Interviewee: Sandra Smith Jordan
Interviewer: Carla Lewis
Transcriber: Dorian Meekins

CL: My name is Carla Mathis Lewis and I'm the branch manager at the Gainsboro Branch Library. Today is March 9th, 2009 and I am interviewing Sandra Smith Jordan. Good morning Sandra.
SJ: Good morning Carla.
CL: Can you tell me where you were born?
SJ: I was actually born here in Roanoke, Virginia. At the Old Burrell Memorial Hospital. I was born December 7th, 1948 to Lula Virginia Cambell Smith, Campbell was her maiden name, and my dad's name is James William Smith Sr. I say senior because I have a younger brother who is James William Smith Jr.
CL: How long have you lived in Roanoke, Virginia?
SJ: All of my 60 years. I turned 60 December of 2008 and I have actually loved and lived here all that long time.
CL: And what street did you live on?
SJ: I was actually born when they were living at 623 Loudon Ave. I now know that that was an area of town that very few blacks lived in, but that's where they were at the time when I was born. My dad worked at the flour mill over at Shenandoah like two blocks away and I always thought he actually worked in the flour mill and found out later in years, he was the chauffeur of the man who owned the flour mill, so. I was wondering how he got to drive some of them pretty cars, but I just thought he had money, y'know. And my mom, she actually cleaned houses and, y'know, worked for people that way, but with the snazzy clothes she wore, I thought she had a lot of money too. Back then– I don't know, Roanoke for me growing up was a magical place because I can remember, on Henry Street, Sunday that was showcase day. We would go and kinda line the street to watch the beautiful women in their hats and their beautiful dresses and the men tipping their hats to them and stuff and all I could think of was "Oh my goodness, I be glad when I'm old enough to do that." And never would I have imagined life would change for me, but it did. Integration hit Roanoke and everything I thought to be true, I found out wasn't, y'know. Segregation wasn't a bad thing for me because everybody I saw was living well, doing well. From a child's standpoint, I don't what it actually was. And it was like– The black teachers I had, these women carried themselves with such dignity and stuff. I always thought I wanted to be one. I had no idea that the life that I perceived the blacks in Roanoke to have was what the rest of the country was trying to get to, y'know. We were like in this little balloon I guess or a little cocoon and it just– When I heard about– Carla I was 40 years old before I found out that Danville, Virginia, only 75 miles away from us, was one of the biggest hotspots during Civil Rights. And I considered myself to be an intelligent, y'know, educated black woman and I saw "Eye on the Prize" [on] PBS and it blew me away. You only know the information somebody allows you to get your hands on. And since I had lived my whole life here in Roanoke, I didn't

know how sheltered they had made this little valley. Y'know, they only let in what Roanoke Times and Rural News wanted you to see and the same people who owned the newspaper owned the media. If they didn't want it in here, you didn't know about it unless somebody from somewhere else did. So yes, I love Roanoke. I've been here all my life.
CL: Do you have any sisters or brothers?
SJ: I actually– And we're not talking about the siblings that came in my life after my father died, but my mother had six children. She had three by Percell Johns, her first husband and that would be Cody, Percell Jr., and Johnny Johns. Then she had one by her second husband, his name is Walton Lester Jr., but we call him "Booty" and then I came along. I was the fifth and my dad is James Smith, that was mom's third husband and 19 months after me, my baby brother. So she actually had six kids. And after years later, I think I was about 13, she married her late husband William Bowers. She was Cambell-Johns-Lester-Smith-Bowers.
CL: And your baby brother's name?
SJ: Is James William Smith Jr. He's my daddy's junior child.
CL: Describe your house to us. Did you have a two story house? A brick house? Did it have a TV? A telephone?
SJ: Well, the house we lived in, 623 Loudon, was a two story house. We had [a] nice backyard and frontyard. Yes we were one of the firsts to have a TV. My mom and dad because of the jobs they had, like when the white people they worked for were gonna get something new, they would either sell or give what they had to my parents. So we always had these nice things and, y'know like I said, I always just thought we had money, but it wasn't y'know. In this world though, bartering is something that, back in segregation time, you didn't really look at things from the money aspect of it. It's like "Well Carla, you know how to do such and such and I know how to do this so I'll do this for you and you do this for me" and nobody ever talked about the money part of it. At least, from a child's standpoint, this is the way I perceived it. Where we lived at, like, Ford's Gas Station was right in the backyard from us. So I could go from my back porch down to Ford's and they had everything little kids wanted. That's on one corner, then on the next corner, it was– I think it was Mr. Moses' Store? I'm not sure, but all this I could look out my back door and it's right there for you. Not like today, you didn't have to go miles to get to the grocery store, you'd just come out your back door and there you are. Down on 5th Street it was a drug store on one corner and a little grocery store on another. When it came to clothes and stuff– I just don't understand how our world got away from the neighborhoods because everything you wanted was in our neighborhood. Loudon Elementary School, right up the street two blocks. And it's like overnight, all of a sudden, as soon as I started school, that was Loudon, that was my first grade. And, I mean, the teacher that I had and I can't remember her name, but it was Coach Cannaday's last wife and I wish I could remember her name because that was the lady that I emulated, okay. She's still alive today, but she just– She had a way with kids that made you feel like you was special, even if you were a little bad thing. She had a calming effect to just "Now come on honey, you know that's not really what you want to [be] doing." "Oh my goodness! That's what I wanna be, just like her." And to this day she tells me "You were one of the best

students I ever had." Because really, as far as I was concerned, she was perfect really. She was beautiful, she carried herself like she liked herself, y'know, and it was like– Well this is what black women are supposed to be like. Yeah. Everything in that neighborhood was wonderful for me, but my mom and dad and their lifestyle, they divorced each other when I was two years old and my baby brother and I go to West Virginia to my dad's two brothers. I'm at one brother's house and my baby brother's at the other one up the street, up the road. And my sister, she ends up in Northeast with my mom's mom. My two brothers, Johnny and Buddy, they end up in Bluefield, West Virginia and my other brother Booty, he ends up in Northeast with his grandmother. So we [were] all over the map. I don't know what went on during the time we were away, but eventually my parents decide to get back together and I'm thinking "Oh everything's right in the world again". By the time I'm seven years old, 1956, a year that I thought would never end, so much crazy stuff happened. They get divorced a second time. I mean it's bad enough to go through a divorce one time with your parents, but to have them do that to you twice. I just, y'know, young kids today, they can think of a time when they were a child. I honestly can't and the reason why I say that is because it seems like, even before I was born, I was selected to watch over my mom. And I say it that way because when she was three months pregnant with me, they had to put her in the bed. She had to stay in the bed until I was born. After I was born, I can actually remember them putting me in the dresser draw as a– Because there was no bed for me, but I had to be in the same room where she was and I can remember that and people tell me "Nah, you couldn't remember that. Kids don't remember." You need to be careful about what you say and do around young people. They can't articulate it, but they know what's going on. And I would tell momma and them years later about things that I remember going on in that room and it's like "No, you were a baby. You don't know that." I said then why are you getting so upset if I don't know that? I mean when my mom would get in trouble and she had a tendency of doing that because she wanted to be loved so badly, but she would always get mixed up with the wrong men. And I used to tell her "Y'know, I love you, I really do, but I need to tell you are a good example for me of what not to do because the men that you will lay on your life, and you have children, the men that you have in your life I wouldn't even give the time of day. So I appreciate you showing me what not to do. And it's not that I don't love you, it's just, I'm having to love you for you, y'know. I'm having to do your job for you." And my sister and my brothers used to always argue with me, "Who do you think you are? You can't talk to our momma that way. You can't treat our momma that way." I said, look, she's my momma too and I'm sorry if you don't like it, but sometimes she needs to hear the truth. She doesn't need to be in no fabricated world that y'all people want her in. She needs to know when she's messing up as well as when she's doing something good. "Well, if you live to be 18." I mean I heard that so many times from, especially mom's little buddies because mom was– She would give you the shirt off her back if she considered you to be her friend and when she needed help, they were never around. And even at a young age I did not have a problem letting them understand; "You need to understand something. That's my momma and if you won't watch her back, I will. And bottom line, my future depends on how well I keep this lady stable because everything around her is unstable. And y'all keep telling me I won't live to be 18. If I let y'all run the show with her, I know I won't make it to 18. So when I step in, don't give me no flack because she needs me." And up until when she died last year, it was always that way. My main purpose on this earth turns out from my going back over my life of being there for her. When things turned around and her health went down, the only person that was there to help her want to stay here was me. I actually– The night that she died, I actually had to give her permission to go because they had diagnosed her 11 years earlier with Alzheimer's and I kept trying to tell them, I don't think my mom has Alzheimers. She is taking medication, and I used to be a pharmacist helper up at Super X so, the type of medication they had her on was the type that if she didn't take it she should have died. That's how strong it was and there were time when I knew she didn't take it right. And I'm saying, "Y'know, you've given her medication for a heart problem. There's no way she could have that kind of a heart problem if the medication isn't administered right. You've given her medications for cholesterol, you've given her–" It was seven medications they had her on that she didn't need, but when you're on the wrong medications, you do end up with dementia. Now she did have that, but Alzheimer's kills you, dementia just makes you wish you were dead. And my mom had allowed my brother Johnny and his girlfriend to live in the house with her so she would have somebody there, but they were just living off of her. They weren't helping her. And she called me one day and she said "Sandra, I know you got your own problems," Because I was already on disability by this time. She said "But they're calling me paranoid and I don't think I am and nobody's listening to me and I need you to talk for me." And I'm saying to myself; she never asks me for anything unless she really needs it so I better check this out. And I go up there and she's telling me "Somebody's coming and going in my basement door. When I tell Johnny and them about it; 'No it ain't happening.'" And I went down to the basement door and it was unlocked and she said, she swore she had locked it. What it was; my brother and his girlfriend were using that door coming and going and wasn't telling her. So this is, I guess the Lord's way of getting me up there with her because I ended up staying there during the day until my health went down and she said "Y'know, I think you need to put me in an assisted living because I don't want you to kill your brother and I don't want to kill him either." And mom loved guns. And when she went into assisted living, that's the only way I got her doctor to understand they had her on the wrong medication because those people were crushing her medication to get her to swallow and this is time release medication. He took her off of that, come to find out the only thing she needed was blood pressure medication and they didn't even have her on it. She got better, but not better enough that– Y'know if they gon' label you with something, they gon' keep you on that label and 11 years go by. But everyday, unless I was sick, everyday that woman saw me. In assisted living and in the nursing home.

CL: The assisted living place was in Greensboro or Roanoke?

SJ: No, the one up here on Williamson Road.

CL: So it was here in Roanoke?

SJ: Yes. It's Roanoke Assisted Living now, but I wanna say Lakeview? Friendship Manor owned it, but it's the one where they ended up having that flesh eating disease. It came in a day after she

had to go to the hospital for somebody hitting her in the head. I said, "Well thank you momma. You weren't there the night that this stuff broke out because it wouldn't have affected you, it would have gotten me," y'know what I'm saying? But she went from the hospital into Friendship Manor, but the night she died when I got to the nursing home, they had just fed her and I knew she didn't look right and she was so happy to see me and the girl grabbed the tray and went out. And I'm looking at her and I'm a little puzzled and I said "Momma do you need to go to the bathroom?" And she let me know, yes. Well as I'm taking her to the bathroom and I got ready to put her on the toilet she said "No!" Real loud, real strongly that no, don't do that. And I said "Okay, okay. What's wrong?" And she started regurgitating and I knew then it was food poisoning, but they tried to tell me "Oh no, no, no, no." I said, "Look, I've had food poisoning, whatever you fed her," and they had given her chicken that had set out too long. Well, this is at 6 o'clock, from 6 o'clock until almost 11:30 I was there administering to her. Couldn't get no help from nobody. "Well she just gotta do what she gotta do." A brother, baby brother Jimmy came in, he's helping me, but both of us are so drained that by 11:30 I really had to go home. And he's also on disability his self and he was feeling the effects and I told mom, I said "Y'know, everyday you wait until I can get to you and I love you for it, but I need you to understand something. If they wait until I leave tonight and they put you in the hospital, every time you've had to go to the hospital in the past two years, I've made it there somehow to be with you, but I won't be able to make it tonight." I said, "If you are tired– At the rate these people are treating you, and I see you every day, at the rate that it's going, I might end up in the ground before you do." I gave her permission to die.
CL: It's okay.
SJ [crying]: I told her that if she was tired, she should go ahead and go to sleep, and she went to sleep. At 5 o'clock in the morning they called me to tell me she was gone and I know it was best for her and for me, but it still hurts because she went through all this stuff during her life and I know everybody has their own path to go, but it still– it hurts. And it's really fascinating that I'm 60 years old and yet, in still, the majority of my life was revolved around taking care of her or my siblings or somebody else and I'm just now getting to a point where I'm taking care of me. Y'know, it's– It's fascinating. It's– I wake up every morning and I look out my bathroom window and I see the Blue Ridge Mountains and the only thing I can think of is "Damn, you live in a wonderful place." Because if I'm sad, the mountains say to me "But it's gon' be okay." If I really get angry, pissed off, I go up to Mill Mountain Star and I yell my head off. Then I look down at the little teeny cars and trucks and it's like, well, when you were down there it felt real bad didn't it? And now your up here in God's country and it's like, okay, alright. You let it go so that's the end of that part of it.
CL: Let's talk a little bit about your schooling. You started out talking about your elementary school?
SJ: Yes, at Loudon Ave. and that was– I lived in 6– That was in 800, block of Loudon. Now I'm not sure if the reason I ended up at Harrison was because my mom and dad divorced and she had what was called primary custody and her address was Rutherford or– Because I was still living

on Loudon with my dad so I would walk from Loudon Ave over to Harrison. My mind says that the summer between first grade and second grade is when they tore down Loudon Ave. I mean, I can't find any[thing] about it to justify the date for me. I do remember the summertime, they had painted the school and got it all ready for the next year, but there was never a next year. So I don't know if that's actually when integration stuff started rolling or what, but I do know I couldn't go back to that school and I ended up at Harrison and I went to Harrison School from the second grade through the sixth grade.

CL: Okay, and then you went too?

SJ: Booker T. Washington Junior High School. Ah! And I say it that way because that was– Y'know I told you, I had all these wonderful anticipations about becoming of age. Y'know, being able to go to Henry Street's nightclubs, The Ebony Club and all this other stuff. And once you got to Booker T., that was your introduction to becoming an adult, y'know. That's when we had our socials and it was just a sign of, y'know, you've made it through this, now you come into this part of it. And there was teachers there that would actually talk to you like you were a person. Like Ms. Deskins for instance. I will always be grateful to this lady because my mom never talked to me about things like menstruation, how girls are supposed to mature. I was in a household full of men, y'know, brothers. All I was there for was taking care of everybody else, but Ms. Deskins talked to me as woman to woman. She talked to me like she knew I was gonna be somebody. So here's another teacher in my life that made me feel like, maybe I should be a teacher, y'know, because my first grade teacher, she carried herself in a way that– Yeah I'd like to be like that. Then here's Ms. Deskins, talking to me in a way that– not down to me, but the fact that she respected the fact [that] I had a brain, I had something to say, and she was willing to listen. And then I had to opportunity of being in the choir with Ms. Hunt and you talking about a woman that could make you feel like you were better than what you thought. That woman, she could listen to your voice, "Oh you should be a soprano. Oh your voice is changing, we're gonna make you second soprano." And I'm going like "Well you ain't heard me sing yet." "No honey, I've being doing this long enough where–" I mean, those [were] the kind of teachers I had at Booker T. Washington and I thought all was right in the world, but this is still segregation time, okay, for me. Come the summer after the 8th grade and I get this notification. Now we had moved from Rutherford Ave to 22nd Street in a predominantly all white neighborhood and I had never heard a person use the word "nigga" before, like white people use it until we moved up there. And this letter says that, due to your address, you will not be going to Lucy Addison, which– That's where you went to in the 9th grade back then. You will be going to Monroe Jr. High School on 19th Street. Well, I didn't know what hell was until that year. And the very first day of school, there is this table out front with people from the health department– No it's the second day of school. And the first day of school they had allowed one little white girl in the school that had lice. The second day of the school they got the health department up there. Now, black kids don't get lice, okay, but they got this long table and they had these little people on either side that tells you you['ve] got to go to this table and they got this man on the other side of the table with this long nozzle and he goes "Wshhh! Wshhh! Wshhh!" He's shooting some kind of powder in your hair, in your pubic area, under your arms. Any place there may be hair they are "de-lice-ing" you as he says. And I said "But excuse me, well how do you know that I got lice?" He said "Doesn't matter. The school's been infested." I said "This is [the] second day of the school, what do you mean?" "What do you mean? Talking back to me, nigga." And I'm going like; we ain't in Kansas no more is we? They did not allow us to go home, we had to sit in that school for the school day with this powder on us. That was my first experience with being around white folks. And I had been around white folks, with the ones my mom and them worked for, but I hadn't been around these kinda white folks. And, okay, I'm surviving that and get into the second week of school. Now Ms. Deskings had been my gym teacher and I didn't know how good we had it at Booker T. because we had the stalls that, y'know, went all the way down to the floor. What you did in yours was private, put it that way. And she always told us to use our little flip flops and to take care of yourself and protect yourself. I get up there and they have the stalls that, y'know, the bottom part of it, what's in one can go into the other. I got on all– everything I ever used at Booker T. and I get athletes feet from the girl in the other stall because the stuff off of her nasty feet pop onto my little clean feet in my flip flops and I get athletes feet. It's the second week of school. It is so bad for me. I don't have an immune system to combat white people's germs because I have never been around them. They had to put my feet in what they call mini-casts to save my toes and I had to be educated at home for eight weeks. Athletes feet. I mean it blew my mind and I'm saying, well maybe they won't make me go back to school. Well, [as] soon as the doctor releases me I've got to go back to school. Well, it's like– What else? Be careful of what you ask, okay? Because when I said "what else can happen to me after this", I had no idea what was coming down the pipe. I'd been– let's see. I was in school for less than a month and they let this little kid come back to school with what they call the kissing disease, but what is mononucleosis. And for me, that diagnosis meant being in the hospital for close to a month, had to have two spinal taps to save my life, ended up paralyzed for two weeks because they nicked my spinal column with one of those needles, and to have the doctor tell my mother "Well, I'm sorry, but she will never be able to hold down a job. She will never be able to have children. You will be lucky if she makes it to be an adult." And I'm going like what is this? Somebody's joke? Y'know? Here I am in the 9th grade and just because I'm made to go to school around these people, I gotta be punished like this? I don't think that's fair. And I decided after that, I ain't taking no more of this stuff. I had a very short time back in the school before the end of the year, but I had [an] English teacher. Now I loved English because of the teachers that I had had in the past. I had an English teacher to tell me "If you get anything out of this class, you'll be lucky." And she gave me her teacher's manual, I still have it today. She said "If you learn anything, you better use this because this is the only way you're gonna get it." And she really did me a favor because I used it even when I went to college. I used her little book and I gave it to my sister when she went to college and I'd given it to other people for them to use. So, I'm glad she did give me her little book. But she and the other teachers definitely let me know; "We ain't teaching you nothing." She had the audacity to tell me "Hey, you niggas wanted what we got, now get it the best way you can." And I told her "Hey, it's nothing that you people have that I want. The court system said I had to come here, I wanted to go to Addison. I was an honors student before I came up here. I was supposed to be having Algebra II. You tell me, you don't get Algebra II until you get in high school. So you give me something called new math that you people didn't even know what it was. Half the answers in the book were wrong." "Well, see, y'all want what we got." I said "No ma'am, I'm sorry. There's not anything y'all have that I would ever want, but whatever. Y'all do the best you can." Do you remember Judge Ballou? He was the head judge over all the judges Downtown. This is when the municipal building used to be the courthouse and the jail. My first interaction with him was that summer after the 9th grade. I told my mom, I said "Look, I'mma be perfectly honest with you. I know that by law I'm supposed to go to school, but I want you to honestly know I will leave your house every morning like I'm going to William Fleming and I will come back every evening like I went to that school, but honestly I'm going to be able to find me a job somewhere because I'm not going to that school." And she said "So what do you want to do?" I said "The law says I gotta go, but I'm not going to." She said "Well then the law's gonna have to tell you where you can go." I said "Well I wanna go to Addison." She said "Well okay, fine." So she got a lawyer, we went before Judge Ballou and he said "You need to explain to me why you're in front of me." And I said "I'm in front of you because the law says I have to be." He looked at me and he said "Do you know who I am?" I said "No. Who are you?" He said "Can't you read?" And I looked at his little sign in front of him and I said "You're Judge Ballou. How do you do?" "Well, I do fine and who are you supposed to be?" I said "My name is Sandra Lee Smith, that's who I am and I guess I'm in front of you because the law says I have to go to William Fleming High School and I say I will leave my momma's house everyday like I'm going, I'll come home every evening like I went, but I'm not going to William Fleming High School." And I told him what I just told you about what I went through at Monroe and he just sat there and calmly looked at me and he said "You know what you want don't you?" I said "No I know what I need and I don't need to be around, excuse my French, anymore of you white people. I just– my body won't survive the issue." And he looked at me and he said "Well, you might be right because I've never heard of somebody going through as much medical trauma and you went through [in] not even a year." He said "So, if I let you back in at Lucy Addison High School, what're you gon' do?" I said "What do you want me to do?" He said "I want you to be the best student you can be. Can you do that?" And inside I'm saying to myself "This man is gon' let me go. This man is gon' let me go back to Lucy Addison. Yes!" And evidently he could tell it from my body reaction and I said "For you, yes. I will be the best student I can be." And he said "Okay, alright. Here you go." He signed my little petition and gave me permission to go and I'm elated, but to show you how quickly things change; in less than three weeks after that first visit with him, my mom had to have an emergency hysterectomy. Well, she was married to a 100% disabled veteran and she was his legal guardian and anytime she could not be in charge somebody else had to be made his guardian. Well, here I go back before Judge Ballou because I presented such a strong case for myself before. At 15 I become my mom, my baby brother, and my step-father's guardian and I had to be given a special driver's license. So Judge Ballou says "You know you're gonna have to drive your mom's car." I said

“Well, to be honest with you, I’ve never had driving. I’m only 15, can’t have it.” He said “No, I make that determination.” He said “I’m going to send you to get the driver’s test. I’m going to allow you x number of days to study. If you pass the test I’m gonna give you your license.” And I’m saying to myself at 15, yeah right. Well, I took the test, I passed the test so at 15 I had a driver’s license and now my mom’s got in and my step-father’s got in and my baby brother’s got in. So I’m running everything.

CL: Were you allowed to go to school?

SJ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. And see, when I was at Booker T., I liked it so much I would summer school, m’kay. Well by the time I got to 10th grade I actually had enough credits to graduate, but nobody told me that you had to have 11th and 12th grade English, Government, and US History. If I had known that I would have taken those during summer school and I could have graduated in 10th grade, but since they didn’t tell me that, I had to go to school to take those courses. Well, because I really didn’t have but certain mandatory electorates that I had to take, the rest of the time was like taking typing and stuff like this and the other kids couldn’t understand “Well why is it [that] Sandra doesn’t have to take tests like we do?” Well Sandra’s been typing up your tests so she can’t take the same tests that you take. So the teachers would orally give me my tests. My 20th class reunion I found out what my nickname was with the other kids. They used to call me little old lady and now I understand why, y’know. “Well you used to drive to school, nobody else could drive to school. You used to this and you used to that.” Well, you do what you have to do, y’know what I’m saying?

CL: Well when did you fit college into– Graduating– Well not graduating in the 10th grade, but completing 10th grade and maybe the 11th grade because people had to take–

SJ: No, I finished high school.

CL: You finished high school, okay.

SJ: Yup, when I was– I got pregnant right before my senior year started and right toward the end of the year– Well, in March of the next year, I’m about ready to deliver my baby and Mr. Phillips and I had already set up everything for me to graduate, but Mr. Coleman, the assistant principal, decided to pick a fight with me. I did not like his attitude. “Didn’t nobody tell you to lay there and get pregnant.” And I told him, I said “Y’know, I’m not sure how you got your job, but you really don’t have the right personality for it and because of you, I would like for you to send my money for my gown, pictures, dues, whatever else I’ve given you money for, back to my mom’s house because I won’t be graduating from this school.” And he did not allow Mr. Phillips to know that we had had that argument until after graduation and Mr. Phillips did not know what had happened and he convinced me to go back to summer school to take my last two credits and I did and graduated from summer school. No, I wasn’t gon’ let that man keep me from graduating, it was just– No, you don’t talk to me that way, especially not when I’m getting ready to deliver a baby, no. Emotional, all over the place.

CL: So and then after you had your son? Is it?

SJ: Yes, that was James Clinton Smith, that was my first son. Well, to be honest with you, I did not decide to go to college until– I think I was 32 years old; 31, 32 years old. And this is after losing a child, having another child, being married, and then divorced. And TAP, I have to credit for me going to college because they had this JOMP program and one of their directors used to be a regular customer of mine at Super X Drugs on 19th Street and she just kept telling me "I think you would really do good in college." And I said "Well what am I gonna go to college for. I'm already a mother of two kids–" Blah blah. This, that, and the other. She said "But I really think you have something that you need to finish, don't you?" Of course like, like what. She said "I don't know. What did you think you wanted to do when you were in school?" And I said "Well, while I was in school I had been taking this stenotype course through the mail and I always thought I might want to be a stenotypist in the court system." And she said "Did you finish it?" And I said "No, I got pregnant and didn't get a chance to finish it." And she said "Well, they have that course out at Virginia Western. Why don't you finish that and then see what you might want to do after that?" And I'm going like, well y'know I do books for Super X and stuff and that takes up a lot of my time. She said "No seriously, just think about it." Well I decided to take their little course to see if I was college material and I aced that and I'm going like "that wasn't so hard" and she said "Well, that's what I'm trying to get you to understand. It's not as hard as people want you to think it is." So we went out to Virginia Western and I enrolled out there under their Secretarial Sciences course, but the lady who was supposed to be teaching the course, [the] stenography course, left the area. So, instead of just dropping out, I went on and finished a year. Then I transferred to National Business College because they did have the course and that was a pretty good experience for me, but the manager that I had at Super X, because this little black girl was going to college, decided he was going to cut my hours and cut them all the way down to nine hours a week. And I told him "Look, I need you to understand something. I'm not trying to better myself to go after your job. If I wanted anybody's job it would be your boss' job, not your job." I said "You need to understand something here; I'm raising two sons and I cannot do that off of nine hours a week." "Well you need to drop out of school." I said "And who are you to tell me what I'm supposed to do?" I said "Now the last election, you almost got your ass whooped my me." Because this man waits until 6 o'clock, knowing that the polls closed at 7. He leaves the store and the only person there other than the pharmacist is me, so I couldn't leave until he came back. He comes back five minutes after 7, knowing I could not go to the election polls, knowing how I felt about that. And at first I was going to lay his butt out, but I had people who– Customers who knew how I felt about me voting and they laid into this man where I didn't have to say a thing, okay. But when he did that, the manager up at– Dan Hale, he was the manager up at Kentucky Fried Chicken, he offered me a job up there and he said he would work my hours around me going to school. So I quit Super X. I went up there. I ended up finishing my court stenography class and stuff. Well, it was legal secretary, what I ended up getting an associate degree as. But Judge Ballou again ended [up] being in my life because every day we had to go to his court, y'know, for practice. He pulled me to the side one day and he said "Sandra, let me ask you something. I've been in your life for a long time." He said "I know you love the Roanoke Valley." I said "Yeah, I do." He said "Well you are aware that once you get your degree for this court stenography course, that you're probably gonna have to relocate to

Richmond, DC, one of the larger areas. We've got two ladies here that have been doing this for the past 20 years and they're not ready to retire and we don't have openings for new people." And I said "Really? Well why ain't you tell me that a long time ago?" And he said "Hey, I didn't think you were– Y'know, according to the doctors, you weren't supposed to be able to have kids or anything so I didn't think you were gonna stay in the valley." And I said "Well, what do you suggest I do?" He said "Well, instead of court stenography, why don't you transfer it to legal secretary. You can still use, y'know, that kind of shorthand. But there are plenty of jobs around here for legal secretaries." So through his guidance again in my life, I was able to change, y'know, what I was doing. But, y'know, it shows you how you might have one bad white person and then you got a good white person and it depends on the person. Regardless of the color. So I ended up getting my degree as a legal secretary and I used the– what do you call it. I've used what I learn, but I've found out that just because you get a degree as one thing, that's not necessarily what you're supposed to do. Because I ended up being a district manager at the Roanoke Times Rural News. And growing up in Roanoke, you know the Roanoke Times and Rural News ain't have nothing good to say about black folks, but here I am, a disgruntled parent– Now I had already passed the state board for [an] insurance agent, so I'm an insurance agent for North Carolina Mutual. [I] had no intentions of working at the newspaper, but my son gets a paper route; his district manager messes over him. They send a letter saying they're taking my son and me to court. They're gonna sue us for the money he supposedly owes. Well hey I'm a bookkeeper. Don't you think I'm keeping my son's records? So I take the records down to the office and I show this man why my son doesn't owe this money and he says "Can you hold on just a minute?" And he goes [to] get his boss and they come back and "Are you looking for a job?" I said "Do I look like I'm looking for a job? I came down here to do you a favor. I want you to understand I don't owe this money. You can take me to court if you want to, but Judge Ballou and I are very good friends. I'm trying to do you a favor." "Yes ma'am and you're doing a very good job because after reviewing your records and stuff we found out we owe you x number of dollars back because your son never got his discounts for paying on time" and blah blah blah and all this stuff. I said "Well thank you, I appreciate it. I can use the money for gas." "No, seriously, would you like a job." I said "No I wouldn't, I already have a job." "But this is a part time job, it will only take a few hours a day. It's only– It's such a small area" and blah blah blah and all this stuff and I said– Just trying to be nasty, okay? I said "Yeah right. Sure, I want your job." I mean I wasn't saying I want a job, I'm just saying; I'm a black person and you['re] offering me a job? This is Roanoke Times and Rural News, yeah sure. And the next day I get a call saying "We need you here by 4 o'clock to sign your papers." And I'm going like "Sign my papers for what?" "You accepted our job yesterday." So here I am. I'm an insurance agent, got too many things to do to begin with because, as an insurance agent, me and my big head, the so-called supervisor I had didn't like the fact that I didn't like to sell insurance and I had offered to quit a couple of times. I actually threatened to quit and the guy from Durham, North Carolina comes up here and says "Look, if we enlarge your collecting right, would you stay on as a collecting agent and you only sell if you want to sell?" I said okay because I didn't realize that

they have what is called an __(??), which means people that stay behind on their insurance. They expect for it to be like 40 to 50%. Well, mine was like 9%. I had no idea that that was such a big thing, y'know, and he says "But because you're gonna be a collecting agent, the 300 and some people that you have, your book will actually be 1,500 policyholders." I said "How [do] you expect me to deal with 1,500 policyholders in a month?" He said "But you don't have to sell. You just have to keep what you got." Well, here I am with this great big collecting book, now I got this part time job at Roanoke Times and Rural News. That's when I learned that prayer works because I told the Lord, I said "Y'know what? I have worked jobs making less that $5,000 a year and they took a lot of work and if you help me figure out a way to intertwine these things, I think I could do it." Because they were in the same area, mostly where I grew up, Northwest Roanoke. Well, what I did was to use the Post Office, get a lot of rows of stamps and I went to each and every one of my customers that I knew didn't necessarily need me to collect and I let them know they'd be doing their agent a wonderful favor if they would mail the money to her because they used checks and the ones who didn't use checks, I did continue to see them, but out of 1,500 people, I only personally had to collect from 150 people. The rest of them did their agent, who they liked, a wonderful job of mailing the money to me. And since the newspaper paper routes were in the same area, when I needed a carrier for the paper route I just took my little butt out there delivering papers. "What is my insurance agent doing out here? My son needs a job, can you give him a job?" I said "Is he 12 years old?" "He's 13." "Is he willing to listen and take instruction?" "If he gets it from you, yes." I said "Well yeah, I'll give him a job. I'll give him a try." I mean, when you pray the Man always comes through, especially if your name's Sandra. He's always watching my back so what can I say?
CL: Okay Sandra. When you were small, even when you were in high school, where did you buy your clothes? Were you able to go to the shops Downtown?
SJ: To be honest with you, most of my stuff, my sister Cody, it was hand-me-down stuff. I don't remember us actually, as you say, going shopping. She probably did, but for me, no. When I got pregnant with my first child, my mom was gonna buy me this maternity dress that she saw down at Heironimus. It was $85 for one dress and I looked at her and I said "No disrespect, but I'm not gon' be pregnant forever, y'know? So I tell you what, you give me $85 and take me to the fabric place and I'll use grandma's sewing machine and I bet I can make me enough for the whole pregnancy." And I got this one pattern, a Simplicity pattern that had the slacks with the stomach cut out, the skirt, the shorts, and the top. And then I got one pattern that looked like the dress she was gonna buy. And that one tent dress, I made it out of this real soft wool, I lined it because I'm allergic and it had a roll. Girl, you couldn't tell me nothing, okay? I thought I was the prettiest pregnant person in the world when I put on that dress. And I had– I made three different colored tops, same top just different colors; the shorts, the long pants, and the skirt. And people thought I had all kinds of outfits just because I switched them up and it cost less than $80 for making all of that and I had no idea I could sew. I mean I used to make stuff for my little dolls, but I really didn't know that I could sew. But like the lady at the fabric shop told me; if you can read

instructions, if you can follow instructions, you can sew. It's just a test of your patience. I said, well hey I have plenty of patience so I guess I can sew.
CL: Sandra, what is your fondest memory during childhood?
SJ: When Henry Street was at its best time for me was when you could go to the movie theater and go across the street to the little store and get this five cent sucker that would last you for days, okay, and it only cost five cents. You could get your hot dogs in the movie theater. Venette's, do you remember him? Little restaurant? That man made some of the best food. I know I had to be six maybe seven, because my brother Johnny got a paper route and his paper route was actually Gilmer, the street over from that, Loudon Ave adjacent to Henry Street, and Henry Street. That was his paper route. Now a lot of people would have thought "that's too dangerous, you don't want that." Well, he carried Gilmer and the next street over, I carried Loudon Ave and Henry Street. And I know that the Lord is always watching over me because there were people who– Other people would cross the street, okay, they did not want to be around them because they considered them dangerous. They would walk me and make sure that I was safe. I had people with their lights on because they knew this was the time of morning that this little girl would be bringing that paper. And when we got through carrying the papers– Now Venette's was Gilmer and Mormon Road, that little area, he has this little restaurant there. As soon as we passed there, they would have me breakfast waiting there every morning.
CL: That is amazing.
SJ: I mean that's my favorite memory because that was showing me how people really cared about Sandra.
CL: Your favorite gift?
SJ: I'd have to say it was my first child and the reason why I say that– I had gotten to a point in my teenage years of being really disappointed in the world around me so I had gotten suicidal and I had a real frank conversation with the Lord up on Mill Mountain and I told him, I said "Y'know, if this is all it is, I really don't want to be here. So if you want me here, you're gon' have to give me a reason to stay." Because the stuff at home with my step-mother and my mother, it was just– I was sick and tired of being everybody else's caregiver. Y'know how you get sick and tired of being sick and tired? Well, I was. And a friend of mine, Rony Gravely and I used to race cars together. I used to race cars. And he was having trouble with his girlfriend who had run off, I was having trouble with my boyfriend who went into the Air Force. We [were] kinda crying on each other's shoulders and we went to the Lee High Drive In and Paul Newman and Harper was playing. And we [were] consoling each other and I had never let anybody touch me sexual[ly] and we did and I knew at that moment I was pregnant. And everybody [was] acting like "no you didn't know," I knew. I knew I was pregnant. Telling myself, no you couldn't be because this is the only time you've done it so no you can't be. I was. And with all the stuff I went through because it was an ectopic pregnancy, it was in my tubes, and I should have died according to the doctors, but with all that went down to get him into the right place because they were giving me birth control pills to push him out and three doses is what it takes. The first dosage it felt like somebody had their hand– and I'm going like I ain't taking this no more. Well

the second dosage it was worse except in a different place and something told me, y'know [the] man upstairs, when they got ready to give me the third pill; I said I'm not taking that pill. "Yes you are, yes you are." I said no, I'm not taking that pill. And by not taking that pill he ended up in my womb in the right place. And well, I knew I went into labor in March, the hospital said "No you're not in labor. You've got this much more to go." I said "I don't care how much more I gotta go, my water broke, I'm in labor." My son was born April 11 by an emergency c-section. I should have died, he should have died, because they let me fall out of the bed in the hospital and Dr. Law told my mom "She won't make it and the baby's probably already dead." And my mom told him straight up "[If] either one of them die, I'mma sue you for everything you got." So the Lord said no problem. As soon as that child hit, air they heard him all over the hospital and that was my best friend until he died at age 25. So my favorite memory is that young man coming into my life. Taught himself how to use the bathroom. Started talking at 8 months, walking at 8 months. He'd answer the phone telling people "Sandra's not here, call back." I believe that's– Yeah that's my favorite memory.
CL: That's beautiful. Tell me what you think about the public library, Mrs. Lee if you remember her, the library today.
SJ: I remember the library from the time that I was probably 8, 9 years old because I was at Harrison and this is after I had been forced to move from Loudon to live on Rutherford with my mom and my grandmother lived in the 400th block of Rutherford. And my grandmother would take the bus from Downtown, she worked at the State and City building as an elevator operator. When she'd take the bus, she'd come by here. Lotta times she would stop, come by the library and my way of being able to spend time with her, more time with her, I would come from Harrison down here and Mrs. Lee would sit and talk with me and spend time with me and when grandma would get off the bus she'd come in. They'd talk, we'd talk, and then I'd leave with my grandmother. So Gainsboro Library really has been in my life for a long long time and Mrs. Lee– Well she was like a surrogate mom, but she was like that for anybody that needed it. But I liked her because, just like Ms. Deskins, she talked to me as a person. Not a little kid, not somebody that didn't have an opinion, but somebody that she could exchange thoughts with. I mean, this library really– It's not like the other libraries in Roanoke. This is a community space, this is a home place. That's the reason why I was really pleased that when you expanded it, you tied it all into the main place, know what I mean? Because this was a little teeny little thing to begin with, but now it's– Well, it's just like your heart, y'know? Use it enough [that] it grows. That's what I call it, yeah. The heart of the community. A place where, if you wanna get in touch with the community, this is the only library I'd tell you to come to. You can learn a whole lot here.
CL: Who were some of the strong community leaders?
SJ: Coach Cannaday. That was– Maybe it's because he married my first grade teacher, I don't know. But Coach Cannaday and I, up until the day he died. I don't know if I ever had a class with him or not, I'm not exactly sure why he and I were always so close, but if I never needed a father figure to talk to, if– I don't know, he was just always somebody watching over me. But in my lifetime, seriously, the black teachers that I had, whether they were actually a teacher of mine

or just in my life through school, I never really had a bad one. And maybe that's just me because if you didn't come across right to me, I didn't have a problem letting you know "I'm sorry, you're messing up." I didn't have a problem letting you know why and for whatever reason, because I was able to do that, I always had a good report with the teachers. Not so much with the kids because they got on my nerves, I'mma tell you. You know you ain't supposed to be drinking, you know it makes you sick, but you gon' do it anyway? I mean, just because I had my driver's license early I was the designated driver for all the so-called hip kids. Like, y'know, y'all are so boring, you really are. "Well don't you wanna smoke?" No. "Well don't you wanna drink?" No. "Well what do you wanna do?" I said hey, get you out of my face really. Take you home and you go on and puke into the toilet and stuff. Not my cup of tea. I actually smoked a cigarette one time and it knocked me out for 15 minutes. A group of us decided that we were gonna buy a pack of cigarettes to see how it would do and I said "Well if we're gonna spend our hard earned money, we're gon' get a real cigarette." So we got a pack of those short Camels and it knocked me out for 15 minutes and I said "I tell y'all what, y'all do what you wanna do, but I ain't burning my money up." Especially for something that could knock me out? I don't think so.
CL: How has Roanoke changed in the years, the new years?
SJ: Oh my God. I actually can remember picnics and family dinners at my grandmother's house in Northeast.
CL: Your grandmother's name?
SJ: Lula Turner Cambell. And I wanna say it was Gilmer School that was right across in front of her. I'm not sure which elementary school was there, but she had a school right across the street from her house and on the corner was the rec center and all of this is right in spitting distance of my grandmother's front porch. And because of the blue law, on Sunday, that's when everybody got together because there wasn't no malls, there wasn't no stores open. Everything was done Saturday night so that you could be together Sunday because that was your entertainment. And I mean, I could walk from my momma's mother's house around to Rutherford Ave where the post office is now, to my daddy's mother's house and nobody would mess with you and I mean, I had to be a real young person during this time. I can remember when they told those people "You gotta move." It wasn't no negotiation. It wasn't no trying to give them a good price for their property. It was you gotta move. Bye. Get out.
CL: Was that in North–?
SJ: That was Northeast and I remember when my grandmother moved in the 400th block of Rutherford Ave, that was the transition. She had been in that house until I was in maybe the 7th or 8th grade and that's when they came through again with this "You gotta move. We're going to make improvements in Gainsboro. We're gonna remove the hills of Gainsboro." And that's when they came in and destroyed Gainsboro. What you see today is what they did, okay? And my grandmother had to move from Rutherford [to] up off of Melrose on Palm and eventually that's where she died, but she died on a mortgage on the house because she had just got through paying for the one in Northeast. They moved them out. She'd just got through paying for the one on Rutherford and they moved them out. So, y'know, Roanoke has gone through so many changes

in my lifetime, but I would say in the past five years, for the most part, they've been doing things that are not so bad. Like the Greenways, for instance. I live on a street where Lick Run, the Greenway for that is and I can remember 15, 20 years ago when they were starting to trying to get the connection between Valley View and over there done and I helped a little bit with that, but I see more– I see better things now than the stuff they used to do in the past.
CL: Okay, jobs. What kind of jobs– When you were growing up, what kind of jobs were available to you?
SJ: When I was pregnant in the 12th grade I had a part time job at JCPenney. After I had my child, I got a job at Halmode Sewing Apparel down here on Center and because of the dust I ended up with an eye infection so I had to leave there. And I went from Halmode to First National Exchange. They had a check processing division out on Plantation Road and I worked there, but you couldn't leave until all the checks were processed and I was there one night from like 2 in the evening to 2 in the morning, and this is with a young son at home. And I said, no I can't deal with this, because that night I was almost abducted by this man that was going along 581 killing women and luckily– Like I said the Lord's always watching over for me, but luckily I had talked to a police officer earlier that day. They gave me a description of the car and said he's passing himself off as a police officer and if he gets out of his car, you don't get out of yours and you pull off until you get to an area where people are. And when I did that, the guy didn't follow me and I knew that somebody was watching over me, okay. After I was at First National Exchange, I got a job at Super X for the first time and that's when I was doing their books and cashier, but Allstate had asked me to work there. So I left Super X and went to Allstate and while I was there was when I had my last child. So after I had him, the doctor didn't want me to work anymore so [for] about five years I was at home. And then they wanted me to come back to Super X to straighten their books back out. So I went back to them until I went to college and then I ended up with insurance and then at the newspaper. But I'mma tell you, when He wants you not to do something, he works things out because Roanoke Times had devised a plan to get rid of people 40 years old or older who had worked for them for 10 years or longer and– I had no idea how devious white people are, y'know, I had forgotten because I had worked down there and though I was friends with these people or whatever, but business is business as they say and they didn't want me down there, so they worked a way out that– They ended up getting me losing my disability with social security plus I couldn't get benefits with them because they didn't give me enough hours and when they decided, "okay we done messed her up enough," they fired me and told me "You were dumb enough to come back part time and as a part time employee, we don't need a reason to fire you. If we say we don't need you; bye. So bye!"
CL: Okay Sandra, is there anything else we didn't cover that you would like to say to us in this interview?
SJ: Well to be honest with you, I probably need to do another interview with you because, y'know, it's a lot of things I'd like to say that we really don't have time for. And the reason why I put it that way; I got to take my son to work and I don't know for sure what time it is right now, but I know it's getting close to it. Yeah, that's what I figured.

CL: Alrighty. Well I do thank you for interviewing with us today.
SJ: Well I've had a wonderful day period. This has been a very nice day for me.
CL: Thank you. And we will have you back.
SJ: Okay.
CL: Thank you again Sandra.
SJ: You're welcome.
CL: I appreciate the interview, [I] appreciate talking to you.
SJ: I appreciate you taking this interview too.
CL: I appreciate your love and all that good stuff.
SJ: You['re] welcome.
CL: Thank you.