

[00:00:01.330] - Courtney Thompson

I am Courtney Thompson, and I'm here with Rita Turner Bean to talk about your life growing up in Sewanee as part of the Sewanee Black History Initiative. Ms. Rita Turner Bean, thank you for sharing your story with us today. Would you please tell us your full name and when you were born and where?

[00:00:27.730] - Rita Turner Bean

Hi. My name is Rita Turner Bean. Originally, my name is Rita Turner. And of course, my married name is Bean. But I was born in Belvidere, Tennessee, and my parents came to Sewanee, I believe it was in 1950. So my young years were here in Sewanee. I kind of grew up here in Sewanee. I was born April 27, 1948 and came here, in, I believe it was 1950. But like I said, growing up in Sewanee, it was wonderful. We just played a lot of ball in the front yard and in the street. And I rode bicycles and never had any trouble. We could go and stay out late till it's dark and we didn't have any problems or anything. It was just a good time, as I remember.

[00:01:32.610] - Courtney Thompson

That's wonderful to hear. Can you tell us a little bit about what your family was like? I know that you enjoyed the time here growing up. It was a pleasure, maybe a little bit about your siblings and a little more about your parents.

[00:01:48.930] - Rita Turner Bean

Okay. My parents both worked for the University, and I remember just them going to work. In the wintertime in Sewanee, it would snow. It would be snow up to our knees, and we would be out playing. And I remember my parents walking to work because the power lines were down, no lights. We had candlelight, but they went to work anyway. They just, like I say, walked in the snow and would go to work. But I remember just them being there all the time. They would bring home food from Essie-May. My mother worked at Essie-May, the Sewanee Military Academy, and she would bring home all this food. And we always had plenty to eat. And my father worked at Gailor Hall, and then on the weekend, we would go to Church and they had a little clubhouse. The parents would go to, like on Saturday night and dance, but we couldn't go. But we would always kind of go to the top of the Hill and kind of listen for the music and having to get back to the house. There was this lady next door. Her name was Ms. Byrd, and she would keep all the kids, all the black kids in the neighborhood. We would all go to her house and stay while our parents went down to the clubhouse and partied. I remember growing up with some- my siblings and some neighborhood kids that we would play with each other. And my father would fix me up an old bicycle. And so we had, like, a little gang of us riding bicycles all over the University. I don't know. It was just fun times. My mother also worked for Ms. Cravens, Ms. Duval Cravens. And she was just so good to the family. She would give us Christmas presents and it would be like a pack of stockings or a handkerchief. And we were just excited about getting those Christmas presents from her. She always treated us so nice, and I remember her. But also I remember going up in the University when the Essie-May soldiers, cadets would walk from Essie-May up to the University to go to Church. We would all run up to the middle of the University to watch them march up the street and go into the Church. And we just thought it was just wonderful to see those guys walk in and march in. Going to the movie, we had to sit up in the balcony because we were segregated and the other kids would sit down. But we enjoyed being in the balcony because we thought we had the best seats. We could see the theater. It was better. So we never had any problems or anything. We would go up there and sit and watch the movie and no problems. We were segregated. But we didn't know anything about it, about being segregated. We just thought, hey, we were good growing up, and it was just no problem. When we graduated 8th grade here at Kennerly School, it was three of us in our graduation class, and we went down to Winchester to a high school. And we became the last black class to graduate from Townsend high school in 1966, before most of all the kids integrated and went to Franklin County. Other than that, we enjoyed going to our Church at St. Mark's Community Church. And it was just really nice.

[00:05:42.170] - Courtney Thompson

I'd like to hear more about the black community, and because when you were talking, it sounded as if the black community was very tight knit. Folks knew each other, looked out for each other.

[00:05:52.490] - Rita Turner Bean

Yes. They were. Yes.

[00:05:55.850] - Courtney Thompson

Are there other things that you remember about black people in Sewanee growing up?

[00:06:05.130] - Rita Turner Bean

Pretty much I stayed with my mother's sisters. I would go and spend the night with my cousin who lived across the street, my momma's sister and so her kids. But pretty much the kids from over what we call over in the bottom on Willie Six Road. They would come over to our section and we played ball together in the street. But spending the night, I would say, like with my mother's sisters like Aunt Mary Lou and Aunt Lacy Childress. But other families, we didn't spend the night at their house or anything, but just we all got along and we all played together and went to Church together.

[00:06:44.790] - Courtney Thompson

Do you know why you didn't spend the night? Was it kind of a safety thing?

[00:06:51.150] - Rita Turner Bean

I don't know. Our parents just never. We never thought to say, hey, can I go spend a night with somebody else? I don't know. I was just closer with my cousins, I believe. And I just never went and spent a night with anybody else other than my cousins. But we all played together. We all played together and went to Church together, and, of course, went to school together. Our Kennerly school was- we went from first grade to kindergarten- I mean, first grade to 8th grade at Kennerly School. And we were in a big one room classroom, a row of first graders, second graders, third graders on up. And then finally they put on a new section of the school where the smaller kids went, like, from first grade to maybe fourth grade or fifth grade. And they moved those kids into that section. But in our section, it was like 6th, 7th, 8th grade graders. And like I said, when we graduated 8th grade to go to high school, it was three of us in the graduating class.

[00:07:53.670] - Courtney Thompson

Very small.

[00:07:54.450] - Rita Turner Bean

Oh, it was small.

[00:07:55.650] - Courtney Thompson

what was that like to be instructed in a classroom where there are so many different needs and so many different kind of levels in terms of where students are at?

[00:08:09.990] - Rita Turner Bean

Well, our teacher, Ms. Sofia Miller. She was from Cowan. We loved her. We loved her. But as far as the teaching, seemed like, I don't know how she did it. She was just like, this is first grade work and this is second grade work. And you just kind of did it by levels. But we just loved her. I remember her being so nice.

[00:08:33.090] - Courtney Thompson

Can you talk about maybe something that you learned from her or from your parents that has stayed with you? Something that was valuable.

[00:08:44.670] - Rita Turner Bean

I think more than anything was my work ethic, my work ethic. They went to work faithfully every day. And I grew up thinking we had to go to school every day because we didn't miss any school. We would get perfect attendance. We had to be really sick to miss school and hardly ever missed any school. But I think to this day, I work ethic. I went on to move to Atlanta in '71, and I had gotten jobs and my last job that I had, I was there 20 years.

[00:09:21.810] - Rita Turner Bean

And some of the younger- it was for an accounting firm. Some of the younger accountants would

come in, and she would say, Rita, your work ethic- she just couldn't believe it because a lot of the people that came in under me was out of work all the time was always some excuse. So I think that went with me and I have two children, Robert and Tina, and they both have that same work ethic. They're not lazy. They go to work. And I like that about them. Some kids, you see, these days is like, mainly, I think my parents taught us that more than anything.

[00:10:10.110] - Courtney Thompson

So you mentioned that you have since moved to Atlanta. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how living in Sewanee, how growing up here, might have shaped your perspective. So did you take anything that you experienced or learned in Sewanee and I know you've indicated that your work ethic was something that early on was instilled in you. But were there other experiences or lessons that you learned growing up in Sewanee, small rural Sewanee, that you've taken with you to Atlanta or other places that maybe you've been in the world?

[00:10:56.970] - Rita Turner Bean

Mainly just remembering how nice it was in Sewanee, and how it's relaxing. Even though we moved to Atlanta in '71, we would come back for most of all the holidays and Mother's Day, Father's Day. And it was just so nice up here. It was just so peaceful, calm. I never had any trouble in Sewanee. I didn't. I don't know about my sisters after they integrated and things like that. But as far as me, I never had any trouble. And it's always nice to come back to Sewanee, to this day, even when my parents are gone, we still love coming up here. It's just, like I said, it's peaceful. You can take a walk and not be bothered or harassed or anything. To tell you the truth, I really never had any trouble or anything. But even though the opportunity for us was more in Atlanta than it was here in Sewanee because it is a University, and unless you became a professor or something like that, other than that, there's nothing really to do, no opportunities for work because it is a school. And unless you work for the school, it really wasn't anything for us to do. So the opportunity came for us to go to Atlanta, and my husband became a salesman and was there for 30 years and retired at General Foods. And like I said, I worked as an accountant- administrator, admin for an accounting firm and was there 20 years. So it worked out good.

[00:12:40.870] - Courtney Thompson

And yet you still come back.

[00:12:40.920] - Rita Turner Bean

Yes, I do.

[00:12:43.510] - Courtney Thompson

Which is wonderful. I think that that is kind of a testimony to how meaningful this experience has been for you growing up in Sewanee.

[00:12:52.390] - Rita Turner Bean

Yeah because I think if it had been bad, I wouldn't want to ever come back here again.

[00:12:58.090] - Courtney Thompson

That's true. That's true. So, there are some fond memories.

[00:13:00.130] - Rita Turner Bean

Right.

[00:13:01.930] - Courtney Thompson

Let's see. I wonder if you could talk a bit about your sense of how Sewanee might have changed over the years. We've talked about the serenity here, the peacefulness, the quietness, the way in which you can experience solitude when you come to the mountains. So some things clearly have remained steady and consistent. But are there things that over the years you've noticed have changed about Sewanee?

[00:13:36.650] - Rita Turner Bean

For me, it really hasn't that much. The people that I met, well, I haven't met that many new people here. But like Ms. Duvall Craven, I think she passed last year, and she has always welcomed us in her home. Like when my parents died, my father died. My mother died when we came to Sewanee, with my siblings being here, they would stay at the house. Mrs. Craven would always insist that we stayed at her house. And I think there's a Mrs. Beasley that my daughter stayed at. And to this day to get that kind of what's the word I'm looking-

[00:14:20.250] - Courtney Thompson
Hospitality

[00:14:20.300] - Rita Turner Bean
Hospitality, right. For her to still invite us to her home and spend a night at her home because she loved my family that much. And we loved her, I thought, was really, you know, special. My husband grew up in Winchester, and he was always said, people in Sewanee, they're just different. There's no way anybody in a white family in Winchester would let black people live in and come and spend a night in their house. And also Dr. Joe Parsons. I had my daughter in '66, and he was my doctor. And he asked me. He said, Rita, his wife would like, need somebody to babysit the girls, his kids. And I told him, yes, I would do it. And to this day, I saw one of the girls last week. She's 60 years old now, and I'm 71, and I hadn't seen her in 40 years that I moved to- 48 years, when I moved to Atlanta. And her mother to this day is 81, Mrs. Parsons, she lives in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and she invited me and my sister, Sandra, to come and visit her. And we stayed at her house. And I don't know, people are just like, "oh, I can't believe those white people let you stay in their house, the people of Sewanee, they just was like that. I mean, it's just really nice to know that they loved you and you loved them. But people like that, it kind of just stayed with me and just special. It makes me teary-eyed. That's why I love this place. It's just really nice, even though I've gotten older and I don't know as many people up here anymore, like I used to, because like I said, Ms. Craven passed last year, so I don't know anymore people like her that is still here today.

[00:16:31.010] - Courtney Thompson
But you have the memory.

[00:16:32.030] - Rita Turner Bean
Yes.

[00:16:37.890] - Courtney Thompson
And sometimes, you know, individuals are kind of one of a kind.

[00:16:38.790] - Rita Turner Bean
Right, exactly. Yeah. That's true. No, it's nice. It sure is.

[00:16:46.950] - Courtney Thompson
I think that the note that I would like to close on is, so thinking about your experiences in Sewanee, thinking about all that you have experienced since you left Sewanee, what would you- for people who are coming to Sewanee, for people who can relate to you because of some aspect of their identities, what would you like for them to experience or to look for when they come to Sewanee?

[00:17:35.550] - Rita Turner Bean
As far as, I don't know if people would still come up here to actually live, because, like I said, the opportunities is not, you know, as far as jobs or if they want to come here and retire. I know some families, some of my peers have moved back because they lost their parents, but they moved back in the homes. They understand what I'm talking about. But as far as new people come in here, I don't know if they would have that same experience. You know what I'm saying? It's like, I don't know if the Ms. Cravens have gone or left or-

[00:18:15.070] - Courtney Thompson
or if there are more.

[00:18:15.910] - Rita Turner Bean

There could be some more that I just don't know about. But I don't know if they do move here. I hope they have that same experience I did. But I'm just not sure if they would.

[00:18:34.450] - Courtney Thompson

Well thank you so much for this interview. I would like to thank you, Ms. Rita Turner Bean today is May the 27th, 2019 and this concludes our interview.

[00:18:50.170] - Rita Turner Bean

Thank you very much.