Interview with Juanita Waiters Clarke

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Birmingham (Ala.)

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Ortiz: Mrs. Clarke, can you tell me about the area that you were born and when you were born and a little bit about the community that you grew up in.

Clarke: I was born in Forkland, Alabama, in 1923, September 29, 1923. I don't remember anything. My first memories were of Birmingham when I was about four, but I spent much time in Forkland after that and I know what it was.

My mother's father lived on twenty acres of land adjacent to, it must have been my grandmother's land, because next to it were about two other tracts of twenty acres, and two of my grandmother's sisters lived on those. I got to know both of those very well, but my grandmother was dead by the time I went to visit down there. My grandfather was pastor of the church in the community, a Methodist church, and he had a small farm
there. He had married again. The other sisters lived on adjacent land with their children and husbands and family.

Ortiz: What county is Forkland in?

Clarke: Forkland is in Greene County.

Ortiz: In Greene County, Alabama.

Clarke: Yes.

Ortiz: Did your mother's father own the twenty acres?

Clarke: Yes, he owned the twenty acres, and I just assumed put together that they were originally somehow--I know, as a matter of fact, that it was my grandmother's land, because he was from some other place, and it was only recently that we found some relatives of his and we know basically where he came from. But he was on my grandmother's land, and evidently the twenty acres were left to each one of the daughters, because they all had twenty acres right there together.

Ortiz: It was kind of an inheritance?

Clarke: Well, my grandmother, she must have been a slave or
right out of slavery. I just imagine that the master must have given it. I don't know how they got the twenty acres, but each one of the daughters had twenty acres.

My grandmother was also a teacher. She had a teacher's certificate. I have the certificates at home now. My grandfather was, too. She earned $25 a month, and he only earned $15. But I have the teacher's certificates that I show to my students in Materials and Methods of Teaching class and History and Philosophy of Education class that I would show to them. You read the contract and you see all the rules and regulations for women who were teaching back in those days. That's about all the history I know about that place.

Ortiz: Did your grandmother used to, would she tell you stories when you were a child about her upbringing?

Clarke: No. I really didn't get to meet this grandmother. She was already dead when I went much later. I guess I must have been about from five or six on, and I had a step-grandmother then.

But now, I spent some time with my paternal grandmother over in Sumter County when I was about five. My first memories were of Birmingham, because that's where I was, right here in Birmingham over on Ena Ridge [phonetic]. But my mother sent us to Sumter County to live with my paternal grandmother when I was
about four or five years old, and we spent several years there, and those were my earliest memories.

She had a big farm, about 300-and-some acres, with a lot of cows and horses, and she ran the farm by herself. My mother and father, there was a house out from the big house where they had lived and there were some other houses around where people, some of them were stepchildren and all and their families, and they helped her with the farm. We had a good time running all around. There was one horse that we could ride, and there was one cow that we could milk who wouldn't kick us. We were from the city, so we had a good time those few years running around the farm, and those were some of my fondest memories. That was in Sumter County, right off from Demopolis, about three miles from Demopolis, Alabama, and it was called something like McDonald's Chapel or something like that.

**Ortiz:** What kinds of responsibilities did you have when you were living there?

**Clarke:** When I was living there, there were three of us. My brother was the youngest, I was the middle, and my sister was the oldest. She had most of the responsibilities. She helped my grandmother do everything. My brother and I mostly played. They had a hard time keeping up with us, because we were always running through the pastures and that kind of thing.
I don't remember any special responsibilities, except maybe sweeping the yard. We used brushes to sweep the yard to keep it clean. My grandmother wore a long skirt. We picked the cotton and things like that, but we didn't really have any duties related to that. But she would show us how to milk the cow and let us do it. There was one horse that I told you that we could ride. The horse was gentle, wouldn't throw us or anything, and we could play with that horse. We could help pick cotton, but we didn't have to, but we would go out there and pick it some.

My sister, as a matter of fact, when my grandmother, I guess she wasn't feeling well after a while, my father came and got my brother and I and took us to Chicago, but left my sister there to help Grandma, because she was a big help to Grandma, but we weren't.

Ortiz: Your grandmother was running this farm, 300 acres.

Clarke: Yes, she sure was.

Ortiz: It must have been quite a burden.

Clarke: And she had big crops. I remember when she got the sugar cane, and when she would process that, she had some men to come. They put the sugar cane in big bunches and they had a tub up under it, and they had ropes and horses to go around. The
man would drive the horses around so the ropes would squeeze the sugar cane. Juice would fall down into the pan underneath, and that's the way they harvested, made the syrup from that.

She would have hog killing days, when the men would come and help her kill the hogs, and they would skin them and all. So we really did get an education in those few years. I doubt if I would have been very smart had I not had that experience, because we learned so many things. We didn't know anything at all about a farm or anything like that, but we saw the whole process through that.

She let us have a little garden so that we did plant seeds and all. She had a garden. She was very patient with us. She taught us a great deal. She had lots of African sayings and all. When we were sick, we would have to go to bed and she'd take a flannel cloth and put it in something, camphor or something, and put it over our chests. She was the doctor and all. We never had a doctor. She had little roots and different things for you to take if you had a fever or if you had this. She had something to cure it. She had little sayings for everything. She said, "See a penny, pick it up. All the day you'll have good luck." Right now I still say that. And sayings for everything.

**Ortiz:** What other kinds of sayings?
Clarke: Let's see. It's hard to think of just all of them right off, but she had them for just about everything. She also had a parlor where she had all kinds of books and all and all kinds of little interesting whatnots and all. We weren't supposed to go in there, but anytime we found the door open, naturally we would go in there and we'd just sit in there and read the books and look through all her things, until she would come and put us out because she didn't want us in there too much. She kept it locked. It was the parlor and it was for company, and she had all her important things in there.

Like she wore a long skirt, I was saying. We thought it was most amazing that Grandma didn't have to go to the bathroom. She'd just pull her skirt out like that and urinate and it'd go straight down. She was quite a wizard.

The thing of it is, though, when she would harvest her crops and take it to market, she was never satisfied with the prices she got. Although she worked very hard and she had the harvest, bring it in and all, I think she went deeper into debt or something. She talked about the mortgage. And eventually it became too much for her, and I think that's when she had my father come get the two of us and she kept my sister with her. After we were up there for a short time, we heard that she was on the way up there with my sister, but she didn't make it very far. She became ill. She stopped in York, Alabama, and she died there, and then my parents went and got my sister. So she
had a pretty tough time trying to run it by herself, as I look back.

**Ortiz:** When you would go into the parlor and sneak in and read the books, do you remember what kinds of books were in there?

**Clarke:** Oh, we read all kinds of little Bible stories and things like that. I guess I read just about all, because I could--I started to school there. There was a church just a few miles from the house, and it was on the property. My grandfather had been a minister when he ran the farm, and I'm sure they were very prosperous back in those days, but now he had been dead for quite some time. I say he was prosperous because they had a big farm there, and my father did go to Tuskegee, and that was unusual. He didn't graduate, but he did go there. I know that was unusual for most black people, so they were very prosperous on that farm when my grandfather was there.

Plus, he was the pastor of the church, and the church was still there. We all had to go to the church every Sunday, and we started school there. It was just one big room, and we learned to read while we were there. I remember getting a book and taking it under a tree that day after school and I read the book all the way through that first day, that little primer. We also read all of Grandma's books. I think that was the most
I don't think I've done that much reading. Well, I have, but that was the basis, I think, for most of my knowledge, reading all of those little Bible stories and all that she had in there. She just had so many treasures in there like that.

Then besides that, she had little sayings for everything about what made you rich. I've forgotten. They will come to me from time to time, but to just sit here and think of them. But about rich man, poor man, all kinds of little sayings like that that you remember that would fit just about everything, I guess.

Ortiz: You mentioned earlier that she also, some of the sayings came from African culture. Did she talk about that, too?

Clarke: I said that because she did dig up roots and things and she would make different kinds of little poultices to put on your chest and to put on injuries. She had little drinks that she would make from roots and different things that we would drink. It was only after that that I connected it with African culture, but I'm sure that that's what it was, plus the sayings and all that.

Ortiz: When you went there originally, you were about four or five.
Clarke: I remember being four in Birmingham, so, yes, I was four or five. In Chicago, I remember I was around eight, so we stayed there a few years, from the time I was four or five until I was about eight.

Ortiz: Did her family, other family members, help her harvest?

Clarke: She had some stepsons and all. They were her husband's children who lived out in a couple houses out on the kind of fringes of the property, and they would come in and help some. I think most of her help really was hired help. They may have been neighbors, because they would come, and the ones who came for the sugar cane were a certain group of men and then another group would come for the hog killings and all. So it may have been that different farms the people would come and do that, but I do remember she would have these men to come, and they were not the men who lived or the people who lived in those houses. They helped with the cotton picking and all that.

Ortiz: So you moved back with your parents and then went to Chicago?

Clarke: No. My father was in Chicago. My mother and father were separated. My first memories were with my mother, my sister, my brother, and my mother in Birmingham. I don't know
whether my mother became ill or what, but she sent us to stay with Grandma. My father was still in Chicago. He came and got us and took us there, though, and then he went on to Chicago. He had a car. He had a little convertible automobile, and he would come to see us and we'd run to meet him.

Finally, she sent the two of us with him to Chicago. He took us to Chicago. He had a sister there who helped out at first, and then later on we just stayed with him. That was the time of the Depression, and he was doing all right when we first got there, but after we were there a little while, he had trouble finding work. He showed us the corner where he stayed. He stood there waiting for work. Eventually, he developed tuberculosis and he died there. He never did go back to the South.

During that time, my grandmother died coming up there. My mother came. We were playing with my father. He was playing with us on the bed, playing with us. We didn't know what was going on. My mother came in. She came in, she came to get us. I don't know whether he was sick right then, because shortly after then he did go to the hospital, and when we went to see him, he had lost a lot of weight, and we never saw him again after that. He died of tuberculosis. But she came in and she said she came to get us, and he said, "Well, I guess I'll go, too." So they went back together then. But then shortly after that he went to the hospital and he died. And that was during
the Depression.

I thought back on that. I thought, he developed tuberculosis, but actually my brother and I always ate well. We didn't realize that we were that bad off. So he took very good care of us till my mother came.

Ortiz: And then so you moved back down to Birmingham.

Clarke: My mother came and got us and took us back to Birmingham, yes.

Ortiz: What was life like growing up in Birmingham?

Clarke: In Birmingham, we moved a lot. I remember that little house we had, a shack, an old wooden house that went straight back, on 12th Street between 7th and 8th Avenue in Birmingham. It was right across from the Elks Rest. We lived in there, and we went to Lincoln Elementary School. I was in the fourth grade. Sometimes Mama would have trouble paying the rent, but the man would let her by a lot. And then I remember a man at the Elks Rest would give us Coca-Colas, and he would always give me a nickel. So people were nice. But we didn't stay there very long. I found out later that the rent man, who was being nice to my mother, was the father of my husband that I married later on.
Ortiz: Really?

Clarke: Uh-huh. Mr. Clarke, Peter Clarke.

Ortiz: Interesting.

Clarke: Uh-huh. Well, that's another story. But when we left there, we moved to a big house up on Avenue D and 27th Street on the south side. That was a great big house, and we went to Lane Elementary School. That was down on 18th Street and about 4th Avenue South. That was a pretty long walk.

But in the house, the thing that was important to me was, it was an old house and it had a sewing machine up in the attic, and I used to go up there and fool with the sewing machine. I'd get some oil and oil it, and I finally learned how to peddle it, and I'd just go up there and stay for hours and hours playing with that sewing machine.

When I got to the fifth grade in school, my sewing teacher asked, "Who can operate a sewing machine?" because they were all treadle like that. I raised my hand up, and I was the only one with my hand up. So sewing has been very important to me throughout my life. As a matter of fact, I majored in home economics in college because I wanted to be a sewing teacher, because I found that sewing machine up there.
Ortiz: What kind of school was Lane Elementary School? Can you tell me a little bit about it.

Clarke: It was a small black elementary school, with eight grades. We had a principal. His name was Bill Moore. He was kind of stern, and he was a strong disciplinarian. It's very embarrassing, but he did paddle me one time. He had a big belt, and I've forgotten what I did, but it was very embarrassing. You had to go in there and lean down while he gave me about five licks. They didn't really hurt, but it was very embarrassing and I didn't tell anybody about it. So that's the way the schools were, actually.

Ortiz: The teachers and the principal of that school were black?

Clarke: Black, yes, all black. My sewing teacher, after I could sew, she lived in North Birmingham, and I spent a lot of time in her class sewing, and whenever I could be out of another class, I was in there, too.

I would walk over to her house. She lived in North Birmingham, and that's all the way on the other side of town. But during the summer I would walk over there and stay over there as long as I wanted to and became a member of their
family, more or less. She's still a good friend of mine. She lives in Washington, in Seattle, Washington, now, after she retired. But she's still a good friend of mine, and I was basically a member of their family. That was my second home over there.

She was my sewing teacher, and we started taking sewing in the fifth grade. She would give me some of her dresses made out of nice material, and I'd cut them down and make dresses for myself and stuff like that, and also would give me material sometimes. Her sister was a seamstress, too. I'd go over there and help her sister, and I guess I learned more about dressmaking by going over there helping her sister do handwork and stuff.

**Ortiz:** So you really became quite a seamstress in your own right, really.

**Clarke:** Yeah. Not making any money at it, but I made all of my clothes and all of my daughters'. I have four daughters now, and I'd sew for them, too, and my mother and my sister and all. I still have lots of material. I'm always making something. That's my main hobby.

**Ortiz:** During this time when you were at Lane Elementary School, was your mother working outside of the home?
Clarke: My mother, maybe not so much then. There was some kind of welfare program where she supervised a playground, and that helped her get through. We would go to the playground every day, and it gave her enough money to pay the rent and to provide food.

Basically, our diets all the way through school was basically peas, beets, or greens or something like that and cornbread, and very seldom much meat or anything like that. Actually, we ate once a day, and that was dinner. We could cook grits or something like that in the morning for breakfast, but you had to make a fire and all that, so we'd always skip breakfast. I don't understand now how we were able to get up in the morning, go to school, and especially high school and walk all the way to Parker and walk back, and eat dinner and that was all. We didn't have any lunch money or anything, and still do all right.

Ortiz: So you were going to Parker. What year did you start at Parker?

Clarke: Let's see. What year? It must have been around 1936.

Ortiz: Was Dr. Parker still there?
Ortiz: Yes, he was principal.

Ortiz: I've heard a lot of different stories about him. Do you remember your perception of Dr. Parker at that time when you were going to school?

Clarke: Well, you know, there were so many of us. The only contact I had with him was just seeing him sometimes. The school was well run, and everybody was very proud of it. We wore a uniform, a blue uniform. Girls had to wear little dresses and all. Conduct was exemplary or whatever. There was a big band, we had a big band, a big marching band.

The teachers there were revered by everybody and everybody in Birmingham knew them by name, and Dr. Parker and all of the teachers were some of the most important people in Birmingham. Anybody who worked at Parker, everybody in Birmingham knew who they were and thought they were very special people. Later, one of my sister-in-laws, Mary Alice Clarke, was teaching there. She taught me. She lives over in Titusville [phonetic] now. She was one of the teachers, and one of her sisters taught there, too. And then the Joneses. But if you taught at Parker High School, you were very, very special to the black community and looked up to as, you know, just the tops.

Ortiz: What kind of subjects did you concentrate on at Parker?
What were the most important to you?

Clarke: Oh, well, I always like English especially. After we were there about a year and a half, though, they opened up Homewood High School down here on the south side, over on the south side, and we went there for one semester.

Oh, I loved math. I remember thinking myself, "Oh, this is fun. But you know what, I don't know what I'll do with that." I didn't know how it would help, and anything that much fun, I just didn't see any practical application for it. I think about that all the time now. But I loved it. But when I went to college, I majored in home economics, because in those times you thought of you were going to get married, and you didn't see many women going into careers or anything, so I didn't think in terms of that. I said, "Well, I'm going to have to work, but if I major in home economics, I can work and then I can get married, too." And that's what I majored in.

Ortiz: Where did you go to college at?

Clarke: At Xavier University in New Orleans. The reason why, when I was at Parker, I always knew that I wanted to go to college, and when I was at Parker, there were so many students there that I knew that if I went to college I would have to get a scholarship, because I didn't have any money.
There was a Catholic school right across from me, and there were not many students over there. I would go to church over there sometimes, and I asked the priest if I could come to school over there without paying any tuition, and he told me I could. I decided that I would rather go to school over there because I would have a much better chance of getting a scholarship than I would in a high school where they had thousands of students there, and I chose to go over there. My sister and brother went over there, too.

We had two coaches from Xavier, a basketball coach and a football coach were from Xavier. I was writing an application out. What I did was apply to nursing school, because I knew that you could go there and not have to pay any tuition, and they would even give you a stipend. So I sent an application in for my sister and for me to St. Mary's Nursing School in St. Louis. And then I applied at Xavier, but I didn't know whether I would get anything or not.

It just happened that while I was working on my application, Mr. Cole [phonetic] came by. That was the basketball coach. He was one of the Chicago Five at Xavier. That was real famous. He would have been a professional basketball player, all five of them, had we had integration, because they were outstanding. Anyhow, he put a note in it and sealed it up. I didn't know what it said, but I got a scholarship.
I had an uncle, my father's brother, lived in Gary, Indiana, and when we were in Chicago, he took us over there one time to visit Uncle Britten [phonetic]. Uncle Britten hadn't gone beyond the third grade at home in Sumter County, and I'd never seen him before then, because he was older than my father. My father was much younger. But he lived in a house with a couple of apartments to it, and he worked in the steel mills. He wore a suit and he had a gold watch, and I just thought he was--you know. Well, I liked him.

So I would always write to him. I never received an answer at that time, but I would write to him, and especially after my father died. I would write and tell him about what my grades were and that I was going to school. I guess secretly I was thinking he would help me go to school, but I would tell him everything.

So when I did get that partial scholarship, I got a letter from him, and he asked me how much it would cost for me to go to college. I said, "Well, he's never gone beyond the third grade (because he could barely write). I'm going to make it as low as possible, but he's not going to hardly want to give me any money when he gets this."

But I told him. It wasn't that much, because I got, I think, my tuition. I had something like a $50 a semester scholarship, and I didn't need a whole lot more than that to go with it. I needed something for rooming and books and stuff
like that. So I told him. It might have been about 50 or 60 more dollars, so I wrote and told him that, and I got a fat letter with cash money in it. He sent that, and that's how I went to school.

Plus, my other coach was from New Orleans, and he arranged for me to live with his family while I was there. So I'd always go down there and live with his family, and then I talked to the nuns about a job and get a job baby-sitting, and that would take care of my room and board and maybe about $2.00 a week, and that would give me car fare to get to school and back. So that's how I worked that out.

**Ortiz:** What was the name of the high school in Birmingham, the Catholic?

**Clarke:** That was Immaculata High School. It's now Our Lady of Fatima, and they don't have the high school anymore. They have the elementary school. They just had a reunion a couple of weeks ago.

**Ortiz:** And that was right across from Parker?

**Clarke:** No, that was right across from where we lived on the south side, on 17th Street and Avenue F, over there were UAB is now. The Catholic church and the school were right over there.
Ortiz: So you graduated from that high school.

Clarke: From that high school, yes.

Ortiz: How old were you when you graduated?

Clarke: I was sixteen.

Ortiz: So it must have been quite a change. You were sixteen and you moved to New Orleans to go to school. That must have been quite a different milieu.

Clarke: Well, that's a Catholic school, too, now. There were nuns there. And Mr. Edison [phonetic], who was our coach and our science teacher, his family was there. I stayed with them. They became like a family to me. I'd stay with them. And then being on a Catholic campus, it wasn't that large and I got to know people, and I felt perfectly at home.

And then I had a mission. I mean, my job was to go to school. I knew I had to take all the classes that they would allow me to take each semester and that I had my budget. I didn't have any backing, except my uncle sent me that money. I didn't know how long that would last. I packed up my trunk and get on a train. I was glad to go, and I was never--there were
no dormitories at Xavier at the time, either. You either boarded in a house with some other girls close by that was approved by the nuns.

When I was ready for a job, I would go ask them about a job, and they would place me with a nice family. I know once it was a lawyer and his wife, a young couple, and they had two little children. I had to cook, and I had a nice room where I could study. I would have to cook, prepare the meals and all, and look after the children, and if they went out anyplace, I was there to keep the children, and it worked out just fine. I fit right in with the family.

You just had a mission. I mean, I did what I was there to do, and it worked out just fine. I know I had to graduate in four years. I always made plans around that. I found out later that had I really hadn't been so set on four years I could have finished in three, because I could have gone to summer school two summers. But I just thought it was four years, and that's what I did.

**Ortiz:** You majored in home economics.

**Clarke:** Home economics, yes.

**Ortiz:** So you graduated in about 1943?
Clarke: '44.

Ortiz: What were your plans at that point?

Clarke: The thing of it is, I was so set on going to college and graduating that, except for teaching—-I was prepared to teach. I said sometimes that I was going to be a dietician, but I really made no moves to do anything to get into dietetics. I could have.

I came back home, and what I found was that I couldn't find a job, because, see, people who taught in the public schools then kept those jobs. I mean, they didn't move around or anything, and there were very few vacancies. I found unless you knew somebody to help you get a job, you couldn't just apply and get one.

I had been working at the hospital as a nurse's aide in the summertime, and that's where I was, right back there. I even saw a couple of other college graduates were there. I couldn't get a job at all. We went to work at seven, and we had a three-hour break, and we worked till seven at night. We bathed the patients. They trained us, and we did all of the work that the nurses did, changed the beds with the patients in them and all.

I think we made $10 or $15 a week or something like that, and I would have to wiggle my toes at night to get the blood circulating. There were actually just no other jobs, because
most people just would not—you were not going to just walk into a job like anybody else and get one, because we were in segregation.

I had a friend from Philadelphia whose father was—and I didn't know anybody important to help me get a job. Her father was a supervisor at the post office, and I wrote her a letter. Her name is Julia Lee [phonetic]. I wrote Julia a letter and asked her, "Since your father is a supervisor in the post office, if I came up there, do you think he could get me a job?"

She wrote back and said, "Yes."

So I went to Philadelphia to Julia's, and Julia's father got me a job. They were a Catholic family, too. They got me a job and they helped me find a place to stay. So I stayed there for two years and worked in the post office. People would say, "How did you come up here and get a job just like that?" It was because I had to use connections. That's how bad it was. Even if you got an education, you weren't necessarily going to get a job.

Later on, my husband, I had met my husband when I was at home. He was in the navy. I would see him when he came down to New York sometimes. I'd go to New York, and I was married while I was up there working in the post office. He played music for a while. I went to New York, and we stayed in New York for a while. I got pregnant, so he decided that he was going to give up music and go back home. I tell everybody it was not my idea,
it was his idea. But we came back home, had no trouble getting a job teaching, because all his family folks were well known and his sisters--

Ortiz: In Birmingham?

Clarke: Yes. And his sisters were teachers, and that's the way it went. You had to know somebody.

Ortiz: Where did you first meet your husband at?

Clarke: I met him at my house. Actually, I met his brother-in-law when I was out at what they call, I think it was--it was a big house where they had a music box and all and people would come in and they'd talk and they'd play the Victrola and dance and talk and stuff like that.

I met this Woodrow Young, was his name, and we talked and talked and talked, and he took me home. He asked if he could come back to see me, and I asked if he was married.

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Well, I don't go out with married men."

He said, "Well, I have somebody I want you to meet."

And so he came over there. Chuck was on furlough. He brought Chuck over to my house. Mama found out that his father was our rent man when we first moved back to Birmingham and she
knew him.

And by the way, he was one of those people who started that Penny Savers Bank that they had way back, my husband's father, Peter Clarke. My children and my grandchildren and all, they are very proud of that fact that he pioneered in that. They have a picture that they had blown up with him standing there looking proud with the others.

**Ortiz:** I've seen that picture.

**Clarke:** You may have seen that picture. He's on that.

**Ortiz:** They're inside the building and they're behind the booths.

**Clarke:** Yes. He's really, I think, the central figure there, standing up there with his chest out. Well, that's my husband's father. They're all very proud of that.

But I met Chuck then. Later on when I went to Philadelphia, he would come down and visit me sometimes, and we continued the relationship.

**Ortiz:** Did your mother remarry during this period of time?

**Clarke:** No, she never did. Well, she did later on. She had a
job at the Famous Theater. She took up tickets. And also at the Carver Theater. She worked there. That was the regular job that she had after we left. She spent many years working selling the tickets at the Famous Theater and the Carver Theater. She had been a teacher herself back in Forkland years ago. To teach then, you only had to finish about the ninth grade or something like that. She had attended Barber Memorial School [phonetic] or something like that, but she had a teaching certificate, too, she and her mother did, too, years ago in Forkland.

**Ortiz:** She went up to ninth grade?

**Clarke:** Yes. So she was considered educated and taught school down there.

**Ortiz:** When you moved back to Birmingham, it was about 1946, with your husband, '46?

**Clarke:** Let's see. Yes. We were married in 1946 and came shortly after that, probably that same year or a little later in the year, around 1946, '47.

**Ortiz:** Did you notice changes in Birmingham when you came back as opposed to when you'd been there before?
Clarke: Well, it was better for me because I was able to get a job, but I attribute that more to the fact that his sisters and brothers knew the principals and everybody in the school and they had more influence, and they would just hire you. The reason why I couldn't get a job before was because I didn't know anybody. I didn't have the connections to get a job. I found out they just don't hire—you know, they only have so many jobs, and if the principal recommends you to another principal or somebody who's been teaching in the school a long time recommends you, you get the job. I couldn't get one before that. It's not that way now. All our students get jobs when they go down to apply. But it was pretty hard to get a job there, because one thing, teachers stayed in those jobs. They didn't have any other job, so once they had a job, they stayed there. So there were just not that many vacancies. And those few that there were, I guess they had relatives and friends who would get them.

Ortiz: Where were you living when you moved back to Birmingham?

Clarke: When we moved back to Birmingham, originally we moved in with my husband's folks, all the daughters and all. They had a big house on 11th Avenue, and of them lived there with their husbands and all. Only his mother. His father was dead, and so
the daughters were there. That was the home house, and we stayed there until we could find a place. We found an apartment up at Dr. Lacy's [phonetic] house. He had been a dentist, and he was living there by himself, except for his son, who had a wife. He had built two little apartments like, and we took one of them.

**Ortiz:** Dr. Lacy was black?

**Clarke:** Black, yes, but had been a dentist for many years and had a big house.

**Ortiz:** At this point, are you still working—did you go back to working at the hospital?

**Clarke:** I started teaching. I taught at Hooper City [phonetic], taught the seventh grade at Hooper City High School for a year. And then I became pregnant, and when you become pregnant, you have to resign and stay off for two years. Then after that child was born, then I had a job in the city. Now, where was that? Maybe I chose not to go to the city, I guess, because if you got pregnant in the city, you had to resign.

They were building Holy Family High School out in Ensly, and I applied there. I stopped working for a long time. I have five children. When my children were old enough and I started
taking them to school, they were building this school, Holy
Family in Ensly, and they were building a home economics room.
I said, "Well, I'm going to apply here, because they don't care
whether you're pregnant or not." I applied there, and they
hired me there, and I taught there for about seventeen years.

Ortiz: Was that a public school?

Clarke: No, a Catholic school. It's still there out there in
Ensly. I think they had two lay teachers, a biology teacher who
was a coach, and I was the English teacher, sophomore/junior
English teacher, and the guidance counselor and home economics
teacher, when they had home economics, but they started cutting
that out and I ended up an English teacher.

Ortiz: Were you going to a Catholic church at that time?

Clarke: Yes.

Ortiz: Which church was that?

Clarke: Our Lady Queen of the Universe. I had been going back
to Our Lady of Fatima, Immaculata, the same one, but Father--
Clarke: He was doing street preaching over in that community over there by us, so that he started a church over there, a mission. And so I started going to the street preaching, and then when we built the church up there, then I started attending there.

Ortiz: Where would you go during this period of time, say, you and your husband, when you had some spare time?

Clarke: Where would we go? My husband was a musician. He played a lot. So I guess it would be to—I would go by myself or with somebody else, but we would go to hear them play, you know, dances and different things like that. I guess that was the most important social activity that we had.

I was a member of a sorority, and we had a dance once a year. You would invite the same people, and they'd sit around the table. They'd bring food and eat. Most of the sororities and fraternities had dances regularly.

Sometimes they played at the club. A. G. Gastors [phonetic] had a club right down here. They would play there, and we would go there and listen to the music. He would play with lots of different bands. So that was the main thing we did. Other than that, we went to the movies. We saw the Carver Theater [unclear]. We saw all the—-they showed the black
movies. Well, throughout high school that was one of the main things we did. We saw all of the movies at the Famous Theater--Jacksons, Byron [phonetic], and anybody with a black movie, Bill Abram [phonetic]. Any black movie, we would go see that.

Ortiz: So you spent a lot of time around the Fourth Avenue area.

Clarke: Yeah. We would walk down there and go to the theater from the south side every Sunday. I was big, too. Father Smith was our priest, and we'd go around to the sacristy where Father was and whisper in his ear to give us our fare. He'd take it right out of the collection plate and give us our fare, and we'd walk to the movies.

See, it was a mission, and we would help clean up, help cook, go over there and, you know, answer the mail, work in the office. So I would say the Catholic church was really responsible for the mission, the Catholic mission, because Xavier, that school was opened by the Blessed Sacrament nuns, and their order was specifically to help educate blacks and Indians, and we got the very best education at every grade.

I had not had any sciences in high school or anything, but they taught it so well that I was able to do very well in that and was qualified to teach it when I left there. I took an English--well, I majored in home economics and certainly didn't
think I was prepared to be an English teacher. We had to take English every semester. That was their requirement. And so I ended up with sufficient hours in English to teach. I thought I couldn't teach, but I was a very good English teacher, outstanding English teacher, turned out to be. All my students could really write and all. I attribute that to Xavier, and I didn't know I was prepared to teach English.

**Ortiz:** When you were teaching English, what kinds of materials would you use?

**Clarke:** The nuns had been using a [unclear], so I followed it to the letter, mostly. But one of the things that made it most successful was that that was what they called dictation exercises. We'd get the grammar rules and all, punctuation rules, a certain number of them that the students would go over, and then at the beginning of each class we would have a dictation exercise. I kept my book, and that would be the roll call. That's the roll call.

One person goes to the board, everybody else at their seats would apply certain rules that we had gone over. We had about five sentences that I would dictate, and they'd write on every other line to make sure the sentence was written correctly, punctuated correctly and all, and then they'd exchange papers and correct each other's while we corrected it at the board. It
didn't take but a few minutes. And then they'd put the number correct on there, and that was the roll call.

By practicing like that, and then we'd go on with writing. Of course, we started with the sentences and then the paragraphs and then we end up with the critical paper and then the research paper. And then we had some novels to read. I'd have to figure out unique ways to teach the sophomores, because [unclear] and it's hot summertime. So we'd do things like pick out little parts, a scene up in the beginning and in the middle and toward the end, and get a group of students to rehearse and do a drama presentation on this part and on this part and this part. Then they'd do that, and they got to be real good at it. They wouldn't mind reading it if you do things like that.

But I think that dictation exercise made all of them very, very good. John Rogers [phonetic] in the state legislature now, he was one of my students. One of my students was deputy police chief. Naturally, I say to all of my students, but I tell them afterwards I said, "You can write anything now. You write this, you can write the critical paper, you can write, and you use the same techniques to write a whole book if you wanted to." And they were really good.

Besides, their parents picked up their report cards. We couldn't give the report cards to the students. Their parents had to come to a PTA meeting on Sunday, and we had an individual interview with each one of them as we gave them the report
cards. The parents would be looking and, "Oh, we'd like to see a better grade on that."

I remember I had one student that I thought he wasn't doing--his handwriting was poor, he was sloppy, and he didn't do it right, and I said to myself, "You're just going to get a D."

And then I thought, "What am I going to tell his father, when his father's looking at me, about that D? Well, I'll tell him I did this and I did that, and he still didn't get it." So I had to do this and that, and to my surprise, when I did this and that, the boy was doing just fine. So he needed that attention, and that taught me a lesson about that. Of course, I used that later with my students at Miles, too. I'd tell them that little story about that student. I remember him clearly. He was doing all right, but I was about to give him up.

Ortiz: Now, this was at the Catholic school, and these were primarily black students?

Clarke: They were all black students. The faculty, the nuns, were white, and when we had religion, we had a priest teaching religion, and they were white. But they were all black students, all black.

Ortiz: So you were one of the only black teachers?
Clarke: Not the only. We had a business teacher, a young man teaching business, and we had a biology teacher, who was also a coach, and he's the principal of a school out in Fairfield now, but he was the biology teacher/coach, Mr. Boykin [phonetic].

Ortiz: You were teaching there up to 1960--

Clarke: 1969. I guess I would have been there now, but I was recruited. I was really recruited by one of my students. She said she had come with her brother to pick up the card, and they needed somebody at Miles to teach English in a special program. They sent one of the students from Miles to come out there for me to interview, see if she could take my place, and they got me to go to Miles and teach in their program, and that's how I went there.

Ortiz: From '69 till--

Clarke: From '69 until I retired in 1986, but I'm still back out there, though, now. Since my husband died, I'm back out now.

Ortiz: I didn't write down the name of the school in Ensly. What was the name of the school in Ensly?
Clarke: Holy Family High School.

Ortiz: You said that that was a relatively newer school.

Clarke: They were just building it. I was taking my children to the elementary school and I saw them building that school, and that's how I got the idea that I would work there, because at least one more of my children was born while I was working there. See, I could just go on teaching there. Carol, that's my baby, she was born while I was working at Holy Family, the one who talked to you.

Ortiz: And you were teaching there throughout the fifties and sixties.

Clarke: Yes.

Ortiz: In Birmingham during those years in the fifties, what were the symbols of Jim Crow?

Clarke: Well, that was before the Civil Rights Movement. The main ones were, on the bus, the partition. Sometimes on some of them you could move to the back; sometimes they were stationary. But it had gotten so you could move back and forward and all. It was not a big issue in Birmingham so much, but in some of the
smaller towns, and I guess it all depended a lot on the bus
driver, too, on that. But in general, if it was crowded, you
would stand up, I mean you would be left standing because there
wouldn't be as much room. There would be more room to
accommodate the larger number of whites.

And then the signs on rest rooms and things and all kind of
public. Even water fountains. There were white fountains,
black fountains. Alabama Theater, we could not go to the
Alabama Theater. There were several. We went to the Famous and
the Carver, but those were the only ones we could go to. Now,
the Lew [phonetic] Theater you could go and sit upstairs. They
had a balcony way up high where we could go and see. But mostly
we just went to the Famous and the [Carver].

Then all of the colleges. I mean, the only college that
students could go to in Birmingham would have been Miles
College. I got my bus fare and rode out there and [unclear].
He came out and talked to me. I asked him for a scholarship,
but he told me he didn't have any money. So I was determined to
get one, and I did succeed. Now, of course, it's all different.

Ortiz: Did you have any personal experiences with segregation
that you can remember?

Clarke: Actually, I guess you'd say we were pretty docile or
whatever, but we just abided by the rules and were not all that
upset. I guess the main thing that I remember mostly was that the policemen, they were pretty hostile. I mean, they were not nice to us. I see that as the main thing that I noticed that I thought was bothersome.

**Ortiz:** I'm really curious about, you mentioned earlier your husband would play different places. Can you tell me some more about those places. Would he play in houses or in clubs?

**Clarke:** He played in clubs, he played for dances, and all like that. He had been in the navy band. That's all he did in the navy was play. He played with quite a few very outstanding musicians. I know a couple of them--well, at least one was a composer. Quite a few of them were from Birmingham, too, because we did produce some pretty outstanding musicians. So it was kind of like a fraternity or something among those musicians because they all knew each other. Wherever you go, all over the country, they were like brothers or something.

He had two older brothers, Pete. We have records where he was playing with Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald way back in the thirties. All of the Clarke brothers, I guess Pete was the first one up there, but he spent his whole life up in New York playing music with Duke Ellington and all of those. And then Richard was in the service, too, but when he came out--he's older than my husband--he also played in New York.
Then Chuck, when he got out of the service, played with [Charles] "Cootie" Williams, and that's where he was playing with "Cootie" Williams when I married him. But he didn't like being out on the road, and he just decided to give it up and come back to Birmingham. He taught band, and then he just played around locally. And then after that, he got a job in the post office and with Social Security. But he didn't like the lifestyle of being on the road, and he said he couldn't do that and have a family.

**Ortiz:** What were the best clubs to hear music at in Birmingham?

**Clarke:** In recent years or a long time ago?

**Ortiz:** Say in the forties and fifties.

**Clarke:** Forties and fifties. I'd say that this A. G. Gastors Club. That's where they played. They played regularly down there. Now, they had other clubs with little bands in them, but they weren't, you know, they were just—but I'd say that one was the main one I can think of. Other than that, they played dances. Back then, they mostly just played around different places, dances and things like that.

All the clubs, that was the major entertainment, I guess you could say. We had social clubs all over, and people would
have dances at the LR Hall [phonetic] and the Masonic Temple right over there. Those were the main places where we went to dances, and those were the black—whenever you were going to a dance, you were either going to the LR Hall or you were going to the Masonic Temple. Then they had some clubs located all around, but Chuck didn't play in those so much. They mostly had Victrolas or they may have a little group or somebody in there and maybe you'd drive out to the club. And cars were not all that plentiful, so you didn't frequent over there that often.

Ortiz: When did you and your husband get your first car?


Ortiz: Were there places in Birmingham that you didn't want to go that were considered like tough places?

Clarke: I don't really know of any like that then, because, as I say, even when I was young I could walk from the south side over there, but you'd be all the way over in north Birmingham. Nobody would bother me. If anything, people would look out for you. It was perfectly safe to go anywhere. And other black people, especially, they were almost like a member of the family or something. If a young person was doing something wrong, they'd correct you just like they knew you or something. That's
the way it was. No, we would go, for recreation we'd walk up to Burger [phonetic] and back. We'd hike up there and hike back.

It was the same, I'd say, basically with white people, too. Nobody bothered you. Sometimes you might witness a domestic fight or something like that. But, no, everything was--walking to school and back, groups of people walking to school, no fights, no anything. Everything was just peaceful. I'm sure there was some fights somewhere sometimes, but I don't remember any in particular. No, I don't, I sure don't.

When we were younger in Chicago sometimes, we were real little, I remember a couple of fights, but that wasn't anything but somebody picking on you and you'd turn around and go like this. But, no, I don't remember any--everybody was trying to make it the best way they could, I think, and neighbors kind of looked out for you, too, and even other people, teachers. Like I said, my teachers helped me with my clothes and different things like that.

We did the same thing at Holy Family, too. We had a boy there, a young man there who was staying with his grandmother, and he was the smartest boy in the class. His suits were too big and stuff like that. His name is Prince Thomas [phonetic].

He still writes to me and sends me flowers on Mother's Day. His grandmother died while he was in school, and when it came time for the junior prom, he didn't have any way to go to the prom. He didn't have any backing, for one thing. And another
thing, he didn't know how to dance.

So we got together. Somebody said, Wilda Dean [phonetic], her name was, she said, "Well, I'll teach him how to dance." She was very vivacious.

I said, "But we can't just teach him how to dance because he'll be embarrassed. So we'll have to open it up for everybody who doesn't know how to dance, because he isn't the only one who doesn't know how to dance."

So they announced, "Anybody who doesn't know how to dance, there's a dancing lesson in the home ec room."

So Prince came. He went and he practiced. Then we had to get him a tuxedo, we had to get him some shoes. We borrowed Chuck's tuxedo, because Chuck played music and he had one, and he was about his size. But anyhow, we got him to the prom.

Since I was the counselor on my free period, too, when he took the ACT, naturally when the scores came back he was invited to all these different colleges, and so we discussed what college he probably ought to go to. We chose Berea because it wasn't too big and we thought it was one of the—-it was integrated, and it ought to be, but it wasn't too far away and kind of small, and so we suggested that he go there. We had to help him get some pants and some shirts and different things to go. But he went.

Years later, when he was married, he wrote me a letter, thanking me, and he told me that he was married to an insurance
underwriter. They live on Medicine Lane [phonetic] in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, so it's home. He's deputy to the attorney general of the state of Pennsylvania. He's a lawyer. He invited me to his son's graduation, except I had a nephew who was graduating from Duke and I went to his graduation at the same time. But his son was graduating from the University of Pittsburgh, one of those big colleges up there, so I never did get a chance to see him. He called recently and left a message on the answering machine and told me it was good to hear my voice. But he sends me flowers sometimes on Mother's Day and things like that, although I don't see him.

He also made long telephone calls to tell me about, you know, what he experienced at the college. He wrote a letter once and told us--he hadn't been dating in high school, no social skills, but he wrote this letter and said he was dating, and he was dating a white girl. So I told the business teacher--he was a young man--I told him to write him a letter and tell him the facts of life. I don't know what he told him, but he wrote him a letter, said, you know, he might want to take it easy and don't go too far all at once. He got through it just fine.

Ortiz: At Holy Family, how were the relations between the teachers, between you and the other teachers?
Clarke: Now, the nuns lived together and all of that, but they all--just fine.

I never had to discipline anybody, because the principal was kind of stern, and she didn't bother anybody much. But whenever I had a problem with a student, I said, "Would you wait outside the door until I can speak to you?" I put him out in the hall, and he'd stand out there until I can get to him. He was all afraid the principal was going to see him. That's all I ever had to do, and they'd just beg to get back in.

Every once in a while I'd walk over there and say, "Well, now, [unclear]." And then he's just dying to get back in because he so afraid that Sister Miriam [phonetic] was going to see him out here. I don't think she would have done anything that much, but she just looked stern.

They had it set up so that their parents were in contact, because they were paying tuition and they were making a sacrifice for them to come, and they just better not get in any trouble with the principal.

But they were just beautiful people to work with, always professional and not that warm or anything, but they always gave you anything you needed to work with.

I had been taught by nuns in high school when I went there. They were always very good teachers and devoted teachers. I mean, they taught. That was their main thing. They didn't have anything else. If they were teachers, they taught. And Carol
is so good right now. I see little workbooks where she had to
do all these workbooks and grammar and all of that, and that's
the reason why she never had any trouble with her schooling.
But if you went all the way through a Catholic school in those
days, you really knew what you were supposed to know.

Ortiz: Now, you mentioned advising your student. What was his
name?

Clarke: Prince Thomas.

Ortiz: Prince Thomas. You advised him to go to Berea College.

Clarke: Yeah, I didn't know much about it. We looked at the
ones that he had offers for. Some of them, if they were very
large, what I said was that somebody who's not that socially
developed might not do very well in a very, very large college,
and so you wanted something kind of medium-sized where he could
relate to people better and that kind of thing.

I kind of did that with all my students. I found that you
had to fit them in according to their--and if they end up in the
wrong place where they can't make an adjustment, then they'll
flunk out. I always knew that some of the larger universities,
like the University of Alabama, is okay for some people, but for
other students who didn't have many social skills would be much
better of in a predominantly black college, because they need
that nurturing and they need that one-on-one with the teachers
and things like that. On the other hand, some other students
will go to the University of Alabama and do just fine.

Ortiz: Through these years, through the fifties and sixties and
on up, did you maintain contact with family or relatives from
Forkland or Sumter County?

Clarke: Oh, yes, and we still have that property down there.
We're in touch with them. Of course, some of my relatives are
up in Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, and we were in touch with those
on a regular basis. And then those who are still down there,
from time to time we go down there, and we have that property
down there still down there [unclear].

Ortiz: What was medical care like in Birmingham?

Clarke: Medical care. Well, we had Hillman Hospital up there.
It was about two blocks from us and it takes in patients, but
we never had to go. I guess we were lucky, because I guess all
that walking to school and back and eating beets and peas, we
were never ill, nobody in the family.

Ortiz: When you had your children, were they delivered at
Hillman?

Clarke: No. By that time, I had insurance and everything by then, and they were all delivered at the hospital.

Ortiz: At Hillman Hospital?

Clarke: No, at--let's see. Was it a Jefferson Hospital? It was the one over there at UAB. Then there was a little Baptist hospital over there on the south side--I've forgotten the name of that--where some of them were born.

Ortiz: That was in the fifties?

Clarke: Oh, in the fifties. Now, let's see. Let me get that straight. We had a hospital out in Ensly. I'm trying to see if I--Dr. Bryant [phonetic], the black family doctor, I went to him for our first two children, and they were stillborn. Then my sister's a nurse and she worked at Lord Nolan Hospital [phonetic]. [Unclear] Dr. Lacy's house, and his daughter-in-law was a nurse at the same hospital. So I got them to recommend somebody for me to go to, and I went to a white specialist those babies. It was a hospital over in the medical center that he took me to. I think Dr. Bryant probably did take me to the Ensly hospital.
Clarke - 50

Compared to what he did and Dr. Bryant did, they did the same thing, so I don't know what--I've never been able to figure that out what did those two babies die. They were fully formed and all, but they were born dead. And then I went to Dr. Wert [phonetic] twice. The children were fine. I went back to Dr. Bryant and lost a child, and then all the rest of them I went to the specialist and they all lived. Now, what it was I don't know, but that's what happened. All of those with Dr. Wert were in the hospitals over in the medical center, and they were white.

Ortiz: What were the biggest changes, if any, that you witnessed in Birmingham during those years, from the time you were a child and coming back and teaching, in a sense retracing some of your footsteps?

Clarke: Well, I'd say that the black community was--you knew just about everybody in the black community, because everywhere you went, you did all your business basically with the blacks and you knew everybody. You knew who was supposed to be important and who was not. Then with integration, it seems like there were more black people and you didn't know as many folks.

But on the other hand, in integration you were more involved with the government of the city and all of that, because Dr. [Richard] Arrington was the dean out there at Miles
and then now he's the mayor, and then all of the city councilmen and all of those folks are people that you know personally. Before then, we weren't even interested in what was going on at city hall, because we didn't feel influenced by it or even part of it. You'd read about it, and it was something distant. But now, with all of the Civil Rights Movement, we are a part of what's going on.

Also, you see more and more, after integration you see young people going into jobs, earning more money and that kind of thing, when before it was like a cap on it. You weren't going any further than maybe teaching. You were going to be well off. You could teach and get a job in the post office or work in the mine or something like that. That would probably be it. If you were exceptionally smart and had the money, you could become a doctor or something, but only a few people were going to do that, and we didn't inspire to do that too much.

Ortiz: It sounds like to me that you transcended many of those barriers in your life.

Clarke: Yeah, well. I guess, you know, my grandmother and everybody always emphasized education. I knew that I wanted it. I didn't know whether I was going to get it or not.

Ortiz: Mrs. Clarke, I don't want to take up too much more of
your time. I'm learning a lot. Mrs. Clarke, could you tell me about how you continued your education.

Clarke: Well, after teaching at Holy Family and going to Miles--well, at Holy Family, as soon as we were able to go to the University of Alabama, a whole group of teachers in Birmingham immediately went down and enrolled. I was going because it was fun to go. I wasn't even thinking about a degree or anything. I just wanted to go and I enjoyed going.

I remember one summer a friend of mine called that I rode with and said, "Are you going to summer school this summer?"

I said, "Well, I don't know. I guess so."

She said, "Well, if you're going, you can get your degree."

I said, "I can!"

She said, "Yes."

I hadn't thought about a degree. So we earned a master's degree, and we kept going together until we finished the Ed.S. degree. It was just fun riding down there in the car pool and going to the classes. It was a whole new experience. And then after I started working at Miles and I was associate professor of education and all, one year I decided I could go one more year and get the doctorate, so I went that final year and earned a doctorate. The whole thing was a very pleasant experience for me.
Ortiz: What year did you start at UAB?

Clarke: At UAB. That was the University of Alabama down in Tuscaloosa. We commuted down there. At the time we started our program, UAB was rather small. It had education, but it just expanded, really, much later than that, I think. It wasn't that large. It didn't have the degree that we required. We took some courses over there. They would allow us to take six hours on each program and I took those, but it was at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa.

I started down there--when did I start? I earned my master's degree in '67, so I started in '65 and earned a master's degree in '67 while I was still at Holy Family High School.

Ortiz: So your M.A. in '67. When did you receive your Ed.S.?

Clarke: The Ed.S. degree was something like 1974.

Ortiz: And that was from the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa, also?

Clarke: That's at the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa. And then in 1979 I earned the doctorate, the Ph.D.
Ortiz: And the primary emphasis was in education?

Clarke: I started off in English, secondary education, because that's what I was doing at Holy Family High School. And then I was counselor, too, so I switched over to counseling for my Ed.S. degree, and I continued on with the Ph.D. in counseling.

Ortiz: So you came quite a long way in your education from those days when you'd sneak into your grandmother's parlor and read.

Clarke: Yeah, right. But that started me off, and it still influences me a lot, because I still think about my grandmother and what she said.

Ortiz: Mrs. Clarke, this is what I was showing you earlier, and this paperwork becomes part of the file in the archive. I think that I mentioned—or I might not have mentioned this over--

[End of Interview]
[transcribed by TechniType]