

## Conversation with Lucille Ollinger

Liberty Street Community Center

September 9, 2004

John Malpede: So, I'd like to introduce Lucille Ollinger. And, uh, this is Lucille Ollinger, and this is Lucille Ollinger. There's Charlie.

Charlie: Before you get started, there was a reporter from New York that wanted to meet the real Mayor Gorman. Is she in here?

Jan Cohen-Cruz: Yes, but she's not – here she is –

Charlie: Have you got a minute?

J: Yes, I have a minute.

John: The real Mayor Gorman is here and then we're gonna go visit him in City Hall.

C: Oh, well, you can see him down there.

Jan: OK. Thank you.

C: Ok, I'll get out of your way.

John: That was the real Charlie Hammonds playing the real Mayor Dawahare in '68, at which point, the real mayor Gorman was the owner of the independent television station. And, um, OK, so – what did it look like here in 1968?

L: What did it look like?

J: Yeah.

L: Well, all that was dirt road. It wasn't concrete roads. It was dirt roads.

Henriette: And the road was much higher?

J: If you look out the window you can see all those, the rocks. When they built the housing here, they brought the street level down. Before, you said there were houses all the way up the hillside, right?

L: Mm-hm.

J: How long ago did your family move into Liberty Street.

L: I was born and raised up here. I was born and raised here. I've always lived on Liberty Street. This was my home, right here.

H: This was your home after it was rebuilt, right?

L: Right.

H: Where did you used to live before you went to this house? How did it go – the whole rebuilding?

L: We used to live up on this end of the holler on Liberty Street. Now there's houses all along in here. And when they came and bought all the houses out, we moved from this end down to the lower end. And then they started these houses up here. And once these were built, we moved from there up into this section. And then they built that section down there.

H: Right.

J: So where were you living when Kennedy came by?

L: Down on the lower end?

J: So you had already moved from up there down to there.

L: Up here down to there.

J: Why did Kennedy go to your house?

L: Because my dad had two beagles on the porch. Beagles dogs. And he wanted to see those beagle dogs.

(Laughter)

J: And your dad was coal miner, right?

L: Yes.

J: And your mom, your mom, she did, she did a lot.

L: Yes, she did. She was, she was – she used to work in domestic – she did cleanin' peoples houses. And after that, she helped start the daycare, the Head Start out in Backwoods. It was called Backwoods then, where Roy Gemso is. There was little old building there that they started a daycare there.

J: How did she fund the daycare initially?

L: Well, she did crocheting and sewed those and she took food from here house to feed the kids, and just, whatever they could to raise money is what they did.

J: And you told me that you had a little wagon you took out meals to people in town and then they would buy them to fund the daycare, right?

L: That was my sister.

J: That was your sister. You had to stand in for Marlene.

L: (Laughing) Yeah, she should've been here!

H: And so, how many children were there in – when Kennedy – how many brothers and sisters do you have?

L: I have 11 brothers and sisters – there's twelve of us.

H: Right. So the pictures that're over there, everybody, that is the house of the Ollingers' and the family when Kennedy walked in there.

L: Mm-hm. Those are my sisters and brothers.

J: How old were you in this picture?

L: Sixteen.

H: Do you remember what questions Kennedy asked when he came in the house?

L: I wasn't inside the house.

H: Oh no, you were outside.

L: We didn't get to go in, 'cause we started, everybody started trying to go in, and I was outside, so I didn't get to go in, so I don't really know what was said. But I can tell you, if Patricia was here, she could tell ya.

H: Yeah, and Marlene also. So Marlene told me that he was talking about, "What did you eat? How much did you eat?" and questions like that.

J: So then, later on, when the housing was built, your family lived in this? In this house?

L: Yeah, I grew up, from sixteen years old, in this house. This used to be a five-bedroom, two bath house. And then, when my mom and dad died, they turned this into a center. All the kids were raised in this house.

Charles Ollinger: I spent 25 years in this house.

H: Is that your brother?

L: yeah, one of'em.

H: What's your name?

C: Charles.

H: Charles Ollinger? So where was your sleeping room?

C: (Unintelligible)

(Laughter)

L: His room was down – there used to be, like, a hallway going down through here and up – between those two bathrooms, was a bedroom. Was a bedroom there, and a bedroom there, then a little hallway down there, down this-a-way and then a bedroom, bedroom, and bedroom. Three bedrooms this way, two that-a-way. And two baths over here.

H: And that was the livingroom.

L: yeah, somewhere in here was the living room and kitchen.

J: I think you and your sister told me that your mother planted three rose bushes outside the house.

L: Yes, she did. She had three rose bushes. They stayed there a long time. I don't know if they're still out there or not because they did have some – people that come do the landscape out there – but they stayed a long time out in the front out, down there.

H: Why did she plant those roses?

L: 'Cause mom was always doing something, she just liked roses, I think she planted, I don't know.

H: Oh no, Marlene told this story.

L: Marlene told this story.

H: She planted them when Martin Luther King was killed. And the other one after Kennedy was killed. And then the other Kennedy. One for each of them.

L: They stayed there a long time. They may be out there. I don't know, but I doubt it. When they did the landscaping –

J: You were recognizing some other people in that picture. Were you Charles?

C: I was six.

L: He was six when he came. Yeah, I know. My fathers people and them.

J: Oh yeah? Are any of them still in Hazard?

L: Uh, well, Miss Valerie's dead. Everyone's still here except maybe a couple of 'em. Those were good times.

J: So now you work , who do you work for?

L: Hazard/Perry County Community Ministries.

J: Right. And they do a lot of really great social services, is that right?

L: Yes they do.

J: What do they do?

L: We work, they work, we work with the homeless people help them to try to become self-sufficient. Getting into housing and just whatever one can do. Mostly work with homeless people.

J: And how are people doing, generally? 'Cause Kennedy was investigating need in '68. What, how are things now? 'Cause you're sort of on top of the situation in your job.

L: It's somewhat better, but it could use a lot of improvement. It's not THAT much better, but it's still a little bit better. It could use a lot of pay improvement. Jobs, we need jobs. We still don't have that many jobs. I think that we could and sure, he did a great job, and I think the only sad part of him bein' here, other than him dying after he left here, that someone didn't finish his work. Or didn't pick up and finish what he started.

J: Yeah, really. Things sort of veered off in a different direction. I was saying to your sister, well, I think I said it to you too – I said, like, 'cause in '68 when I was in college I guess, you know, it was very tumultuous, you know, and then, with the war and everything, and then, on top of that, Martin Luther King was killed. And two months later Kennedy was killed. And for me, that was, like, as disorienting as 911 or something. It just, like, really brought down my foundations, you know? And your sister said that she thought that, your sister said, "Well, the legacy of Kennedy sort of went on for a long, long time. And it's still working itself out. Things that we started there are still working themselves out. Even, even though (unintelligible)...So, would you like to say anything else?

L: No... Other than, I thought that Robert Kennedy was a very caring, compassionate, loving man. He was a good person. And, like I said, I think it's sad that someone didn't finish what he started, or at least, put a better effort in.

J: Yeah.

H: Maybe people have questions for Lucille? Anything you would like to ask her?

? (audience): Has the community grown, as far as the number of people living here? How big is it compared to that time?

L: It has gotten smaller. There was more people that lived on this street then way back, on Liberty Street. And all the kids that, when I was growin' up, they, mostly, have left this area because they couldn't find jobs. So they left to go find work 'cause they couldn't find work here.

?: So are the older parents still here. Do they still come back and visit or –

L: Well, most of the older people that lived on this street when I was growin' up are all dead. They're all, mostly – you have maybe, maybe about five or six of 'em that are still living. But most of the older people are dead.

?: And how come you have a memorial outside to the Alumni?

L: Because that was the only, the black – Liberty High School was a black school and that's why the kids that graduated from there, in fifty – I think it was '51 or '52 – they had that done. And they wanted to have that to remind them that that's where they graduated from school. I went to school there, but I only went 'til the fifth grade.

J: And just a couple months ago – there's a wall of dedicated bricks there? – they just this year started a program where people that buy bricks there, then it's used as a scholarship.

Mitty Owens: I know it's easy for us to see the significance of Bobby Kennedy's trip, you know, from poverty today. I'm wondering, at that time, did people, did it have a lot of impact? Did people see a lot of meaning in him coming to visit? And did people talk about it for awhile, especially since he was assassinated?

L: That's ALL they talked about was Bobby Kennedy being here. And that we were gonna get these nice houses to live in and maybe have jobs and – that's all you'd hear. That was the talk.

Mitty: Do you know if it motivated any individuals to do particular things, to get more active in their community, to fight for these programs and –

L: Yes, well, I think, yes, it did. And one person in particular, which he didn't live here on Liberty Street, was Marshall Johnson. I'm sure a lot of people know him. He helped, like I said, I work for Hazard County Community Ministries. He's a black man and he got funds in here, or helped get what we call the Johnson Place, they named it after him, which is a housing complex that we rent for low-income, lower-income people. And they are allowed to stay there for years, until they can start getting' into, find permanent housing and whatever. But he did that. Marshall Johnson. And they named it after him, the name of the building.

M: Do you know if the black community felt any special significance about Kennedy's coming? Did people feel that, maybe, finally the black community would get more of a fair shake with Bobby Kennedy?

L: I think they did. Like I said, I was only sixteen, but yeah, I think they did. My mom and dad, yeah I think that's what they talked about. "Maybe we'll get somethin' done. Maybe we'll get better housing." Because the house that we left from here and moved down there, it wasn't really any better than the house we moved in because our bathroom didn't work, we didn't have running water in there, we still took baths in the big round tubs in front of big coal stove and that kind of thing. So, it wasn't that much improved from moving from up here where the black people lived, to down here where the white people lived. 'Cause up in this area up here, was all black, and then down where the concrete started was where the white people lived. And they brought them out and moved us from up here down there and started the housing. Then when they got these up here, we moved from there back up here. And then they finished that down there.

M: Did most of the black male workers work in the mines?

L: Yeah, that was mostly – yeah, I remember my dad, 'cause I remember him – what I mostly remember about dad – he wore these hats with the light on the, they call 'em (?)...and it had a little light on top with the fire and I remember him wearing that.

M: Do you remember if the black and white coal miners related primarily as workers, together, united, or was there a lot of racial tension between black and white coal miners.

L: I really don't know, I really can't answer that question. Well, my dad – well, of course, he got along with everybody. Everyone. I don't think he had any problems with any of 'em. 'Cause my dad, he got along with everybody. He really did. Everybody knew Blondy. That's what they called him. His name was Aaron Ollinger, but he had blonde hair on his head, so they called him Blondy. That's what he was known as. Blondy. Yeah.

?: What's been the impact of the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq here in this community – Hazard and areas around. What's the impact of the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on people here and families?

L: I don't know many families that have children over there, so I really don't know the answer to that question. But, I think it has quite an affect on them. Naturally, any human being, yeah.

J: So, I guess that we need to keep moving. I'll say, one thing, a couple things. Again, I'll stand in for your sister. She works for the state and she had to go for some special training today and couldn't get out of it. I called Governor Fletcher – no. But she said two things. One thing she said was, about Robert Kennedy, you know, “He came, he saw, he accomplished. If you don't come, you don't know what the problems are.” And the other thing she said, going back to what I attributed to her earlier, about the legacy, she said, “Well, you know, the schools were integrated, but her kids were the first kids to go to school, black kids to go to school –

TAPE CUT OFF – TO BE CONTINUED