



Storytellers @RPL
Interviewee: Paulette Perry
Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer
Recorded on June 23, 2016

SARAH: My name is Sarah Kiefer. Today is June 23, 2016 and I'm speaking with Paulette Perry who grew up in Ridgewood and now lives in Pennsylvania. We are recording this interview over the phone. So Paulette, can you tell me a little bit about how your family came to live in Ridgewood and when?

PAULETTE: My grandmother originally came to Ridgewood from Montclair in 1928. And we've been Ridgewood residents since then. They're from North Carolina and her grandmother, her grandmother's sister moved to Ridgewood and one by one brought each one of the sisters up here. So all four sisters and three brothers ended up in New Jersey.

SARAH: Oh wow. And can you share any of your fondest memories of living in Ridgewood?

PAULETTE: My fondest memories, it's actually two fold. I did enjoy school although there were very few blacks. And so I had very few friends. I went to Union Street School from Kindergarten to the Sixth Grade. And the second part of that was my friends in my neighborhood, where there was a multitude of black kids, so I always had, always had somebody to play with. I grew up in the apartments and there were eighteen families, and there was a multitude of kids so it was like our own big family affair at the apartments. So school was one version of it, and outside of school was another version of it.

SARAH: That's great. Can you talk a little bit about your experiences in the school? Because I know you also wrote a book, "Black in the Village", does that deal with some of your experiences?

PAULETTE: It deals with most of my experiences. As I said there were very few

blacks in the school at the time and so I was never never really felt to be a part of the group. Birthday parties were held, I was never invited. I did go to one birthday party that of Gretchen Van Emburgh who lived on Prospect Street. But that was the only birthday party I ever got invited to. I had a birthday party and I had begged my grandmother to let me invite some of those, my little white classmates. And I invited a few but none of them ever showed up. So that was, that was always a conflict with the blacks versus the whites. We never, I never felt comfortable and it, my whole life of growing up in Ridgewood it was always like we had an inferior, an inferiority complex because we had nothing in common with the other kids. So that's you know, why my little neighborhood gang was really my life.

SARAH: Right. Can you share some stories of growing up with, your neighborhood and the friends you made there?

PAULETTE: We had, we played games we didn't have any kind of electronics or anything. If we had a box or somebody got a refrigerator, a washing machine, and there was a box that gave us the greatest joy. An old tire, we would roll each other around in tires, but we would take soda cans and stomp our heels into the soda cans and clump around the yard. Or there was, we had a playground on Broad Street way back when. But it was never as well stocked as the other playgrounds in the area. I didn't, I wasn't allowed to go there too much because the bigger kids would pick on the little kids, and my grandmother didn't like for me to be picked on a lot. So, I would go there just to buy supplies to make, I would buy the lanyards to make the necklaces with. We would all go and buy the lanyards and then we'd come home and hook them on to the chain that went all the way in the backyard and we would stand there for hours and hours making our little necklaces. Or we'd make a fake zoo and we'd collect what we'd say were dinosaur bones and we would make a scare house or if any of us had animals like fish or birds we would have our own little funerals in the backyard. And we'd just did our own little thing. We played hopscotch, we played jump-rope, we played stop light, or red light/green light. We played teacher may I, and we just had all kinds of fun, all summer long. Summer seem like it lasted so long when we were younger. And you know, it goes really quick now but we just had a ball. Every year the church would [unintelligible] on the fourth Thursday of July, that was like an annual day for all the black churches and that was it. Movies, we went, didn't go very often, and there was a Good Humor truck that we looked forward to coming by every day, stopping in front of the apartments. And it was just, it was a joy growing up. We didn't have crime, we didn't have anything to worry. We rode our bicycles. We didn't have helmets, we didn't have kneepads. There was baseball in the backyard. We did all sorts of outside activities, we couldn't wait til it got dark, we would scare each other. We would catch lightning bugs. Kids like that, they don't know what it is today. I took my my god kids to an amusement park a couple years ago and they saw a phone booth, and they didn't know what it was, they thought it was an elevator. So, we just, I enjoyed my young life growing up in Ridgewood and I miss it. I look back on it, I wrote my whole book about my life experiences growing up and if I could do it all over again I wouldn't change a thing.

SARAH: That's good. And what inspired you to write this book?

PAULETTE: Basically it was to keep myself awake. When my daughter was born she was in nursing school for like two and a half hours every morning, and I worked the night shift at the hospital. So in order to stay awake those two and a half hours I started writing. That would keep my attention so I would stay awake, and that's what I would do while she was in school, so I wouldn't be asleep and forget to go pick her up. So it started like that, and it took on its own life and it just grew and grew and grew until I just put so many years into it and so much research into it and being at the hospital I was at a position where I met people all the time because I was in an emergency room and I always asked them the same questions and I always got the same answers. I wanted to know why people moved to Ridgewood, because there was influx of people coming into Ridgewood and they all, they all gave me the same answers, they came for the school system. Ridgewood school system was excellent. Everybody wanted to come and get into Ridgewood school system. And so they moved there for a better life, for better education for their kids. Where I had that my whole life, so I didn't realize that schools weren't as good as Ridgewood until way later on in life.

SARAH: Can you talk a little bit about your experiences at the hospital and what you did there?

PAULETTE: I worked in the emergency room, I did the registration. When you came into the emergency room, I was the first person you saw. I would take your information, find out what was wrong, and I would do your chart. And that offered me the opportunity to meet all kinds of people; to never get bored with my job because you never knew from one night to the next what was going to happen because no two nights were ever the same. And I just, I loved my job, I loved doing what I was doing, it kept my attention. I had a great group of people to work with, great doctors, great nurses, great text.

SARAH: That's good to hear.

PAULETTE: And, people, I just fell in love with all of them. I just loved all of my coworkers, I really loved my job.

SARAH: And you mentioned also that you were a member of the Community Relations Advisory Board, do you remember?

PAULETTE: I, yes, I got involved with that when my daughter was a junior in High School and one of the substitute teachers made a discriminating comment to her, called her "you people" which I didn't think with right at all so I told my minister about it, who happened to be on the Community Relations Advisory Board. And he said he would take it to the group, and he invited me to go to a meeting, and I ended up joining. And from that we got the Ridgewood High School to change the handbook and the way they pick their substitute teachers, and that the necessity for them all to have further training in how to deal with students.

SARAH: I remember you also mentioned that your brother is a cop here in Ridgewood and you have a long family history here, do you have any stories about your relatives in Ridgewood?

PAULETTE: My relatives mostly went there, mostly living, mostly are all still in Ridgewood. My brother is a Ridgewood police officer, he's been on the force now 28 years, was the first black lifeguard, the first black policeman. My daughter is in Ridgewood, my oldest daughter, she went to Ridgewood High School as did my brother. My youngest sister went through Ridgewood High School. Her daughter, my niece, my granddaughter, a host of cousins that were my mom's age all went through Ridgewood High School so what's that like at least four generations of us that went through Ridgewood High School. And I still think Ridgewood High School is the best. It has the most beautiful graduation ever and I miss not going this year because I used to always go to the graduation as is the Fourth of July parade is something else that I miss a lot.

SARAH: Have you been back to visit recently?

PAULETTE: I go to Paterson a lot to pick up my Godson, but it's usually early because that's a four and a half hour trip. And usually my family they're all working when I'm there, so I don't get to see them very often. They come up here once in a while and I'd love to get there, but sadly enough I own the house right across the street from where I grew up in the apartments. And we had to sell it when I could no longer go back to work. And it is so painful to come to come to Ridgewood, and see, I still call it my house, that I had for 34 years, that's no longer my house. It's still pain me to look at it and know that it's not mine, I just can't go in and turn the key and open the door. And you know so, it's, it's good and bad memories about going there, but I do like to go see my family.

SARAH: Yeah I wasn't sure if you had noticed any changes from when you grew up in Ridgewood to what it's like now?

PAULETTE: There are many changes, the stores, the streets. My book explains a lot about the stores that were there, when I was a little little girl and the A&P was on Broad Street. And the firehouse was actually on Hudson Street. But Chevrolet dealers, there was a Chinese laundry, Wu Laundry, on Broad Street. I remember my girlfriend's house on Broad Street and as a little child her house was towed from Broad Street to High Street. I remember the house going down Broad Street. The store on Broad Street used to be Agle's Record Shop where for years and years and years of black circles that looked like records were on the sidewalk up until recently. This is the way the world changed, the multitude of restaurants of every nationality of food you can think of. But we didn't have that then. And seeing the people. The people have changed. My brother and I often have this conversation about the old money and the new money. People come to Ridgewood now just to say they're from Ridgewood. But they're not the true Ridgewoodites. The true Ridgewoodite people are much nicer, friendlier, more generous group of people than the newer ones that are coming in now. But that's only

my opinion.

SARAH: I guess, the last question is, looking ahead what lifetime goals do you plan to work towards?

PAULETTE: Well right now at my age, I'm seventy years old, and I forward to maintaining good health, keeping up my strength. Taking care of my little boys that I get every summer. And trying to live a good life. I will one day love to see my book get published, but that's maybe when I'm gone my children will go ahead and do it for me. But I don't know, I I just want to be happy and content and live to be a ripe old age.

SARAH: That's great. Well thank you so much Paulette for agreeing to do this interview. I really appreciate it. And, thank you so much.

PAULETTE: And I thank you for allowing me to do, and I hope everything is successful with it.