

[00:00:01.510] - Nicky Hamilton

This is Nicky Hamilton, and I have the privilege of being here with Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter to talk about her life growing up in Sewanee as part of the Black History Initiative. Today is May 27, 2019. Ms. Carolyn Hunter, thank you so much for being here today and thank you for being willing to share your story with us. If it's okay, I'm just going to ask you to tell us a little bit about where you grew up and what was it like when you were growing up in Sewanee?

[00:00:41.470] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Well, I grew up in Sewanee, Tennessee. My mother and father, John Childress and Lacey Childress. I had a very good childhood because all we did was played and did whatever our parents told us to do. And of course, as time went on, I started school at Kennerly but transferred to a school in Cowan, Thurgood Elementary School. Then from there I went to Townsend High School. And of course, I was a straight A-B student. I don't know why, but I was pretty smart. And then after that, they sent me to College in South Carolina. Denmark, South Carolina. I attended Voorhees College, and I majored in business administration. So from probably '65 till '69, I was in South Carolina. And of course, when I got out of school, I relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, because I was under the doctor's care for an accident that I was in. And from there I just started getting jobs. And I've been working and I worked for several companies, and I retired from the Teamsters. I worked for the Teamsters Local Union 480. I worked for them for over 20 years, and I've had a fairly good life. Married twice. And of course, my husband was a vet. He was a United States Army veteran, and I lost him in 2003. So at this point, I'm just retired and taking it one day at a time.

[00:02:38.570] - Nicky Hamilton

If you don't mind stating your full name and saying where you were born and when.

[00:02:45.350] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

My full name is Carolyn Dolores Robinson Hunter. I was born in Belvidere, Tennessee, which is about 30 miles from here.

[00:02:59.690] - Nicky Hamilton

When were you born?

[00:03:01.250] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

I was born in 1946, December 31, 1946 in Belvidere, Tennessee.

[00:03:08.810] - Nicky Hamilton

Great. Thanks. So can you tell me about your earliest memories here in Sewanee?

[00:03:19.050] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Well, I come home so often, my memories of Sewanee is just coming home, seeing things changing, for the better. But I come home pretty frequently. It's just Sewanee is a University, and usually we don't have anything to do with the University because didn't go to the University. And it is what it is. We were not students. We were just people who lived up here. And of course, I was fortunate enough to win a scholarship to go to College in Denmark, South Carolina, which was Voorhees College. And then from there, after I got out of College, I stopped in Nashville, and I've been in Nashville ever since. But I still come home pretty frequently.

[00:04:09.590] - Nicky Hamilton

Can you recall what years you were in Sewanee as a child?

[00:04:18.510] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

From '47 or '48 till '65? I've been up here all my life, all year long. Except when I left to go to College.

[00:04:32.490] - Nicky Hamilton

What was some of your favorite things your family did here in Sewanee growing up?

[00:04:38.250] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Well, the favorite things most was going to Church. And most time, we go to Church off the mountain. Of course, when we were were children, we went to St. Mark's Community Chapel. That was our Church. And, of course, we went to a lot of churches down the mountain, which was Winchester, Cowan, Tullahoma and Decherd, Tennessee. Memories of growing up is just I can't remember a lot of stuff because when I was young, you think you have a crush on people and ended up being pedophiles. But we won't talk about that because again, you didn't realize it at the time. It was just here recently, I was telling my girlfriend, I said, you know, we had pedophiles in our lives. We didn't know it because Mama didn't tell us that. Instead of that, they just sent me away, got me out of town. But other than that, I had a good memories of Sewanee.

[00:05:42.630] - Nicky Hamilton

Who were your friends that you played with or hung out with?

[00:05:48.090] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

My cousins, Rita and Sandra and Alfreda, and just all my cousins, the ones that were here. And they would send me to Belvidere. And I would stay with my cousins in Belvidere, Tennessee. My mother had lots of sisters. So in the summertime, we'd always spend the summer in Belvidere, Tennessee, with my aunt and uncle. I was the only girl in my family. I had two brothers, one older and one younger.

[00:06:20.190] - Nicky Hamilton

And they were all born here?

[00:06:23.730] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Johnny was born here. Harry wasn't. Johnny was born here.

[00:06:27.870] - Nicky Hamilton

The youngest one.

[00:06:29.670] - Nicky Hamilton

Where was Harry born?

[00:06:31.590] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Harry was born in Ohio.

[00:06:35.010] - Nicky Hamilton

So your parents moved from Ohio?

[00:06:37.230] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Yeah, well, my mother, yes, she did.

[00:06:44.650] - Nicky Hamilton

Did you all have events like today, cookouts? Do you remember any of that from your time at Sewanee?

[00:06:50.650] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Well, we had cookouts and things like that, but the University, they decided to build a center, so they built the center, the community center. And so we have things down here all the time whenever I come home to participate. But it's always been kind of shallow because universities do what they do, and we did what we did and a lot of stuff we did didn't have anything to do with the University.

[00:07:18.610] - Nicky Hamilton

Before you had this center here, where were you having your Cook outs?

[00:07:23.290] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

At home probably. Probably at the house.

[00:07:31.010] - Nicky Hamilton

So you obviously grew up in some challenging times. It was a challenging time in our history when you grew up. Were you aware of those challenges?

[00:07:41.390] - Speaker 2

No, that's the thing. Mom and them, they went to all these meetings up in Monteagle, which was understandable they were going to meetings. But I didn't realize there was so much racism going on because nobody ignored us up here because wherever we went, they accepted it. They had a Sundae shop where you could go buy hamburgers and different things like that. We go up there and it was for the students, too. But we go and they'd sell to us or give to us. So I don't have any bad memories. It's just that I knew I didn't want to be a maid, when I was growing up, watching momma and my aunts. So that's about it.

[00:08:30.630] - Nicky Hamilton

What did you dream about being when you were growing up?

[00:08:34.170] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

A secretary, I thought that was the wisest thing to do, the easiest thing to do. And of course, I had four or five jobs because the only reason for working is money. Every job offered me more money. So when I got my job working for the Teamsters, I quit going after jobs because it seemed like the more jobs I went after, the more I got and the bigger it got. So I just thought, I need to stop this, because the only reason you work is for money, and I was making money. But no sad memories up here.

[00:09:13.570] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

What would you say eventually was your career?

[00:09:17.170] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

I was in business administration. I was like a liaison for the insurance company and the members of the Union. And I explain people's insurance and their pensions to them. They didn't understand their pensions. They didn't understand insurance and why this was paid and why that one was paid and not paid. Well, I understood it, and they didn't. So I did well with what I knew.

[00:09:50.150] - Nicky Hamilton

Where was the insurance company located?

[00:09:52.670] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

In Chicago. Insurance was Central State's Pension Fund, Health and Welfare and Pension Fund. And of course, I was in Nashville at the Union, and I was the pension insurance person. Once they figured out I knew what I knew. Well, that was a challenge because white folks weren't used to black people being in the office. So this man came in and he started talking, just talking. I said, you need to shut up, if you expect me to help you, I need to understand what you're talking about. And I said, we'll do one thing at a time. I always had to explain to them that your brother's business is not your business. Just because you two work together don't mean everything is going to be the same. I said, you weren't out at the same time. You didn't go on vacation at the same time. I said, So your pension history shouldn't be like your brothers unless you all did the same thing every day. I said, you didn't get sick together and you didn't take off together. So why should your pension be like his? I said, plus, we can't talk about his pension. I have to talk about yours. They said, oh, okay. If you want me to help you, you have to shut up, because I know what I know and you know what you know, but I can't tell you if you won't shut up. So after a while, they realize that she's black, but she knows what she's talking about. So I literally had to fight them to make them listen to me. But finally they realized, I better start listening to her. So I was successful at what I did; retiring people, helping them to understand what they would receive and if they retired, or telling them how long if they worked a little longer what that would mean. So I always had a way of handling people.

[00:11:45.490] - Nicky Hamilton

Out of all the things that you've learned from your parents or your teachers or your mentors, what would you say you feel was the most valuable thing you learned from them?

[00:11:59.870] - Speaker 2

Learning to respect others. Learning to respect and just taking life one day at a time, realizing that you can't do anything no more than the moment. You can't go beyond the moment. So learn to respect and listen. You have to learn to listen to people, if you expect to hear them. You can't hear if you're not listening. So I learned to respect people, learn to listen and just take heed in what people are saying, if it didn't mean anything, I'd go on. But I learned something with every job that I had. I started out working at the Board of Discipleship, which was the Upper Room, which is the Methodist Board of Discipleship.

[00:12:51.430] - Nicky Hamilton

Where was that?

[00:12:52.150] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

In Nashville. Then I went across the street to work for the Board of Discipleship, and that meant I was working with all these HBCU colleges, giving them grant money and loans and stuff like that. I did that for two or three years, then I got bored with that. Well, I just wasn't making a lot of money. I went to another job. I had about four or five jobs, but it was all about making more money.

[00:13:21.370] - Nicky Hamilton

Did you have them all at the same time?

[00:13:23.350] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

No different. I worked for the Upper Room, maybe a year and a half, maybe. Then I went to the Board of Discipleship, and I worked there for maybe three years or so. And then I left there and went to Meharry Medical College, and I worked there for about five years. Then I left Meharry Medical College and went to East Tennessee and worked for Morristown College. I couldn't stand that. That was a bad decision. So I worked for them in Knoxville, Tennessee. Morristown is a couple of miles from Knoxville, and I didn't like that because I was too removed from everything. It was just like a flying buttermilk. It was just that isolated. There wasn't a lot of activity there other than the school. And I didn't like being that removed from everything. So I left there and went back home, which was Nashville. And then I started working for NES. NES was a good job, National Electrical Service. But I got an offer from the Teamsters, and they were paying by the week. So I started working for the Teamsters and benefits were great, money was good. And so I thought I'll just stick here because the only reason for working for me was money. I wasn't there to make friends and buddies and all that. But I worked for them, then I retired in 2003 or 2004. Kind of put in a situation where I had to retire, but that I lose money and I wasn't about to lose the money I had already established. So I retired.

[00:15:12.830] - Nicky Hamilton

So other than your parents, who else would you call mentors here in Sewanee? Did you have any?

[00:15:19.790] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

My aunt, but she's gone, Dora Turner. She was a sweet lady. She was just like Mama, Mama too, Dora and some of my teachers. But there wasn't any mentors per se up here because my parents and my relatives were the only people we really dealt with. Momma and Dora and them were into things connected with the University, but that's because they work for the University, and that was understandable. But University was just that, the University.

[00:15:56.010] - Nicky Hamilton

Did you act with any other kids whose parents worked at the University?

[00:16:02.850] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Oh yeah, my cousin Rita. But like I said, University is a University. I took a typing test for them, and I think they said I failed it. And I thought, how you fail a typing test? But again, it wasn't an issue because I didn't want to work up here. No way. I needed to get away from here. And of course, I stayed in Nashville because I was in a car accident. And I was about 26, 27, maybe 28. I don't know. And I ended up being in Vanderbilt for almost three months. I almost lost my left foot, but I didn't.

They saved it.

[00:16:43.330] - Nicky Hamilton
Thank goodness.

[00:16:44.170] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
Yeah, it could have been much worse. But then, I was already a month late going back to school. But they asked me what did I want to do, just stay home and recuperate? I said, I can't recuperate no more than what I'm recuperating now. So I went back to school to College in Denmark, South Carolina. And my friends there helped me from that point, doing different things, washing clothes, helping me every day.

[00:17:13.690] - Speaker 1
What was the College name?

[00:17:14.950] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
Voorhees College, in Denmark, South Carolina. But that's about it. I just had a normal life up here because, like I said, I wasn't introduced to racism until... I don't know. Well, when I was young, my brother and I were walking through the Woods and this little boy, Alan, he spit on me, and I'll never forget it.

[00:17:44.410] - Nicky Hamilton
In the woods here in Sewanee?

[00:17:46.450] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
Yeah. And he spit on me. And I couldn't figure out why he spit on me. And I thought, not going back in the Woods with Harry and them no more, because I didn't like that.

[00:17:56.710] - Nicky Hamilton
Did you ask him, the boy?

[00:18:00.430] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
Yeah, but he just grinned, and I thought ... I wasn't used to, they didn't not accept us. I just wasn't used to somebody spitting on me. We speak and go on. We wasn't denied to go nowhere. We could go anywhere we choose to go. But we knew we couldn't go swimming at the gym because that was the University.

[00:18:23.810] - Nicky Hamilton
were you not permitted to go there?

[00:18:27.350] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
To the gym?

[00:18:27.878] - Nicky Hamilton
Mhmm.

[00:18:28.850] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
No. We weren't permitted because it was the University, and anything that was happening in the gym was connected to the University. So no, they never Shawned me because I never did anything to them. They never denied me any service or anything when I was going different places up here. So it was all right. Yeah.

[00:18:51.170] - Nicky Hamilton
Can you say a little more about why you think Alan spat on you?

[00:18:56.450] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
Because he was white. And I guess he thought he was supposed to do that. But I didn't know why he

did, because I didn't realize we were having racial problems. I wasn't reading the paper. And when I see stuff on TV, I think this is crazy. But then I realized what they were doing because Martin Luther King. If it wasn't for him, I really think we'd still be back in them days because he's the one that put the truth out there. Everybody knew the truth, but he stressed the truth. That was the most brilliant man I've ever... I didn't ever meet him, but he was right there in Monteagle, at the Highlander School. He and Rosa Parks. Didn't realize it. But again, I was gone the majority of the time, so I didn't have any racial problems.

[00:19:54.090] - Nicky Hamilton
Did you play with Alan after that?

[00:19:56.370] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
No. Because he was not my friend. It was one of my brothers that knew him. But I didn't know him. I just couldn't figure out why he spit on me.

[00:20:05.070] - Nicky Hamilton
Did you tell your brothers about it?

[00:20:07.110] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
Oh, yeah. But they didn't do nothing. It was a trip. But again, like I said, when I would go to the McCrady's house, the Vice Chancellor's house, I'd go in the front door. Mama. Carolyn. Why? I said, Mama, because this is the closest door to where I got out. She said, I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I said, come on. Okay. But I wouldn't go to the back door. No, ma'am. Of course, Mrs. McCrady, Edith. She and her husband helped my momma send me to school so I can't complain. They were good to me.

[00:20:39.030] - Nicky Hamilton
Yeah, I have one last question. So if there's one or two things that you would want people to know about your childhood, what would that be? And then also with your experience growing up in Sewanee, if there were one or two things you would like people to know.

[00:20:56.490] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
My experience growing up in Sewanee was real. It was good. I didn't have any problems, I guess, because I was a child. Sewanee was always like heaven. We had everything, we didn't lack in nothing, we didn't want for nothing. So the University took care of black people because they provided Hams and turkeys. And I guess, because the parents worked for the University, so we didn't suffer at all. Didn't lack in anything. And when the houses we were living in wasn't quite up to par. They built the houses. New houses for everybody.

[00:21:41.590] - Nicky Hamilton
Where were those?

[00:21:43.210] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
They are here on the mountain. Yeah.

[00:21:45.850] - Nicky Hamilton
Did you all live in one of those new houses?

[00:21:49.870] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
The house that they built at the time. It's just like another house, now my brother lives in it. He lives just like it's just him that lives in it. But again, as brothers, that's the way they do.

[00:22:01.750] - Nicky Hamilton
And what's the name of your brother?

[00:22:03.910] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter
John Howard Childress, Junior.

[00:22:07.270] - Nicky Hamilton

So specifically to your childhood? What are one or two things you want us to remember about your childhood? It doesn't have to be about Sewanee, just memories you have of your childhood.

[00:22:21.530] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Liking reading, loving to read. And I don't know. My childhood was good. I just read a lot and played a lot. I didn't know play no sports. I didn't like basketball. I've watched, but I didn't play it. My cousin Rita played it. I wasn't into sports. I was more into books.

[00:22:43.650] - Nicky Hamilton

What's your favorite book?

[00:22:51.730] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

What Do You Say After, a book by Eric Byrne. What do you say? Hello. Can't think of the name of it. There's several books, but that one in particular, because it helped me to understand it. Choices you make are your choices, not anybody else's. You can't blame somebody for something you did when you already thought you figured something out. It wasn't. But I had a good childhood. Spoiled, the only girl.

[00:23:32.090] - Nicky Hamilton

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

[00:23:33.890] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

No. I was raised and reared here.

[00:23:37.910] - Nicky Hamilton

Great. Well, Ms. Carolyn Hunter, I want to thank you so much for your time today. And thanks for sharing your story with us. It's been an honor and privilege to hear your story.

[00:23:49.010] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Well, I wish I had more to say, but I had a normal childhood. It's just growing up is not easy. Then when you get older, you say, dog, I'd rather be a child. But anyway, thank you.

[00:24:01.670] - Nicky Hamilton

Thank you for this wonderful contribution.

[00:24:04.310] - Ms. Carolyn Robinson Hunter

Well, I didn't say much because I didn't do much, but I did go to College.

[00:24:09.350] - Nicky Hamilton

It was great. Thank you.