

[HARWELL GOODWIN DAVIS: He stated that he had been appointed to suggest a president for Howard College.

EUNICE ROGERS: And so there was a lot of industry in Bessemer when I grew up, a lot of progressiveness. However, it was still a typical, small, Southern town.

OLIVER BARREAU: To be perfectly honest with you, um, I didn't know what Alabama was until I set foot in Alabama.

ELIZABETH SLOAN RAGLAND: I was not greeted by hecklers. I was greeted by Martha Ann Cox.]

CLAIRE DAVIS: Welcome back to Sam.wav. I am your host, Claire Davis. Today we will look at an intergenerational oral history project that Samford students took part in this semester. This project is funded by the Alabama Humanities Foundation, and it created a platform for college students to interact with senior citizens living at Episcopal Place.

On a sunlit road, not far from the hustle and bustle of Highland Avenue, the Episcopal Place senior living facility sits near an urban park and the Virginia Samford Theater. An affordable housing option for seniors, Episcopal Place is host to a lively community of people who continue to live their lives to the fullest. Samford students met up with them here each week of the semester.

[Ambient noise from Episcopal Place]

MIA OWENS: Wait, so you met Fred Astaire?

LORAIN DEVITO: Yes.

MIA OWENS: You met him?

LORAIN DEVITO: Oh yes.

MIA OWENS: That's so cool!

LORAIN DEVITO: I was sixteen years old.

CLAIRE DAVIS: With the help of grant funding from the Alabama Humanities Foundation, the STORI office worked with Samford University's Mann Center to organize a service cadre centered on creating relationships between generations. Partly an opportunity for these groups to meet and partly a way to archive the community's stories, the project required students to visit Episcopal Place residents weekly. Playing card games and working on craft projects together, students built connections with their interview partners for weeks before ever pulling out a recorder.

When I first heard about the project, I wondered how this might affect their interview experience, since most of our interviewers meet their subject for the first or second time at the interview. So, I did a little oral history work of my own and interviewed Mia Owens, who has worked with us on prior projects. She interviewed Episcopal Place resident Thelma Jackson, a woman you'll hear from later in this episode, and who, as it turned out, came from a similar area of Alabama as Mia's family.

MIA OWENS: I think the part that interested me the most was when she was talking about her childhood living on a farm in Eutaw, Alabama, because that's not super far away from where my grandparents grew up. And she would talk about her

experiences, um, as a child there and how she had all these brothers and sisters and they were, said she had, I think, it was like seven or nine siblings. And, (laughs) it's just imagining that like, in comparison to my family, who has, so I have three siblings. I just couldn't imagine what that'd be like, and just thinking about that family dynamic is really interesting. And then, um, she was talking about, um, like picking pecans off the trees or helping out with the farm and every once and a while chopping wood, and I definitely didn't grow up in that setting but whenever I went to my grandparents' house, I could relate to some of those experiences. And I think just seeing that - those links between us, even though we never were in contact with each other until now, was the coolest part for me. [. . .] So I think that kind of is what stuck out to me the most with that, just the relationship that we kind of had even though we are different, like, different generations, we have things that we can still relate on, I think was super cool.

CLAIRE DAVIS: One of my favorite parts of the interview was after - like, you'd kind of ended the interview--

MIA OWENS: Yeah!

CLAIRE DAVIS: --but you started talking about, like,

MIA OWENS: (laughs)

CLAIRE DAVIS: fresh vegetables and stuff, and it was so fun to hear both of you go like, "oh, yes!

MIA OWENS: (laughs)

CLAIRE DAVIS: "I've had that before, it's so great!"

MIA OWENS: (laughs) Mhm. And when she talked about the, um . . . what was it, the slingshots or something? I was like,

CLAIRE DAVIS: (laughs)

MIA OWENS: "I thought-" Because, like, we had BB guns. And so I was like, "Did you try to like shoot your siblings with that like we did? Or is that just an us thing, or. . ." (laughs) I thought that was really funny. But I'm really glad, because I was ready to end the interview there, and then she just kind of started up again and I was like, "Oh, yeah, that's, like, that's definitely where we had stuff in common," and it's cool that we can relate on that.

CLAIRE DAVIS: Thelma was full of stories about her childhood in Eutaw. Besides swapping stories about muscadine grapes and slingshots, Thelma also told Mia about her mother's quilting bee.

THELMA JACKSON: And mama had a quilting bee. They called it quilting bee. Ma, Cousin Fanny, Miss Elaine, Miss Lula. It was six of them, I have forgotten the other two. Mama, and it was one other woman. Daddy made a hole, daddy and the boys made a hole, four holes in the ceiling. And they put a rope down, and I do not know how they brought the top to keep the rope up there. But we could roll the quilt down so we could sit down in a chair and quilt on it. And then at night, roll the quilt up so we could walk around in the living room, because the quilt was down in the living room. Because that was the biggest room in the house. Because there was the kitchen. The back side was a bed. And then the fireplace was here. But we would quilt on the quilt in the daytime, roll it up at night. And then the next day, if we were not busy, we would roll it down and

quilt again. But I wanted to learn how to quilt so I could be with them. And first, I was under the quilt playing, and mama said, "You cannot play. If you are going to be in here, you are going to quilt." So I started trying to make stitches. Every day, they would look at the work I had done and pull it out. "Oh, this is too big." Then finally, I kept practicing on a piece of scrap fabric. I would sit down and make stitches. One day, they left my stitches in. And that, that is how I learned how to sew.

CLAIRE DAVIS: Other residents, like Pat C. Allen, grew up in the more urban area of Birmingham. She told her student, Maggie Shaw, about her memories of the train in town during World War II.

PAT ALLEN: In World War II (coughs) I was quite young, but I had three brothers and a brother-in-law. And they were all over the world.

MAGGIE SHAW: Mm-hmm.

PAT ALLEN: And my daddy just wrung his hands worrying about the children -- about the boys.

MAGGIE SHAW: Yeah.

PAT ALLEN: But it was kind of funny, because sometimes when they were -- before they went overseas, they would come through on a, on a railroad going to another part of the United States.

MAGGIE SHAW: Yeah.

PAT ALLEN: And they would always call. And we would all pile in the car and go

down there. Mother would have candy and cookies, and I was, listen, "Now you follow the train and throw them the candy and cookies," (laughter) because they could not get off, and we could not get on.

MAGGIE SHAW: Oh my gosh.

PAT ALLEN: So we had a lot of fun doing that.

CLAIRE DAVIS: Judy Pittman also shared her formative experience as a child in the heart of downtown Birmingham. As the daughter of two department store owners, Judy often travelled to their store after school, which led to a short but impactful memory.

JUDY PITTMAN: I spent my younger years after school riding the bus to downtown and going to my daddy's office to do my homework. I even had chicken pox in the bedroom department on the second floor because mother and daddy both had to be at work and I was -- we did not have help so I had mine back in the very back in the bed with -- not everybody goes to a store to have chicken pox, so my life was a little different being downtown.

CLAIRE DAVIS: Recording someone's personal experience during well-known parts of recorded history is often the driving force behind oral history work, and there were plenty of personal stories to be found in Episcopal Place of that nature. Resident David Schnieder worked for an airline catering company, and he shared his experience of 9/11 with us in his joint interview with Marianne Dreyspring.

DAVID SCHNEIDER: Yeah, I worked at San Francisco International Airport for a catering company. I catered the airlines, you know, drove the truck out. The truck went up, you know, scissor truck (inaudible).

MARIANNE DREYSPRING: Was that fun, Dave?

DAVID SCHNEIDER: It was in the beginning. And then after a while, it is, you know, companies change hands. And after 9/11, everything started going downhill. It was not the same. Customer service was not the same. Everybody was trying to save money. But I did that thirty-eight years out there. So I have seen a lot of changes with airplanes and, you know. I was out there the day that 9/11 happened. I can remember that. I was with my partner. And we were catering Continental Airlines that morning. And we, we would go out with two trucks. And you would have three, three flights in one truck, the meal carts or whatnot, (inaudible) carts. Two on another one. We had done four, one, two, three, four flights already, and were doing our last one. And it was a 737, I still remember. And it was a nice day, morning. And I remember seeing two of the Continental planes that we catered come on back to the gate. And then when we drove back, going to the alleyway to the kitchen, looked in the window where the, the, the cafeteria was. Everybody is standing there, watching the TV. And as I walked through, I could see the tower on fire. That is one thing that stands out, you know, working at the airport.

CLAIRE DAVIS: On the other hand, oral histories also preserve the culture of a society. Many of the women the students interviewed held jobs and told us about the societal norms they had to overcome to be successful. Many like Pat Allen found a work-around to the rules.

PAT ALLEN: Oh, well they were in the building business, and I had been around it. And I had a friend that was in real estate.

MAGGIE SHAW: Mm-hmm.

PAT ALLEN: And she kept begging me. She said, "You are just -- you know the business." [. . .] The whole thing. "You just need to go." So I finally went. I told my husband I was going to go to real estate school, and he said okay. [. . .] So I went, and then I took my boards, you know, things.

MAGGIE SHAW: Mm-hmm.

PAT ALLEN: And I passed them. [. . .] And what was so funny was my husband said -- and I passed my boards and everything. And I was mad, because I thought I should have gotten a better grade than I had got on one of them. And I was fussing about it.

MAGGIE SHAW: That would be me. (laughter)

PAT ALLEN: And I was saying something to him about it. And he said, "Well you are not going to sell? You are not going to work, are you?" And I said, "Well, I was thinking about it." And he said, "Well what are we going to do?" And I said, of course I had my baby, was Andrew, my son.

MAGGIE SHAW: Mm-hmm.

PAT ALLEN: My two girls were grown.

MAGGIE SHAW: Yeah.

PAT ALLEN: And I said, "You and Andrew are just going to have to learn that when I have to stay late, I will be late. Period."

MAGGIE SHAW: Nice! (laughter)

PAT ALLEN: They adjusted fairly well.

MAGGIE SHAW: That is a big deal in the 1950s!

PAT ALLEN: That is right, for me. But that was another thing. I went to get my own...bank account.

MAGGIE SHAW: That is a big deal. How was that?

PAT ALLEN: They wanted my husband to sign for it, and I said, "No." And they said, "Well we have to have, we have to have your husband's signature." And I said, "Well I will tell you what." And I was at the bank, and it just happened that one of my friends' son was a lawyer for that bank. [. . .] I told him, I said, "Well, I can just call Mr. Womstein and see if he will give me the bank thing." They said, "That will not be necessary."

MAGGIE SHAW: Wow!

PAT ALLEN: I learned to take up for myself.

MAGGIE SHAW: Yeah you did.

PAT ALLEN: And see, some of the girls that were a little bit older than me, they kept telling me, "You need to get something so-and-so done, you need to get so-and-so done." Because, really, women, women were not, were -- I was -- they were second, in second place.

MAGGIE SHAW: Yeah.

PAT ALLEN: They are not now.

MAGGIE SHAW: You know it.

CLAIRE DAVIS: I wish we had time to go into all the stories we collected. Judy Pittman's experience owning her own clothing store, Marianne Dreyspring's relationships with the people she used to counsel, and Thelma Jackson's adjustment to urban life as she taught home ec skills at YMCAs all spoke volumes about the people they are and how they lived their lives according to the values they were taught as children. Listening to these stories as I prepared this episode made me realize how many vibrant, interesting people can live in one apartment complex downtown, and I only got to meet them over recordings. I can't imagine what a blessing it is to the students in the project, who are continuing to meet with their interview partner for the rest of this semester.

Which brings me back to Mia's interview. Since she's worked with us before on more academic research projects, I also got to ask her what stood out to her from this project, and her answer exemplifies one of the reasons we began this project at all: to start conversations.

MIA OWENS: I think overall I'm just grateful that you guys had this project, and I got to just experience that through getting to go to Episcopal Place and getting to get to know the people there. [. . .] It's interesting to hear how they still have uncertainties about things, and they still have things they want to do, and they still have, you know, dreams they want to achieve, and I think that's just really encouraging. And I think it's just cool just to be able to be, like to hear about their experiences and to be encouraged by whatever's

going to come after college because they've lived through that, and they have all this advice that they can share with you (laughs), and they're so happy that we're interested in getting to know them. I think that's what surprised me the most, was when she was talking about how she was like really glad that I treated her as a person, because I guess that you don't... if you don't have family nearby, or if you're just like living in this community, you kinda feel isolated. [. . .] And so getting to hear that she was really, like, flattered by the fact that we were willing to go and talk to them, I just thought it was such a simple thing to do, but I guess it was a little abnormal for her because there aren't a ton of resources that bridge the gap between those two like age groups. [. . .] But being able to have started that relationship and then the possibility of having that continue is just - I think that's so cool because it's not, we didn't just come and say, "Oh, we're doing this project...okay, bye," it's something that I think could potentially become a lasting relationship or is kind of a, is a reciprocal thing, it's not us as Samford or as STORI coming in and just like getting a story and like leaving, it's something that's definitely more relational.

[fade into conversation between MIA OWENS and THELMA JACKSON]

MIA OWENS: We would, I remember when the scuppernongs were in season, and we'd, you know, pick them, and you were supposed to eat them--

THELMA JACKSON: Yeah.

MIA OWENS: --but you couldn't eat the skin.

(laughter)

MIA OWENS: Because they were too tough.

THELMA JACKSON: Yeah! Picked them off the vine and eat them. And I was eating cucumbers the other day. And, uh, I thought about, Daddy used to pull them off the vine, wipe it off on his shirt tail, and bite it, start eating it. Uh-huh.

MIA OWENS: Yeah. And then for the okra, I remember, they had to, I think my grandfather wore gloves, because...

[fade out]

CLAIRE DAVIS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Sam.wav. Until you hear from us again, make waves!

CLAIRE DAVIS: Our theme was written and produced by Samford student Kerry Joiner. The interview with Mia Owens was conducted by Claire Davis. The interview with Thelma Jackson was conducted by Mia Owens. The interview with Pat Allen was conducted by Maggie Shaw. The interview with Judy Pittman was conducted by Nathan Saab. The interview with David Schneider and Marianne Dreyspring was conducted by Julieanne Jorgenson. This project could not have been done without the Alabama Humanities Foundation. Special thanks to their help funding the project, as well as to Samford's Mann Center for Ethics in organizing the cadre portion of this project. This episode was written and produced by Michelle Little and Claire Davis. This is a Samford Traditions and Oral History Recording Initiative Production. For more information on our program, you can find our page on the Samford website or follow us on social media at Facebook and Instagram at Samford_STORI and on Twitter at SU_STORI.

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