing-off where a choir would have an anniversary and different choirs would come around and it wasn't like a contest, but different choirs would sing, so I remember those things. It might be strange to you but isn't to me is that my grandfather and some other elderly men, they would do something like a call and chant. My grandfather would start singing out loud by himself and then others would kind of repeat it or they would have a chorus to it and it's like a call and chant and I didn't really appreciate it that much then. But through the years as I started studying the Gullah, the history from the coast of Georgia and stuff, I kind of think that that's where it come from and so I do have a interest in that. But, we have no recordings of that, sadly, I don't think the church was that savvy when it comes to recording, I'm saving those things but, I really remember vividly the call and chant that was interesting, how they could know the words to a song. And then I guess, they did it so much, it just came naturally that they would do it. That was interesting.

[02:25]: BH: Wow, so cool. You're saying this has origins to the Gullah dialect?

[02:32]: LW: Yeah, Gullah Geechee, the call and chant songs. You know, somebody will call out something and then people who can and it's like a call and repeat. Yeah.

[02:42]: BH: Wow, that's so cool. Was this at the old or new church?

[02:47]: LW: This is at the old church. I don't know who's around there to do it. I'm only there when I go for family reunions or something. So, I'm not there often enough to go to regular services. But a lot of the elders are probably passed on. Some of the the generation now, the leaders there were kind of put in place. They got there I like to say by default, but the older generation was very keen on that. I don't know what they do in there now, yeah. I guess Mom or Brother could tell you they do that, but I just remembered vividly from my Uncle Frank and my granddaddy and others, singing. And that was basically the Deacon board. They would start a song and chant out something and then we repeated. Yeah, that was one of my vivid memories.

[03:44]: BH: Oh, wow

[03:46]: LW: I also remember the church, neither the location as it is now. I remember the earlier location where it was at the top of the hill at the intersection of. Highway 75 and that little road that goes to Quitman, GA. It said if you were coming from Valdosta, it said over to the left, that little hill and then that main road would take you all the way to Quitman. It was the old white building. It was just interesting. I don't remember the bathroom was outside or not. But as I understand that land was given to the church by someone I'm not familiar, Mom might have the history of that, I don't. But, I can remember sneaking out when we got bored with the services sometimes and no one was noticing the kids going outside and we're playing in that yard, but we had to be careful of the snakes and all that stuff. I think maybe about the time I moved Junior high school that they moved into the location that they're in now. Also, at the old location, there was a school, there was a red building, it was a old schoolhouse where a lot of people in that community attended school. It had the desks and stuff and the church used that when we had church anniversaries and we had food sharing and all that stuff at the events and that schoolhouse was used for that. And they did move that old schoolhouse to the location where the church is now, but as an understanding eventually they got rid of that original building, which kind of sad because I think there's a lot of history with that and they have the setup that they have now.

[05:36]: BH: So, they didn't move. They didn't literally move the building to the new location, they just built a different building.

[05:43]: LW: No, the building was there, the red building; the schoolhouse was there. I remember the schoolhouse being there. And then again, I have to check with Mom, but because my memory kind of goes in and out, sometimes it's all the medication. And I thought it was there, but it's no longer there now. I thought it went to the new building, to the new church, the new property where the church is now.

[06:01]: BH: Okay. Did you go to the church at the school? I mean, did you go to the school at the church?

[06:11]: LW: No, no, no, that was for the elders. I was in public schools in Valdosta. But I have a lot of older cousins. They probably passed on now that people attended that. That time it was a school because they had desks and everything. It was like a old school building.

[06:22]: BH: Okay. What schools did you attend?

[06:26]: LW: Valdosta City Public Schools. First, there was a school right across the street from my grandma's house called Magnolia Street Elementary. I remember going there maybe 1st, 2nd, 3rd grade. Then, they started integration and my mother built that home. My father had been killed in Vietnam and my mother and father had planned and purchased some land and had planned to build where our original home is. And so, we were again sent to a new school. Leila Ellis, and that was probably my first interaction with kids from the white community because Magnolia was like a predominantly black school, but when I went to Leila Ellis, it was more integrated. That was one of those places where we could also walk to school, though rarely we did it but we could walk to school because there wasn't a bus system. Leila Ellis is somewhere, maybe that's Lee Street now. I can't remember but it might be Lee Street in Valdosta, Georgia.

[07:40]: BH: Did you feel safe with integration?

[07:46]: LW: Yes, I had no fear. My family told me I was pretty much an independent thinker and have been, I've been told since I was little and I was more like an activist. I would lead and try to instigate boycotts and walk outs, some things that I thought was injustice. My high school was Valdosta High School. I graduated high school in 1976 and we were one of the first to graduate from the high school. That is now located on it is called the Valdosta Performing Arts Center now, but it was Forest Street in Valdosta. We were the first to graduate from there and one thing unique about our class, we were integrated. We got along I think better than some of the adults in terms of integration. But they always had the Sunday commencement services for all of the high school grads and for the first time, they did it at Macedonia Baptist Church, which was a black church. But prior to that, it always been held at Lee Street Baptist Church or some white church in the city. Our class was good for advocating that we go to that church. Now, not all whites showed up, but a significant number of whites did show up for our Sunday service before our actual graduation. I can remember in high school working with my white classmates and friends with building the float for the homecoming parade and all of those things, but I was still an activist. Can you hold on just one second please? Hold on just one second. I'm back, sorry.

[09:31]: BH: Oh, no, you're fine.

[09:32]: LW: Okay, and now what was I saying? I lost my train of thought.

[09:38]: BH: We were talking about activism and...

[09:41]: LW: Yes, I was a DJ at the local black radio station WGOVE. I tried to introduce the city to jazz. I was always trying to do something new, something different. Always had to, you know? I don't want to say Valdosta was too small for me, but I read a lot and I studied other areas out of curiosity. I studied Black history that wasn't really taught in high school. So you know I was always doing something. Me and my friends were always doing something, but yeah.

[10:17]: BH: Wow, that is so cool. You were saying something about students gathering at a church.

[10:27]: LW: Yeah, I can't remember the name of it now. But, when you graduate, you have the actual graduation but the Sunday before graduation, the graduating class attends church together, it's not commencement, I forgot what they call it. But I forever remember of us going to white churches for those things. But we were in 1976, we went to a black church, Macedonia Baptist Church. And some of our white classmates joined us. Not all of them, but some of them joined us instead of us hauling into another white church, we were just like why not one of our churches? So, we just did it.

[11:12]: BH: Was Magnolia the same?

[11:17]: LW: No, this was high school. This was my high school graduation. Magnolia was elementary school. Maybe I was there 1st through 3rd grade, yeah.

[11:25]: BH: You were saying Macedonia. I'm sorry .

[11:29]: LW: Macedonia is a church.

[11:30]: BH: Right. Was that the same church that River Hill originated from?

[11:33]: LW: Yes, away from. Exactly, yes.

[11:37]: BH: Okay, that is so cool, and you gathered there. So interesting, oh my gosh.

[11:47]: LW: I don't know whether it had anything to do with my membership for River Hill, but a group of us made a decision, class officers and others. We were deterred to show unity. I'm not saying that Valdosta is a segregated town but its like the have and have nots. But, my mother always raised my sister and I to think we were just as good or if not better than others, so we kind of didn't have fear about things.

[12:21]: BH: Speaking about like family and stuff, how many siblings do you have?

[12:25]: LW: I'm the oldest of four siblings. You met my sister, Bertha Kay. BK is what I call her, but you've met Bertha. She's been very helpful with carrying the torch for this, especially since my illness has taken a dive. For the last three or four months, then I have a brother who has a disability he lives in Nashville, Tennessee. And then my younger brother, I don't know if he's talked to help. He retired from the medical field in Atlanta. He and his wife live not very far from my mother. And you met my mother, Kathleen Williams. My brothers did not take a inkling in the history and things in the church. Because they were like boys. They fought it tooth and nail. They were ushers. My sister, and I and my cousins, we sang in the junior choir. People always thought I was a great speaker. So, I was always asked to speak at different events at the church, scriptures, or speak on a subject matter. Easter speeches or whatever, we were always involved. The Junior Missionary Team, it was always something for us to get involved. But my brothers, they were hard heads. They chose to do whatever they wanted to do.

[13:46]: BH: Your whole family was definitely involved in the church.

[13:49]: LW: Yes.

[13:54]: BH: I've talked to a few other people and they talked about the huge family in River Hill Missionary Baptist Church and how everyone seemed to be related.

[14:04]: LW: Everyone seems to be related to someone. Yeah, that's true. I remember my first pastor that I remember from River Hill was Reverend Williams. He was Reverend Williams, he passed away. Then we ended up with Reverend Bland. Reverend Bland eventually passed away. He married someone, he got married late in life. But, he married a lady who eventually joined the church. Gosh, I can't remember her name now, but when she passed away, she took such an interest in my public speaking and me speaking out on stuff, she gave me a couple of broaches of her before she passed away. And then after Reverend Bland passed, then I believe it was Reverend Jenkins and by that time I think I was away at college or doing my own thing. But my childhood memories of Reverend Williamson, Reverend Bland, and maybe Reverend Jenkins as I was maybe getting ready to transition off to college.

[15:13]: BH: That is so sweet. What college did you go to?

[15:18] LW: I went to North Carolina A&T. I did come back home for financial reasons and I enrolled to Valdosta State, but my heart wasn't there. It was predominantly white and I already gone to a predominantly black institution, then I guess I was radicalized. I'm just kidding. I was not a good student at Valdosta State. I fought it tooth and nail because I didn't want to be there, but I have an appreciation of the experiences.

[15:46]: BH: Yes, ma'am. Can you tell me a little bit more about your experiences in college?

[15:53]: LW: In college? Always involved with something, as a matter of fact, the person that I just spoke to about paying the guy who's washing my car, she's like one of my college roommates so and we've been friends since 1976. Thank the guy who's washing my car. She's like my one of my college roommates so and we've been friends since 1976. So that's how far back our friendship goes. Had a wonderful college experience. Always trying something new or different. I was like a risktaker.

[16:20]: BH: What did you major in?

[16:23]: LW: I majored in Child Psychology and then I eventually got my degree in Human Services, my masters in Nonprofit Management.

[16:33]: BH: Oh wow, what did you do with that?

[16:36]: LW: I work in Social Services. I have served as sometimes their class action lawsuits filed unprotected services of people. And I had served as a research analyst at one point studying the education in a lot of the preschoolers that were migrants and how I followed them. A colleague and I, we studied that. That was our research project with all of them, from Florida to

South Carolina to North Carolina to Maryland. They stayed on the coast because they can work the farm. And so, I studied migrant children and the effects of their migration, on their families for working and not a lot of them were educated. Then, also worked for a research firm and I studied the behavior of children who had suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome on Indian reservations. And then, at the research field and I became a court monitor for a couple of class action lawsuits. My first lawsuit that was assistant court monitor. For federal class action lawsuit on behalf of persons who were housed in mental institutions and we had petitioned and the government agreed with us with transitioning out of this institution and into the community. So, I did that case several years. And at one point, I was the only one of 40 court monitors in the U.S. This is what I was told. But then, I got assigned a case where I was the court monitor for class action lawsuit on behalf of persons with development disabilities and mental retardation who were housed in a facility outside Maryland. It was over 3,000 in that class. When I got the case maybe we had like about 1,800. But, my staff and I were responsible for monitoring their well-being and transition into the community.

[18:30]: BH: Oh my gosh, those are huge projects.

[18:35]: LW: So, I did that. And now I have been in social services. I worked now, for a number of years, I work for AARP, the legal counsel for the elderly division, which I monitor the care services and report a complaint and non-compliance issues on behalf of persons in nursing homes, group homes, and assisted living facilities. So, that was great advocacy. So, I'm on my last leg. I think I'll probably try and retire next year. I think, you know, I wanted to hang in there a little bit longer, but I don't know how my health is going to hold up. But I'm currently working for the county government in Prince George's County, Maryland, where I serve as a 88 compliance program manager for the county, making sure that the roads and everything are accessible for those persons with disabilities, making sure that the county government provides sensibility tools for our employees and others in the community to thrive in their work.

[19:38]: BH: That is impressive. Everyone I've talked to so far they have taken the mission statement or the missionary kind of way of life into their careers. Someone served in the military, someone was a paramedic, and then you're in social services. It just seems like a huge part of your lives.

[20:11]: LW: I think that church, we've always wanted to be a servant. The church was very proud of me. I was one of the first ones in the church to go off to college. That was a big deal for my grandparents and members in the church because I grew up there. If that's my affinity now, I would like this legacy to be appreciated and continued. Question is, what do you hope to achieve by the preservation? I was so annoyed and I know develop happens and I have seen it happen in this area where people have built over graves and over historical sites that belong to either Native Americans or you know, enslaved people. And there's no appreciation for it. I'm not saying you have to appreciate it like I do because it is my legacy and my history but at least to the point where you respect it. So, one of my big things with reaching out for this study to be done and to

get historical status. I was so annoyed when our families at one point used to visit the cemetery to visit relatives' gravesites and whatever. We could no longer do that because there was a country club nearby in the college; students would use it for sorority and fraternity initiations and just total disrespect. And so, now I worry that something is not done from our end to try to preserve that, that developers will take over and it will be built and there will be buildings over those gravesites. And, that's where my ancestors are. That's where they are. No one has an appreciation but us. So, no one is going to save this but us. So, this is just an effort to try and do something.

[21:58]: BH: Yes, ma'am. I really hope that comes out of it. With all the disrespect that's going on and tombstones that have been desecrated.

[22:18]: LW: They have been contributors. Maybe not in the sense of a high political figure or high government official, but my people for the most part, how legacy of people helping others and taking care of themselves. Not asking for anything but taking care of themselves and making sure those around that have something and that says a lot. I just wanted to be appreciated, you know? We're there, I think we'll get there. I'm being grateful about this whole thing.

[22:52]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[22:53]: LW: And I know, it's been hard for you trying to get people to want to share their story and the church is not as robust in membership as it was before. And that is a problem with the leadership there. I'm constantly telling them ways to go about recruiting new members or using the resources at the college to start a tutoring program for kids in the community. Just using the resources that's available to them. But, they lack in technology knowledge and other things. So, they stay in a little bubble and so this church is not growing. And if, something doesn't happen, it will probably fade away. We don't get ministers now that have the heart for, the ministers I remember there. Not saying that they don't care, but they don't have an appreciation for it. And then one of those things, I have a thing. There's so many churches. You can look on every corner in Valdosta and there's a church. But what are these people really doing for the community.

[24:00]: BH: What kind of outreach programs did the church have when you were there?

[24:07]: LW: Well, there was Vacation Bible School. There were opportunities for us together and learn from each other, but what I'm trying to get them to understand is that we have to rethink how we reach out to communities and we want to maintain. Like my brother, he grew up in River Hill Church. But, when he moved back home, he decided there not cutting it for me. I'm not growing from there, so I'll go someplace else. And, it's just a small core of people, the men are suppressed in other areas of their life so the church sometimes for the black men is the only way where they feel that they flex their muscle whether it's a good way or a bad way. And so, sometimes just like trying to get them to see this project. I've been thinking about this for a couple of years, but you have to gently tread the water and get them on board with it. They don't see what I see in terms of the value of something like this being done.

[25:03]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[25:04] LW: For the most part with carrying on a church is women anyway.

[25:11]: BH: Have women always had a big role in the church functions?

[25:16]: LW: They might not had a voice, but they had a role. If there was a shortage of funds, they were the ones that do the cake sales or whatever was needed to raise the money or they gave their own. Like I said, the leadership is different now from what I grew up with. But women have always played a dominant role in the church. They just don't want them in a pulpit. That's another thing about the church, they would never have a female ministry. I don't get that but it is what it is.

[25:46]: BH: Do you think the role of the mother of the Church is similar to a minister?

[25:53] LW: No, my grandmother, she was mother of the church. I think it is usually given to the oldest woman in the church who has the most history about the church. There was getting baptized, they make sure you were ready for the baptism. Different things they did death in the family, coordinate the food banquets or food gatherings, but never to speak up.

[26:21]: BH: So, what would your piece of advice to the church be?

[26:28]: LW: To look forward and invest in the future, and that's allowing younger members to come in, that's allowing them to bring in the technology to help you sustain beyond being in the church physically every Sunday. Let's do some Youtube, let's do some learning discussions, let's talk with one of the activist groups or fraternities or sororities at Valdosta State University. See if they would be interested in starting a tutoring program. Let's do something. Most of the students at Valdosta State at the time I was there, they came from small surrounding towns as well and most of them have churches if not exactly but similar to River Hill and let us be that place they can call home for them in terms of their spiritual support while there in the community. Not just to get something from them, but to give something to them too.

[27:21]: BH: Have you ever had a role in the church?

[27:26]: LW: The Junior Mission when I was younger. That was about the some things to the extent, like maybe once I got into high school. And then, college years, I was away most of the time ran out. And of course, they didn't like it. And then some of them don't like it now because they remember me, and I just have a loud mouth. I speak on it whether you like it or not. I speak on it. While, some of them might think that this is not worthwhile or not, nothing is going to become of it. I don't believe in that. I have the wherewithal and my sister, we have the wherewithal mentally as well educationally wise to keep pushing this forward. And I think while they support us, you'll get some of the older men of the church that will kind of resist that. For no other reason other than, it's just two women or women that's involved with the project. They will not tell you that but the indications and support lends you to think that's what's going on. My grandfather was sitting on the front yard reading the Bible and debating. Hey, I was so bold,

I would debate with him. There are some things I just didn't agree with in the Bible, but they appreciated me enough to let me speak that. I was never told I couldn't do.

[29:13]: BH: So, are there any events or times you remember where the community came together?

[29:23]: LW: Funerals were a big thing. Weddings were a big thing. Family reunions, like I said with the church anniversaries, when people came from other locations to celebrate with you or you went to their church locations to celebrate with them. The choir, I forgot what they call those things. The choir sing off they would have all of those things I remember.

[29:48]: BH: Do you have any fond memories from any of those events?

[29:52]: LW: What did you say? Say that again.

[29:54]: BH: Do you have any fond memories from any of those events?

[29:57]: LW: Of course, yes, I always loved the singing. I don't even know if they have it anymore. We had something, a gospel hymnal called Gospel Pearls. Oh boy, that's where all the gospel hymns, or you can find them. We used to have that book behind the pews along with the Bible. Those things you don't see much anymore. But yes, their fond memories of that. Easter, getting dressed up, saying your Easter speech. Then I remember my brother, they could never remember their Easter speeches because they didn't care. They stood up there and they forget. Then, my grandmother will say something, and they would say Jesus wept. Like I said, they were in a world of their own.

[30:41]: BH: [laughs] Oh gosh.

[30:47]: LW: And it was a big deal for some of the members of the church when I went off to college. It was a big deal with me leaving home because not a lot of people in the church at that time, we're doing it. So, it was a big deal for my family. I was the first one in the family to go off to college. So, it was a big deal for the church as well. They all cheered me on. You get ready to go and old ladies will put a piece of money in your hand or whatever. And that's one of the reasons I feel obligated to help protect their legacy.

[31:21]: BH: How has the church fostered your faith?

[31:30]: LW: Look how they preserved in spite of all the odds against them. In spite of them not being the most educated people and knowing how to negotiate and deal with the business dealings, how they were still able to make it and still be here. In spite of all of that, in spite of all the roadblocks.

[31:54]: BH: There's a lot of perseverance. Oh wow. And you've seen the businesses encroaching on that land?

[32:04]: LW: I think it will happen if we don't do anything. I'm hoping that this project and trying to get historical status that we can stop it. But, I know money talks and ***** walks so we'll see.

[32:24]: BH: Yes, ma'am. I remember talking with someone earlier and we were talking about more events at the church was doing. And, they mentioned there's only like 2 outreach programs at the moment.

[32:42]: LW: Really?

[32:43]: BH: But, there used to be more like soup kitchens.

[32:46]: LW: And yes, yes, we'll feed everybody. Yeah, they'll feed everybody. If not at the church, somebody from the church was always dropping something off to help somebody. I learned how to crop tobacco. One of my grandmother's sisters, they had property. They still have property in that community down the road from the church. They had a barn and we would have to crop tobacco. My sister and I were the skinniest and tallest ones, so when you used to stack the barn, they would put me, Brenda, and Gail, my other cousin. We would have to go to the very top of the raft to start stacking tobacco sticks so they could load the barn to cook the tobacco. I remember that. I had a vivid memory of a snake hanging down when I was trying to get up there and I just let go of the tobacco stick and fell straight to the bottom. I didn't injure myself too bad. That whole community, you walk from the church to somebody's house, like the house next door to the church now. That person was involved with the church and there was just always something to do. We thrived on little kids. The plum trees or the little wild trees that grew around. Those are like childhood memories that sometimes sneak on you when you smell a pear or you smell some fresh fruit or something like that, I'll have a flashback to those times. And, I know everything doesn't stay the same, Bonnie. But there's some things that you have to have a respect for. You just have to respect it, you know?

[34:30]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[34:32]: LW: I'm saying you have to love it like we do, but just appreciate who we are and what we are.

[34:37]: BH: Yes, ma'am. The downtown area is historic, there's historic neighborhoods and houses.

[34:48]: LW: Right.

[34:49]: BH: It makes sense to extend it just beyond that part of that of Valdosta, I understand.

[34:57]: LW: Yes, I'm not expecting them to love it like I do. And also, it's time for a change. Some people have even teased me. Do you think you could ever live in Valdosta again? Yes, I could cause almost have no fight in me now, I'm fighting cancer but yeah I could. Would I be

totally happy? I would probably be frustrated because when I go home now, there are things that still frustrate me. But it is what it is.

[35:24]: BH: Yes, ma'am. How often do you go back to River Hill?

[35:31]: LW: Like I said, whenever their family reunions, whenever I go home, which is usually once a year. This time when I went it was celebrating my mother's birthday in Savannah. But I was awfully sick, so I didn't even get a chance to go to church or venture pretty much anywhere. That was my intention to meet you and the professor who helped me with getting this project started. But, I could do nothing. But, I'm gaining my strength back now, so the fight continues.

[36:01]: BH: Yes ma'am. I'm glad that you feel a little bit better.

[36:05]: LW: Yes. Oh, a lot better. Yes, yes.

[36:11]: BH: Do you remember any of the history of the church?

[36:15]: LW: No, all I have I think the family has shared it with you. BK and Mom have shared it with you, just going through those things and trying to piece it together. That's all we have. I still keep trying to find stuff, but hey. It's kind of hard on the Internet because there's nothing there.

[36:36]: BH: Right, yes, I have definitely tried to look things up there. We're definitely using the materials to research the history. I'll definitely talk to more older members and see if I can get them to verbally talk about things that they remember related to the history, just to get it down on those interviews.

[36:57]: LW: Right, right. And we've had one person, she was a secretary of the church, but Brenda said she's not being cooperative. She was a secretary of the church, but Brenda said she's not being cooperative. She's joined another church now and her energies into that church, but she was a secretary for the church for a very long time. And I would think that she would have records and stuff, but Brenda said she's not been very cooperative about wanting to share that with us or help with this project.

[37:23]: BH: I understand, okay. We don't have to discuss this, but you mentioned that your father was in the Vietnam War. Do you remember how the church handled?

[37:47]: LW: Yes, they supported my mother. When my father was killed in Vietnam, my mother was living in Valdosta because she wanted to be close to my family. And the deal was that once my dad came back from Vietnam, that they were going to build a house there together. That didn't happen. He was killed in the Vietnam War and his family was in South Carolina, so of course my family was very supportive, the whole community was. His whole town of Walterboro, South Carolina, he was the first person in that city that was killed in Vietnam. They do, as I understand, have a plaque or something in the community for him. That's another project I am working on, it's because he had to be buried at a all black cemetery. Well, the cemetery

where the whites are buried up front and the blacks are buried in the back and so he's somewhere in the back and we can't get to it. A couple of years ago before cancer, I wanted to go because I had spoken to the military about maybe having him transferred to a plot that my mother has in Valdosta or either the Arlington Cemetery but the keeper of the cemetery said I couldn't come at that time because it was water moccasin season and where his body is, it's very swampy or whatever. So, that's a whole other project that I'm working on. We are a Gold Star family because my father was killed in action in Vietnam. But the River Hill Church community was very supportive. My mother was a young woman with four kids. Actually, I can remember we lived on West Street, 1106 West Street, in Valdosta, Georgia. Dad had gone away to Vietnam. Mom was cooking dinner, the four of us was playing. Brenda was the youngest and I can remember a knock at the door. And, there was a military vehicle. There was a Navyman, a Marine, and an Air Force or whatever. They started reading the telegram and then I just remember my mother crumbling, that he got killed in Vietnam. I remember vividly because I was the oldest. My brothers knew something was going on. Brenda was very small. She didn't have a clue. But the whole community supported her. I give her a lot of credit, she could have married again but she chose not to because she wanted us to remember our father, so she chose not to marry. She sacrificed a lot for us. I remember that, but yes, the church community was very supportive as the community of Walterboro, South Carolina. My dad's family was of the AME, African Methodist Episcopal faith. But my father was a bit of an outlier. He was a member of the Episcopal Church there which was a all white Episcopal Church, so I do remember that, there were very supportive.

[40:47]: BH: Thank you for sharing that. You didn't go to your father's church?

[40:56]: LW: As I got older, sometimes I will still go to an Episcopal Church in support of his faith and what he chose but I am affiliated here in Prince George's County, with one of the largest African American Methodist Episcopal Church called Reid Temple, I'm involved there with some projects and stuff. Cancer has kind of slowed that down a bit. We haven't been back. I haven't been back to South Carolina in years, but hopefully my health still continues. I'll be going there to do more research on getting his body relocated into somewhere near Mom.

[41:38]: BH: I hope again that, for it to be in the swampy area that's...

[41:46]: LW: Yeah, it's kind of hard.

[41:47]: BH: Yeah, right.

[41:49]: LW: And the VA will help pay and well, I don't know under this new administration, but under previous administrations, they were able to pay to have him relocated to Arlington Cemetery or some other cemetery. But, that hasn't happened. Everything kind of went to a halt with me dealing with my health issues.

[42:11]: BH: Yes, ma'am. Can you tell me what the difference is between the African American Methodist churches and then Missionary Baptist churches?

[42:26]: LW: The AME is what we call African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded by Richard Allen and some other enslaved people, but they were a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church with whites and they were not allowed to sit or vote on any of the church issues. They can only attend church if they were in the balcony and even though they save their money, these were enslaved people. They were not recognized as a voting official. So these blacks left the Methodist Episcopal Church and form their own, which is the African Methodist Episcopal Church, it's called AME. And they seem to be a little bit more, how do you want to say this? A little bit more active in terms of racial issues than the Missionary Baptist Church. I look at Georgia, even with the politics. I look at it, I can't even get mad at my siblings, not my siblings but people I know who wholeheartedly support some of the visions of government who does not respect this race or any other race or any other immigrant, but they do that because they're in a Bible Belt state. Valdosta, Georgia is one of those Bible Belt states where they think women shouldn't be ministers. You can barely count on your hand the number of men and women ministers in the Valdosta area. It's just like a Bible Belt and you have, I call them jag-legged preachers. But you have preachers who have preachers that who are not formally educated and then you have preachers who are not about community activism. A church that I'm a member of now, the AME church. We are more activists. We will boycott, we will speak up, we will do what we have to do based on what is best for the entire community, not just the African-American or the Hispanic, but the entire community. We're a little bit more active in the political community scene in Southern Missionary Baptist. That's the difference for me. They'll pray until something happens. I'm like, we're going to pray until it happens, so we're going to do something as well.

[44:30]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[44:35]: LW: I don't know if that clarified the difference for you.

[44:38]: BH: Oh, no, no, I think it does socially, politically, there is a difference I can definitely see that now. I didn't know anything about that. I'll have to look into it, definitely.

[44:52]: LW: Yeah, definitely, look up the AME church and how it got started. Definitely.

[45:01]: BH: This is like a random question.

[45:05]: LW: Okay.

[45:05]: BH: What is one of your favorite moments in adulthood?

[45:15]: LW: My favorite? Hard to say. I like being around people. I'm at my upmost and happiest when I'm in Bermuda. Years ago, some girlfriends and I; we did a girls trip to Bermuda. And after that, I was going on a regular basis. I did go last year. I haven't been this year. I'll probably go again. That's my happiest place. I can sit on the rocks by the ocean, meditate, pray, do my pilates, do whatever. That's my happiest place. That's good for me. Watching people achieve their dreams. Watching people who think that they're not worth anything, find value in

themselves, that's a lot. That's a big one. That's a big one for me too, watching them evolve into appreciating and loving themselves.

[46:14]: BH: What are your hopes for the future?

[46:20] LW: To beat cancer, stage 4 endometrial cancer, to beat it.

[46:27]: BH: Yes, ma'am, I hope you do. What are your hopes for the church?

[46:34]: LW: That we're able to sustain respect and in some way attribute to other people respecting the legacy that River Hill has. Those people were not educated people, so they only did what they could do. I'm educated because of them. I know more because of them. I am who I am in a way because of River Hill, not just my relatives. So, I owe it and that's what this is all about. The study, the preservation. That's what it's all about. You can sit around and talk about it, but it means nothing unless you do something.

[47:07]: BH: Yes, ma'am. And what are your hopes for the country?

[47:12]: LW: That we'll have an appreciation for different views, our skin color, our culture, to respect other people's culture. That there will be a shift. We're moving into such an autocratic society, just for there to be a shift. Sometimes I believe God allows things to happen to right the ship per se that we have to go through these ugly experiences of immigration and people being taken in the middle of the night and all of these fund cuts. I'm talking daily with elderly people who are scared to death about Medicaid and Medicare, and you don't see people on a local level talking about these things in Valdosta. It's like I got mine, you get yours. There should be more programs that's geared to why so many Black kids just dropping out of school and wandering the streets. Why so much effort into arresting them and putting them in the juvenile detention instead of allowing funding for them to be coached into manhood into womanhood into prepping for college, all of those things. Everyone's in silo, they'll talk unity. But it's one thing to talk it and walk it. It's like I got mine, you get yours. And I don't think that's how life is supposed to be, but I'm hoping that there will be a shift and it will be a positive shift that we will expect respect for other cultures. It's so annoying that where we are now. But I also talk to people who don't read the paper. I talk to the people that I see in Valdosta, when I talk to them, oh girl, please. They don't want to talk politics. They don't want to talk about the news. They don't want to do anything...for fear. This country was built on the backs of immigrants. I think most egregious is their treatment of Native Americans. I had a chance doing my research on CIBION, how they would just kind of corralled on reservations. No lack of support and all of this stuff, it's just terrible. Maybe we won't always be a world to have and they have not.

[49:42]: BH: I think that's beautiful. Wow, losing my words. But no, I think that's a beautiful ideal. I think we should strive for it, definitely.

[49:56] LW: It starts with little things. It starts with how you treat yourself, how you treat your family, how you treat those in your world. And then it goes beyond that. It starts small. How do you feel about yourself before you can go out and save a world.

[50:19] BH: Is there anything else that you would like to add on to this interview?

[50:23] LW: No, but you're welcome to call back if you think of anything else. I'll be here.

[50:29]: BH: I think this is a really good interview, thank you so much.

[50:32]: LW: And I thank you again for doing this. For taking this project on, you and your colleague. I appreciate you guys doing this.

[50:41]: BH: Of course, yes. I will continue to stay on it as long as I can. I've enjoyed getting to know all of you, to be honest, it's helping me question my worldviews, expand them, and of course I'm like you, I love meeting people. I like hearing your stories and you have a great story and you have a lot left.

[51:07]: LW: I pray so. and I'm going to do it till I can't do it anymore.

[51:11]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[51:13]: LW: So this is going to be fine. Again, I appreciate you but if you need anything. I'm sorry, like I said cancer I call it the big C tried to knock me down a peg or two and I'm coming back in the game but if you need anything else in terms of support or whatever, just definitely let me know. I always continue to Google and find things but like I said, because the church doesn't have a footprint with Google and all those other things or they don't have records. These were poor people. They did what they did and there's nobody thought about saving this for another generation, so this is what it's about.

[51:52]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[51:54]: LW: It's not that unusual. Because, you know, it's not that unusual. There are other black churches in the same situation. It's just like I was telling a friend of mine. She was trying to trace her legacy throughancestry.com. But those sites don't have enough about us because there was no tracking for us. Back in the day, we were enslaved people, so it's rare that you're going to find that. And then you can go, I have resources, federal resources here, with the census and the statistics of agency, but you got to have something in which to start and able to dig further. So now all the old people who told us the stories, they're gone. And we should have been memorializing that, but we didn't, so here we are.

[52:52]: BH: Well, I'll definitely try to collect names. Maybe we can start on like a family tree. I think that would be really interesting. Yeah, we can try.

[53:08]: LW: Yeah, we'll do something. But whatever you need, feel free to call me and if you don't get me, just leave a message and know that I'll call back.

[53:15]: BH: Yes, ma'am.

[53:17]: LW: Send me an e-mail. Okay, you take care. I'm not going to keep you. But thank you again for everything.

[53:22]: BH: No, thank you.

[53:23]: LW: Alright, bye, Bonnie.

[53:25]: BH: Bye, Mrs. Lydia.