THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Oral History Interview

with

Judy Belk

Interviewer: Francesco De Salvatore

Narrator: Judy Belk

Location of Interview:
Lloyd House, 200 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA, 22314

Date of Interview: 06/10/2024

Transcriber: Kayce Compton

Summary:
Judy Belk is a fifth generation native of Alexandria. She is a descendant of the Casey and Adams families who were early residents of The Fort and Seminary neighborhoods. She reflects on her childhood years between the late l950's- early70's) including living without access to indoor plumbing; being one of the first African American students to integrate Minnie Howard School; and her family's fight to hold on to its land under threat of an eminent domain take-over by the city. She shares how these early experiences have shaped her career as a prominent philanthropic leader, writer, and social justice advocate. In recognition of her writing and civic leadership, in 2013, Belk was inducted in the Alexandria African American Hall of Fame.

Notes:

In all places in my interview where I mention T.C. Williams High School, please note that the new name is Alexandria City High School. It was renamed in 2020 in response to public pressure noting that its original namesake Thomas Chamblis Williams was a known segregationist and fought school integration including blocking my admission to Minne Howard.

I am the proud mother of two amazing human beings: (1) Ryan Alexander Peeks, a military historian, who was born in l987 and lives in Alexandria with his wife Ann Brooks and my first granddaughter, Ada Brooks-Peeks making her the 7th generation of the Casey/Adams family to be living in Alexandria. She attends childcare at Hopkins House where I attended summer day camp as a child. (2) Casey Laverne Peeks born in l991 who lives in Washington, DC and is an early childhood policy advocate. Casey was named in honor of her paternal grandmother, Maydell Laverne Casey Belk and all the awesome Casey women. Both Casey and Ryan were born in Berkeley, CA and spent their childhood in Oakland, CA.

A little about my father's family. My father Lonnie George Belk, Sr. was born in Salisbury South Carolina to Otis Milton Belk and Constance Marie McElwain Belk. They relocated to Alexandria as part of the Great Migration in the mid 1940's. My father was one of four siblings including Otis Milton Belk, Jr; Clara Lee Belk, and Jasper Belk. My paternal grandfather died in his mid 30's. My Grandma Connie lived on King Street two doors down from my maternal Grandma Ada. Both the Belk and Casey families were lifetime members of Oakland Baptist Church.

Both my mother and father graduated from Parker Gray and were inducted in the Parker Gray Sports Hall of Fame.

Apologizes to listeners for allergy-induced coughing throughout the interview.

My published writing, including many references to my Alexandria childhood, can be found on my website at www.judybelkwriter.com.

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Places	Old Town Alexandria; Braddock Road.; Alexandria Hospital; Freedman's Hospital; Howard University; Seminary; King Street.; Quaker Lane; Oakland Baptist Church; The Fort; 1010 Woods Place; "The Little Store"; Bradlee Shopping Center; Episcopal High School; Lyles-Crouch School; Minnie Howard School; Frances Hammond School; George Washington School; T.C. Williams High School; Fairfax County; Northwestern University; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Cincinnati, Ohio; Oakland, California; San Francisco, California; Los Angeles, California; Sunnyvale, California; Martin Luther King Hospital; Virginia Community Health Center; Virginia Theological Seminary; Saint Augustine University; Raleigh, North Carolina

Judy Belk [00:00:05] My name is Judy Belk. My age is 71. Today is June 10th, 2024 and the location is Lloyd House in Alexandria, Virginia.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:17] Great. And my name is Francesco De Salvatore, and we are at Lloyd House and today is June 10th, 2024. So, yeah, thanks for being here, Judy. I know you're coming from far away, from L.A. [Los Angeles]. So let's just start. Where were you born?

Judy Belk [00:00:36] I was born just a few blocks from where we're sitting at the old Alexandra Hospital on Washington Street. In October. October 16th, 1952.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:52] Great. And what are some of your earliest memories from that area?

Judy Belk [00:00:58] Well, there are a lot of stories about, you know, how I came into the world, which reflects, I think, some of the, you know, the low and high points of being born at that time in America and being born at this place in Alexandria. The earliest story, you know, that I remember was my mom went into labor around the same time that my aunt, Clarice Belk, which was her sister-in-law. They were both married to brothers. My mother was married to Lonnie Belk and my aunt was married to my uncle, Otis Milton Belk.

Judy Belk [00:01:54] And, it just so happened that we, that they went in labor at the same time. And they were in a segregated colored ward of Alexandra Hospital. At the time, it was not integrated. And, you know, my mother really talked about it being a difficult birth. There were labor pains. My, and this is really the version of, you know, my aunt who said, you know, my mother was yelling and screaming and she [aunt] was nervous because both of them had, you know, been born in their respective family homes. My aunt, Claudine['s] family home was on Queen Street and that's where she was born. And my mother was born in the Casey family home on Braddock Road. And so, we were, I was the second for my mother and my cousin, Connie who was born, ended up being born the day after I was born, was the second birth for my aunt, but it was, it was still a big deal that they were giving birth in the hospital. And my aunt was concerned that my mother yelling in pain, you know, would disrupt things. And she wanted to be on, everybody to be on good behavior. But, but I think out of that, my mother felt she was not being treated in the way she should have been. She could see from where she was in bed that the other white mothers were getting more attention, and I know that made her angry. And, and so that was the painful part. It was just a story that was told for and over again. And as a result of that, my mother made the decision, [with] subsequent births, to at least have

her last two children, I was one of six, in Washington, D.C. At the Freedmen's Hospital attached to Howard University.

Judy Belk [00:04:34] But it was also as, many of the stories that are passed down, there was also a funny part of the story in that, when the doctor came out--and both my dad and my uncle were in the waiting room--he said to my uncle, "You have a beautiful baby girl." Well, I was the, I was the baby girl. And it wasn't, he got the fathers mixed up, so. But [he] also said you had to, you know, pay in cash. And so my, you know, uncle went and he said, looking for money to pay for the birth. And my father sat there waiting, to, what he thought was my birth. And so then, the next day, when my cousin was born, they called, they finally figured it out, got it straight, and called my uncle and said, "You have a baby girl." He said, "I know. I'm working on getting the money." But actually, they discovered that actually, that there was a mix up between the babies. So, you know, the version of the family was, whenever, you know, I got in trouble, my mother said, "I think I brought the wrong baby home." So I was, I was born on October 16th and my cousin, Connie was born on October 17th, 1952.

Judy Belk [00:06:30] And the other part of the story which just became, which I found out more and more, was that my, my, that the two mothers had decided that they wanted to name their daughters, if they had daughters, after the grandmothers. My mother had decided that she wanted to name me after my grandmother, Ada Virginia Casey, and my aunt had decided that she would then name her daughter after my paternal grandmother, Constance Marie Belk. So my father made the trip out to Seminary when I was born, supposedly, to tell my grandmother, "You have a new granddaughter and we've decided we want to honor her with, by naming her after you." And my grandmother, Ada said, "I don't think that's such a good idea. Don't name her Ada." So my father came back to the hospital, told my mother, "Ada doesn't want, you know, her to be named Ada." And so my mother, I'm thinking, [thought] "Okay, what do I do? I haven't figured out a name," but [she] was a big Judy Garland fan. And [she] said, "Okay, we'll name her Judy, but can you go back and ask mom, 'Is it okay to keep the middle name?'" So I became Judy Virginia.

Judy Belk [00:08:08] My paternal grandmother, Connie, was very happy with the granddaughter being named after her. So my cousin's name was named in honor of my paternal grandmother, Constance Marie Belk. And I had always, when I heard the story as I got older, I was always grateful at that point, not knowing the significance of the name Ada in my family, that my grandmother had not named me Ada. And, it was only later that, as I realized history, Ada is a very, really special name in the family. My grandmother, Ada Casey, Virginia Casey, was named in honor of her

mother, Ada Adams. And the Adams' family roots, you know, go back, you know, to the early, to the 1800s and later. And, and so full circle, in October, on October 16th, 2023, on my birthday, my granddaughter was born, and Ryan and Ann named her, my son Ryan and his wife Ann, named her Ada Irene Brooks Peeks. So, she's the 3rd Ada in the family, and the 7th generation of family living in Alexandria.

Judy Belk [00:10:09] I won't talk that long.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:11] No, no, that's why we're here.

Judy Belk [00:10:15] Yeah!

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:15] Talk, talk. Let's maybe start, you've already talked about your grandmother, can you describe her a little bit more since, you know, she seems to be an important part of your origins?

Judy Belk [00:10:28] Yeah, she was, I mean, and I mean both grandmothers. But, you know, when I was born, I'd always remember her as really the matriarch of the Casey family. She, one of my earliest memories is walking through the, on the construction site, where she had, as a, as a single woman, decided to build a brand new house in Seminary, located right across from King Street. I mean, from Alexandria High School [Alexandria City High School]. And it—

Francesco De Salvatore [00:11:21] When was this? When did she built her house?

Judy Belk [00:11:24] Oh, it was, it was probably in the late [19]50s. She was born, as my mother was born, in the Casey house, not too far from that site. And she had actually lived in the Casey house with her brother, George Casey and his family. And also, I think my aunt, Helen Price lived in the house. So it was, it's a multi-generational house, but I think she felt things were getting a little crowded. And, she purchased some available property just within a few hundred feet of the family home and got a loan and built a house. Which was, you know, one of the newest houses in Seminary. It was sort of on a little hill. So it was overlooking it. It became, not only a centerpiece in terms of, for our family, but it became an important gathering place for the community. [It] was just down the street from Oakland Baptist Church, our family church. It was where we had Sunday dinners--and when we said "Sunday dinners," [we meant] extended family--it was like, okay, if folks are in church, it was like, there would be always an invitation to come to Ada's house or Miss Ada's house, as she was called by the community.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:13:24] Can you describe what the house looked like?

Judy Belk [00:13:26] The house was, you know, two stories. Had a basement. Brick. Porch. On the back, sat on almost two acres, a good portion of which were, vegetable gardens, apple trees, plum trees. Fresh vegetables were always part of my grandmother's kitchen. She canned vegetables and fruit, made homemade applesauce. I remember sitting on the back porch churning homemade ice cream. She, there was a huge tree in the backyard where lawn furniture and where she and aunt Helen and anyone visiting her during the summer would be gathering as we played in the yard. And it, you know, there were, you know, as you know, many homes in Seminary, but many of them were not in great condition. The infrastructure, there was no investment in, I believe, no investment in city, you know, infrastructure in the area. So, the homes reflected that. So, it was a real source of pride, I think, for the community, that Miss Ada had built her own home, brand new brick home. I know it was a source of pride for, you know, my, my grandmother and, with reflection of, I think great, you know, empowerment on the part of her resilience.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:15:47] And can you describe her a little bit more? What, what was she like?

Judy Belk [00:15:53] You know, tough love. You know, I, I remember her as someone who while you might view as strict, I, I only, you know, have fond memories of my time with her sitting in her kitchen where she's making homemade biscuits and frying apples from the tree where she's asked me to go and pick some apples so she could make some fried apples for breakfast. Sunday dinners were really special. She had a tremendous amount of respect in the community. She was someone of strong faith. She, as a sense of respect, she had a pew that, while anyone could sit on it, no one dared to sit in it. And if she was attending church, she--family was very important to her. She had four children, my mother, my aunt [00:17:22]Mopesy [0.0s] (Joyce Sanchez), Thomas, and Herbert. She, [coughs] excuse me. She, I always felt that she could probably be a CEO if she was born during this time period. She had tremendous business sense, even though she worked as a domestic cleaning homes, doing ironing. Land and home ownership was very important to her. And she was the one who stepped in to save, when she could, family property that had been passed down in generations.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:18:28] What do you think you learned from her?

Judy Belk [00:18:35] Confidence. I, you know, I think, she, I mean, I knew my uncle Herbert--didn't know my uncle Thomas as well because he moved away--but certainly

knew her and knew my mom and my aunt Mopesy. And, I think they reflected and passed on to me, a sense of self-confidence and being empowered to speak up for, for justice, for what's right. I think all of that probably started with her. The importance of family. The importance of opening your home to guests, to the importance of meals and, and food as an important part of the African American culture.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:19:47] And what are your memories from your childhood home? Where did you grow up?

Judy Belk [00:19:57] I grew up at The Fort in a home that was owned by my grandmother. She had stepped in to ensure that it stayed in the family. It was actually her brother, Uncle Charlie's home. And when either he left, he was about to lose it in terms of either bankruptcy or credit issues, she stepped in and took over ownership. And by the time I, you know, was young, Uncle Charlie was living with my grandmother. And my mother had, you know, provided the home to my parents, who were fairly young.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:21:06] And this is your mom's mom, right?

Judy Belk [00:21:08] Yeah. And so, so my early memories until we moved to 1010 Woods Place, I moved in 1964. My first 10 or 11 years, 12 years, were, were at The Fort. That's where I was. And so at that time, The Fort was very, very rural. I envied folks who lived, and what I viewed as the large neighborhood or little town of Seminary. But it was, in retrospect, you know, it was only a mile, a mile and a half from where we lived to where my grandmother was. But it seemed far away.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:05] Yeah. And what did The Fort look like? What did that area look like?

Judy Belk [00:22:10] Very, very rural. I mean, in many ways it was a sort of, a kid's dream in terms of wooded areas, lots of places to play hide and seek. There were three homes that were in the small area where we lived. The McKnights lived in the house that was closest to Braddock Road. We lived in the middle plot. And in the back was one with the Young family, Sergeant Young. I would say the most traumatic part, I guess I didn't think it was traumatic at the time, but it, it was in many ways, was the house did not have access to running water, or it didn't have an indoor bathroom. So, there was an outhouse in the back of the property that we had to use, and we had to get our water from a well on the McKnight property. So—water. Like, how much to use every day. Drinking water. Hating to go, you know, to the outhouse. You know, Vickie and I, my elder sister and I had, as we got older, had responsibility to

make sure that the four pails that were used for cooking and drinking always had to be full. So, taking the empty buckets to the well and pulling the heavy buckets up. And, all was, was tedious. And, you know, it was apparent to me that there are other ways to live because, again, my grandmother had a house with, you know, two bathrooms. And both my grandparents had running water. So, we would, sometimes I would spend the night there and sometimes we'd go there just to have a bath in a bathtub. But on a day-to-day basis, water and being responsible and thinking about water, and then at night when we had to go to use the bathroom, you know, Vickie and I holding hands and, and not wanting, you know, to go, you know, to the outhouse. And we could, so it was okay if we could pee right outside at night. But if you had to do number two, it was, was tedious and scary.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:25:46] How do you think those experiences impacted you?

Judy Belk [00:25:54] Well, I think a couple of things. You know, one, you know, there—you know, I noticed, you know, and I knew that for my mom, there was a sense of shame. If, you know, she's very particular about who she felt comfortable inviting over. I mean, she felt they had lots of parties and lots of people and within the African American community, close knit community. But anyone outside, you know, she was reluctant because of the bathroom. And I, you know, I think for me, it's, as I reflect on it, as it became, as I got older and realized that, that this was not the norm. You know, there was a sense of both shame, inconvenience, and then as I now reflect back, it didn't have to be that way. The City of Alexandria could have provided, easily could have provided a water system to that area. But we weren't--it just wasn't important enough. And so, to me, it's a good example of, you know, systemic racism.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:27:40] What are your memories of neighbors? Other people in the neighborhood.

Judy Belk [00:27:52] You know, it was a close-knit neighborhood. I mean I, you know, the people who were our neighbors, you know, that we'd go get a cup of sugar from or sometimes babysat us, you know, the Youngs and the McKnights were all, it was all very close knit. And then, you know, I viewed, you know, my, the extended family, two grandmothers who lived, almost, next door to each other on King Street, spent a lot of time there. And, you know, my parents, you know, had deep roots in Alexandria, so they knew a lot of folks. So, there was, I would say, to me, the neighborhood and the world, I mean, was, was Seminary, was first my, my close, extended world, you know, at The Fort. Being a little envious that we couldn't be with

as many of the kids that we had relationships with, that we went to Sunday school and others who lived in Seminary, which was a little bit more urbanized. And, increasingly getting, it just kind of getting tedious about the lack of access to, to water.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:29:38] Do you remember any businesses or, I mean, anything in the area that your family would go to? Any stores?

Judy Belk [00:29:47] In Seminary—where the gardening, the huge gardening store is now, near Quaker Lane, where Quaker Lane and King Street come together, which is right across the street from Oakland Baptist Church--there was a little store. We called it "A Little Store." It's where we could get penny candy.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:30:23] You remember what was called?

Judy Belk [00:30:24] Well, we called it "The Little Store." And everybody in the neighborhood called it "The Little Store." And it was where we went right after Sunday school, sometimes not using all the money we were supposed to use for Sunday school. But it was also where, you know, my grandmother might say, "Can you go up to 'The Little Store' and get some eggs?" It was a big, we felt pretty isolated up at The Fort. I mean, I was just amazed that I came back and see how close it is. So, you know, before, I'm not sure what year Bradlee Shopping Center opened right below Minnie Howard. But, that was, I think it was opened before we moved down to Woods Place, and that was a little closer to us where we can go to High's, there used to be a place called High's Ice Cream. Murphy's, you know, a five and dime store was located. Safeway opened to [inaudible]. So, that was a big deal when all of those commercial outlets opened.

Judy Belk [00:31:55] But, you know, in many ways around food, like fresh food, there just was a lot of bartering because, you know, we didn't, we didn't grow any of our, anything on our property at The Fort. But Sergeant Young did. He grew grapes and blackberries and strawberries. We had lots of plum trees and fruit, but things like vegetables and carrots and all of that, I mean, we'd, we'd get a lot from my grandmother's garden or people in Seminary giving my grandmother fresh vegetables that we used. So, I mean, I don't, you know, other than, you know, meats and eggs and milk or whatever, I just remember most of our vegetables were fresh or canned, because my grandmother would can a lot that she would then give to us, also. And, everyone made a lot of things from scratch. Like breads and certainly desserts.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:33:26] What are some of your memories of some of these recipes that your grandma made or other people?

Judy Belk [00:33:31] My grandmother's poundcake. Fresh beets from the garden. Homemade ice cream. My maternal grandmother--pineapple upside down cakes, which she was known for. The other kind of a little southern thing, which was really weird, but I liked it: she'd mix corn bread and buttermilk together. And I would beg her for that, I don't know why. But, lamb, I mean, you know, I was shocked to find out that my husband had never tasted lamb. Having a leg of lamb was a big, was a normal Sunday dinner. You know, I can really still smell the smells. I can really remember from my grandmother's kitchen. Kale, you know, all of this, you know, from her garden. And my aunt, Mopesy, I would say, has continued with, you know, like peach cobblers, all of those recipes. My, you know, aunt Mopesy continued to pass down.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:08] So, why did you guys move to Woods Place?

Judy Belk [00:35:15] You know, I don't know the entire story, but it is quite, I think an interesting story in a variety of levels. It basically started first and, like most of the stories with Alexandria, there's, like, really, a tug between justice and injustice. The injustice part started with, you know, when the city decided, you know, it needed a new site for a new high school. I believe that they felt well, the easiest place to build a high school is on the land owned by, you know, disempowered, you know, Black folks. And so they [the city] started eminent domain procedures, which is a really powerful tool that government had.

Judy Belk [00:36:24] I think a real interesting story that I don't, that it'd be interesting if you know more about it, is why, why did Seminary have such a high portion of Black land owners? That's not typical. And the Casey family was one of the beneficiaries of that. I've heard that many of, much of the land that, in Seminary, that was held by Black families, many of them tied to, you know, the settlement after the Civil War of, of, you know, Blacks—Union soldiers who fought in the Civil War, settled in that area. And I say we're "settling"--the Union Army had confiscated a lot of land during that time, during the [Civil] war, and provided land grants to many of the soldiers. I don't know if that is true or not. One of the narratives that I know is not true, you know, I was told that all of the land was owned by the Episcopal Church, which I always thought made sense, which is why that area was called "Seminary." We were adjacent to land that, you know, was still owned, and still is owned, by the Episcopal Church with the Episcopal High School and the Seminary. But, you know, when we went through the whole reparations process, that was not true. So that's one piece that, you know, I heard from someone who was doing some of the genealogical work for the Seminary saying that, really, there was a high

proportion of ownership. And even in Alexandra in general, wasn't just in, was in the Seminary.

Judy Belk [00:39:08] But the reason why that's really important is, the city, proactively, felt it, you know, it was an easy mark to grab them in. One--the houses weren't in great condition. You know, who cares--who, you know, they felt they had the upper hand. And they still did a lot of damage. But, during the process, the community organized with the help of some outside attorneys, with some of the more prominent land owners in that area, and organized and said, "You know, you can't just come in and do this." And I think, I don't—this is the part where I just don't know all of the dealings, only what folks have told me—this is where, you know, my Aunt Joyce and some of the other elders who are in that area could probably say. But there was a negotiated compromise. And, while there were many families who took the money and, and were displaced, the, you know, part of the negotiation was that at least 23 plots would be, would be kept to retain some integrity of that community. And, I don't know if the city played a role or if the community played a role in getting, at the time, some investment from HUD [Housing and Urban Development] to help with making the renovations affordable. But at least 23 families who had land rights in that area were able to stay and make up what is, you know, 1010 Woods Place and Woods Avenue.

Judy Belk [00:42:02] And the way we got in was, you know, some great negotiation on the part of my grandmother, Ada, who was going through another eminent domain battle with the city, which I think has been documented in the "White Paper" on land where, again, the city had decided, that it was gonna, wanting to renovate Fort Ward, and wanted, was planning and offered, really unfair settlement for that property. She retained an attorney, did get a higher price, but also said, "I think I also deserve and want 2 of the lots that's happening in the Seminary project." And so she got 2 and, as a result of that, provided the opportunity for both my aunt and my mother to have one of the new homes. And I knew it was a big deal because I think, still you know, my parents had to come up with $500 for down payment, which I think my grandmother provided.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:40] And, so you were 12 years old when this happened?

Judy Belk [00:43:42] We were 12 years old when we, when I, when we moved there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:43:47] Moved there, yeah, okay. Can you say a little bit more about your memory of moving to Woods Place when you were 12?

Judy Belk [00:43:57] I was ecstatic. I mean, I really thought I had, you know, gone to heaven. I mean, I did. By the time, you know, I was 12, I--there was a lot of shame. I, you know, I just didn't invite a lot of friends to our house. It was really becoming apparent to me about the disparity. I didn't know, I wouldn't, I didn't know it was necessarily, I don't think I thought it was systemic racism. Because there were definitely Blacks, other Blacks that I knew who had, you know, running water and bathrooms. There was a joke in the family that my grandmother always says, and I think in a, in her own way, motivated her to get us out of the situation at The Fort was, every year my grandmother would make me her amazing pound cake. And, for my birthday, and I could, churn my, you know, ice cream, which was peach ice cream, fresh peaches. And there was just a joke, about what was I gonna wish for every year. And I remember, when I was very young, you know, my grandma said, "What are going to wish for?" And I said, "I really would like to have a bathroom." And she kept saying, "Well, you just should wish for it every year, every year." And so that's what I did for every year. And [it] became a joke because "What are you wishing for?" And my grandma said, "She's wishing, we know what Judy's wishing for." And so, I really believed, that all of the birthday wishes. But really, I believe it was my grandmother who made it possible.

Judy Belk [00:46:36] So, I was ecstatic. One, it, it was like a toy store for kids. We lived, in the blessed, one of the best locations in the new development on a cul-de-sac where there was a streetlight. There were children my age in every house of the 23 homes. It was brand new. Two bathrooms, a basement, a backyard. I was really close, closer, you know, five minutes away from my grandmother, both of my grandmothers. So I could cut through T.C. Williams around the music room, and be at church, be at both grandmothers' [houses] within, you know, ten minutes. It was, I didn't know it at the time, but it was a big win for Alexandria['s] Black community. And so, you know, every--all of my parents' friends and other Blacks just would come out and take tours of this development. It was the nicest area. Single family homes, in the city, brand new. And it was, it was a win for the Black community. So it was pretty, I was pretty happy. It was close to The Little Store. And just as, you know, I was moving into teenager-hood, I mean, the only big disappointment for me was I was really ready to leave Minnie Howard. But, just as I would have gone to middle school and gone to another middle school, Jefferson or whatever, they made T.C. Williams into a middle school. So I was at T.C. Williams from, the time that, we won the integration case. So I started there, in January of--. First grade, I was at Minnie Howard until, until eighth grade. But, the neat thing was that I now was able to walk up to Minnie Howard with a group of, you know, my best friends and, you know, two of my best friends still, one lived next door to me, Patricia Boyd King, and one lived

across the street, Tonette Henry Duncan. And behind me was Gail Garvin. And, you know, it was an adventure to walk, walk up to Minnie Howard.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:50:26] Walk us through, where, where did you go for elementary school?

Judy Belk [00:50:32] Minnie Howard.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:50:33] Minnie Howard. And then middle school, you went to—

Judy Belk [00:50:36] Minnie Howard.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:50:37] Minnie Howard. And then you went to T.C. Williams.

Judy Belk [00:50:38] And then to T.C. Williams, right.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:50:39] Right, right. So, talk to us a little bit about what it was like before the integration case. What was it like going to Minnie Howard? What are your memories of that?

Judy Belk [00:50:51] Well, before the integration case, I was bused from what is now, you know, Fort Ward to Lyles-Crouch, which was the, you know, colored elementary school that everybody went to in the area, going far as Franconia. So the bus would start out in Fairfax County or Franconia, pick Vickie and I up, then would pick kids up in Seminary and take us to Lyles-Crouch. Maybe there might have been one other one, Charles Houston, but that was the one that we went to. Separate but unequal, as I would call it. So, you know, Vickie went there for two years. I, once the court case allowed us to go to the school, I had started in first grade there, and the court case, must have been, you know, settled in December. So, in January we were permitted to go to the school.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:52:20] So, what are your memories of Lyles-Crouch? I know you weren't there that long.

Judy Belk [00:52:27] It was, I remember it being dirty a little. I remember it being crowded. Playground equipment-not great. Because sometimes we were able to walk down on the weekends and play on the playground equipment of this brand new Minnie Howard school that we weren't allowed to go to, and I couldn't quite

understand why. And, so those were my initial memories. I remember the teacher, a teacher eating a big pickle in our class. I couldn't understand why she was eating a big pickle, but that's a memory.

Judy Belk [00:53:33] And I was pretty excited about going to Minnie Howard. I can only, you know, share what I remember as some of the--I mean, the one thing I do remember because I couldn't, I was totally confused, was that, a year earlier, our attorneys had told both my mother and Ms. Bradby that, in order for the lawsuit to be filed, they had to intentionally go and try to register us at Minnie Howard. So, my mother got us all dressed up and, you know, Sunday best, and I thought we were going to finally going to Minnie Howard school. And, we got there and, you know, this is, you know what I, was taught me. What I remember was crying leaving, because you know what I was told, and Marie, who just recently also shared it, is that, you know, Miss Wade said, "If it was up to me, I would let you in."

Francesco De Salvatore [00:55:14] Who's Miss Wade?

Judy Belk [00:55:16] Helen Wade, who was the principal of, um, of Minnie Howard, "that I would let you in, but I'm--my hands are tied." And so we knew that would be, I think they knew it would be response, but our attorneys had to, said that we had to, had to go through that exercise. And the only other memory that I have, because candy was involved, was before the judge made the ruling in his case, he brought, I think, us in one by one. Because, again, as you know, the City of Alexandria said that it would, that we were "mentally deficient," because they couldn't use race to keep us out of the school because of the *Brown [v. Board of Education* Supreme Court] decision. So, the documents are quite clear. Because I've read the case and the actual [coughs] the actual court case, is, you know, the Bradbys and the Belks and maybe there was one other family about another school, but [sister] Vickie was identified as the lead plaintiff. And, and Thomas C. Chambliss, who was the superintendent, and a segregationist, could not use race anymore to keep us out of the school. [Chambliss] said we were "mentally deficient" and it would not be to our emotional development to, to go to the school, which is pretty unbelievable. So, the attorneys who were representing us from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and I later found out it was as part of an effort that was driven by Thurgood Marshall, who later went on to be the first Black appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court, decided, I mean, he knew just having the *Brown* [Supreme Court] decision decided, wasn't enough, that, that he really felt it needed to be tested. And he identified five or ten cases across the country, especially the South, and this was one where he thought it was a good chance of winning.

Judy Belk [00:58:29] And, so with the city, and I just think it's really important to [inaudible] how present the city, using its resources, stating, doing everything they can to prevent us from attending. And the, and our attorneys said, well, if you're saying that these children, five children are "mentally deficient," we would like permission to test a sampling of the white students. And of course, found out that if we were mentally deficient, they were mentally deficient. And, and the attorney, I mean, the judge, I guess, from what I, you know, could have denied the request to test the sampling, the students, but he didn't. So, in many ways, he's part of this story also. But, I think he was still concerned about what would be the impact of us attending. Or maybe he himself wanted to hear firsthand to see if we were mentally deficient. So I remember going into his chamber. I remember him offering me a piece of candy and saying, "Do you want to go to the school? Why do you want to go to the school?" And I remember more of the candy that the conversation. And I remember, because it was an unusual time, you know, mid-school year for the change to happen.

Judy Belk [01:00:34] But I think attorneys felt we got this ruling, let's get these kids in. And, you have to realize at that time, that, you know in [19]58, [19]59, there was concern about violence. And, and so I remember the night before, because there were community organizers, there were attorneys saying, really, telling us what could happen, that, you know, we could be called, the "N-word." They were hoping there wouldn't be violence. There was not violence. But, although I remember mostly excitement about going, because finally I got to go to the school I wanted to go to, if you talk to Marie or James or Marie, who was three years older, she said it was very traumatic for her that, she was called the "N-word" on the playground. She was punched. She was spat on. Her brother, who was even a couple of years older than her, James, had even a tougher time. So she said it was very traumatic. I do recall Vickie not as excited as I was about going to school. She was older. She, Vickie is deceased, so I haven't been able to really hear in more detail her experience. But, Marie, you know, Vickie and her, you know, we're, stayed close together, but I do, it now is, it's apparent to me why, you know, it was such a struggle every morning for her to get up and go to school. It was, she had a very difficult experience than I did.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:02:59] So, how did your mom, I guess, how did this all come about? Did your mom already want you guys to go to Minnie Howard, or was she approached by attorneys?

Judy Belk [01:03:12] Yeah. I, you know, my mother, you know, I think would, would say, and has said, you know—while she, like everyone else, was keeping an eye on what was happening around the country, I think it really came down to--a bus that was always late. The bus that would pick us up, you know, we were maybe, you know,

the fourth stop, and it was late, and sometimes it just didn't come. And sometimes we would be standing out in the rain and in the cold waiting for a bus that was delayed or didn't come. My mother always made her opinion clear to the bus driver when it did show up. But one day it was just pouring and it just didn't show up. And I remember her saying, "This is crazy. Come back in the house." And she gets in the house, and then I hear her say, "The Belk girls are in."

Judy Belk [01:04:35] The attorneys, once the decision was made that they were going to use Alexandria as a site to test the *Brown* decision, went and talked to many families. In fact, they thought the larger number of families, the better. But, they were looking for families within close proximity to schools like Minnie Howard, where that would just be the logical school we'd be going to. And many said no, because white folks got wind of it and, you know, talked many folks out, and it's, but in some cases threatened and, and violence and threats were really real. So while now you're saying, of course, say, you know, you'd raise your hand, there were community organizers who said, "This is what this will mean and could mean. We'll do everything we can to protect you, to give you the support. But. there could be danger." And I mean, in some cases, you know, there were instances, not in our court case, but others who tried who, you know, they lost their jobs. So, like so many parents who continue even to this day fighting for access to public education to, to a better life for their kids, you know, my mother wasn't thinking so much of history. She was just simply pissed. And, you know, she was only 26. Probably a little, I mean, she was 26 when I went to the school, so she was like 25 or so. And, and there are many, especially with Vickie being listed as a plaintiff, and there were folks within the Black community who were encouraging her that maybe this wasn't a good idea. My grandmother wasn't one of them. She said "Go for it."

Francesco De Salvatore [01:07:17] Who are the other kids? So it was you, your sister Vickie, and then who were the other--.

Judy Belk [01:07:23] Marie Bradby, Deborah Bradby and James Bradby.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:07:30] And what about the lawyers representing you, what were their names?

Judy Belk [01:07:33] Yeah they are because they, I just saw, you know, the plaque. And their names are included on the plaque. I can get you those names.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:07:44] Do you have memories about them? Interacting with the lawyers? Do you have any memories of--

Judy Belk [01:07:48] I, I remember, you know, going to community meetings again. They gave us a lot of candy while the adults were talking. The only other vivid memory, and again, it was great to have Marie, clarify it. Part of the settlement, or maybe the decision of the community organizers, was that they knew that we needed, we needed to catch up to the academic offerings at Minnie Howard. And so one year of tutoring, twice a week, was arranged. I remember the tutors really vividly. They were young and, and came to our home and again gave lots of candy and, and played lots of games as they were beefing up our academic skills. I was always told that they were volunteers, white volunteers from Georgetown. Marie said they actually were volunteers from the Seminary. And, again, it almost didn't happen for us because my mother was not comfortable with, you know, white people that she didn't know coming to her house. And her entertaining them, and then, them asking to use the bathroom and she'd have to say, "You have to go to the outhouse." So, Vickie and I overheard community organizers who were Black, young community organizers--because it was a really quite an interesting, you know, campaign of support that happened--and, and heard them say, "Ms. Maydell, this is really gonna help, [it's] important" and she kept saying, "Nobody, nope. I'm not having any white folks I don't know come in and nah nah nah nah nah." And, so they came up with an agreement: What if on the nights, what if they didn't ask to use the bathroom? And also Miss Bradby said, "I'll, they can also, we can, can use our house," which for most of the tutoring and she had indoor plumbing. And, and so that was kind of the compromise. We'd use Miss Bradby's house for the tutoring, but, you know, maybe one night a week if they came to our house, but they wouldn't use the bathroom.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:10:54] Wow. What, I, I'm just curious, what was it, obviously, do you remember the day the case was finished? When it was decided that it was in your favor--

Judy Belk [01:11:09] No, I remember more, I remember more the first day of school and just getting all dressed up and, and I remember thinking out, "Will I be able to stay, mom? Will I be able to stay this time?" And she said, "You'll be able to stay." And the principal, Miss Wade, you know, meeting us, assuring my parents, that she would make sure we stayed safe.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:11:42] Can you walk us through that first day? You kind of just did right now, but—

Judy Belk [01:11:46] Yeah, I just remember, then Miss Wade, I mean, I just remember the halls were really shiny, really polished. Lots of light. Not at all like

Lyles-Crouch, which was really dark and old. That both, that they did decide-it was a big decision-should they keep Deborah and I together or in different classrooms? And then they divided us up and I went to Miss Talish. She was the teacher, tall, and her classroom—for years I could go past Minnie Howard and remember my first year, my first grade classroom. And she was nice. Students were nice. Most of them were. I mean, there seemed to be lots of interest in my hair. I would say the only incident that I remember--I'm sure there might have been others but I was really--the one I remember was [I] became a friend with one of the students and we decided she was going to come to my house or I was going to go to her house. And then she came back and told me that she couldn't come to, that I couldn't come to her house. And I said, "Well, why can't I come to your house?" [Friend said:] "Because my mom said, 'we can't have colored people at my house.'" So that's, that was one, I didn't have the same kind of impact that, that Marie and Vickie had. And James.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:13:45] You mentioned this in one of your writings and so you mentioned in one of your articles that, that the Jewish community in Alexandria helped fund the Black attorneys?

Judy Belk [01:13:55] Yeah! That's what, what I heard. And it's, you know, not—from what I've heard and have talked with other, you know, communities—but, there needed to be resources for, like, the community organizing and, and the tutoring and even part of the court case. And, one I met, years later, a person in the philanthropic community who, whose family was from here. And she also shared that her family was very involved in helping to provide philanthropic support and, and so it's not--I don't, I don't have, I don't have any specific names except, you know, my mother often talked about support from the Jewish community regarding the court case and, and the resources. And it's, it's pretty consistent with what I've heard about Jewish philanthropy and involvement in the civil rights effort.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:15:43] And you've mentioned these community organizers. Like, who were they specifically?

Judy Belk [01:15:47] I don't know. They were, they were African American. They were Black. Black and, I mean, I know the, the volunteers, I mean, the tutors were white. But, they were the ones that, with the attorneys that I just, seemed swirling around. And they were folks that, the organizers, you know I think my mother knew probably some of the, knew of the attorneys, but I think, I always remember her feeling really comfortable with whoever the community organizers were. That they were the ones who, who solicited her, who she knew she trusted, that was giving her

information when she needed to get to meetings or she needed a ride to meetings, they would drive her and that sort of thing.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:16:54] Okay. That's great. And so, okay, so you, attend Minnie Howard up until high school. And so, you've also mentioned that, you know, you were part of the Virginia State Student Association. Was that in high school?

Judy Belk [01:17:13] High school, yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:17:13] When you joined that? Can you talk a little bit more about that? What was your--

Judy Belk [01:17:16] Yeah, I, I organized, I joined and organized and was involved in lots of organizations. That's kind of just, I don't know, my thing. And, and, you know, it started with, I mean, you have to realize that until I got, until the middle school, and there was a whole influx of, of more Black students. I mean, every year more and more Blacks came to Minnie Howard when I was in elementary school. But for the first couple of years, it wasn't, that wasn't the case, because folks were still waiting to see "Is this for real?"or whatever. But more and more came. But they were, you know, mainly, folks from Seminary. And then the middle school kids were kind of bused in. So, I just joined in like, was part of the first integrated, I think, Deborah and I were part of the first integrated Girl Scout troop that was formed at T.C. Williams. And, so a lot of those kind of relationships and connections just started. And also because we were at T.C., we were where we started, Alexandria had a tracking system, "ABC Track" or whatever. And only because, again, not that we were smarter than anyone else, but because we had been in a predominantly white school longer than a lot of the whites, we continued to be tracked all the way through, you know, high school where we, Deborah and I had more access to AP courses and that sort of thing because of the tracking that started in elementary school. So that, again, another sense of systemic racism, I think.

Judy Belk [01:19:34] But, but part of who I was, part of just, you know, I joined everything. So, I, first joined student government in middle school. I, I was the first, you know, Black officer at T.C. Williams. I think I was, you know, president of the inner—what was it called?—the "inter-club council," I think. And I went, you know, one of the first Blacks, I went to Girls' State and then, there, you know, I would go to student government meetings or whatever. A "Virginia state student government" meetings. And I think in my junior year, I decided to run for vice president and won and was the first Black to be elected. My timing was lousy, though. It was just, where, you have to realize, thinking integration, you know, technically started, you know,

when I was in elementary school. Throughout the entire time I was in school Virginia was still dealing with that. And, as you know, it all reached a huge peak when, my senior year, which was the last year before there was a consolidated high school. But again, that was in response to the Feds putting pressure on the City of Alexandria.

Judy Belk [01:21:35] And so I was, I was elected, you know, as vice president. And, normally it's, you just kind of go around to, you know, various high schools and you know, talk about the needs of students and provide support to the local presidents. But, school integration was raging across the state. And so I became like a poster child. And again, students were okay. It was parents who, as I would come in and talk about anything, would, you know, shout me down. Call me names. You know, the sponsor of the teacher who, who was the student government sponsor, she drove me around to a lot of, from T.C. Williams, drove me around to a lot. I took some buses alone or whatever, but then it was just clear that, it wasn't safe or it wasn't helpful. And, it was tough. I mean, the woman, or young person at that time, Pam Schell, who was president, you know, tried to provide some cover, but, it was just tough. And I was also stubborn and trying to really, push on. I remember, you know, one incident, is that usually the student body president hosts the, the state officer who comes, they stay at their house. And so I was with the student body president. I don't even know what city it was in. All day, really liked her. And, you know, I was looking forward to spending the night at her house. And then at the end of the day, she brings in a Black student who I didn't know and was not part of student government. And I'm saying, "Okay, who is she?" She says, "Oh, Judy, I think, we're thinking it's best that you spend the night with her [Black student]." [Quietly] So. You know.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:24:25] I'm sorry you experienced that.

Judy Belk [01:24:26] Hmm hmm.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:24:33] So, you graduate T.C. Williams. And where do you go?

Judy Belk [01:24:38] I wanted to get the hell out of Virginia by this time. Because I, you have to realize, because the city had to be pushed into coming up with a solution of integrating its schools. Or, you know, there were threats that the Feds would come and take over. They decided, without a lot of community input or thought, "Okay, alright, we feel the pressure. We'll just make, we'll just have one high school and we'll close [Francis C.] Hammond [High School] and G.W. [George Washington High School]." G.W. was predominantly a Black high school, and Hammond was predominantly white. Technically, it, it made sense, one would say -- one high school,

go with the newest school, the largest, the one with, that was most, had the most diverse student population. It all made sense. But, sometimes things that make sense fail or falter or [are] painful because people are not thoughtful about how to implement a really good decision. And this was the case. And so, in, you know, I think it was maybe, maybe in the spring of 1970 or '71 or whatever. I graduated in '71. They said, they made the decision that they were going to close the schools and, and you know, it was just devastating. Just think, how'd you feel if you're, if you're a rising senior, sports, cheerleading, student government, all of that. And the history. School and, and G.W. meant a lot, especially to the African American community. And Hammond, folks, whites were quite happy there.

Judy Belk [01:27:11] So, I, you know, I was playing, helping in a role and try to sort all of that out and it, it was clear, that the adults especially were not helpful and had not really sought any input and didn't want any input. And so people were just angry. And I just decided, okay, let me get out of here. And I wasn't quite sure if I'd ever come back to Virginia.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:27:46] So where'd you go?

Judy Belk [01:27:48] I thought I was going to the Pacific Northwest, but I went to Northwestern. And, sight unseen because, you know, we didn't have money for me to visit colleges. And, you know, my, my sister Vickie had gone to college. My parents had not gone to college. But she had gone to Saint Augustine school. Historically Black College, which I think that, you know, what my parents thought. And they knew Saint Augustine, they knew people who—neighbor and, a neighbor, in fact, Ms. Miller, who was one of the attorneys who were involved in making the Seminary development happy, had really encouraged her to apply. So they knew, I mean, "Northwestern? What's Northwestern? What is this place? What is this school?" And, and it had become on my radar because it has a good communications school. And, I was very active in theater and my theater teacher strongly suggested that I apply. And, but finally, you know brought my parents around was that they gave me a full ride. Which, that was the only way I could have gone.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:29:34] What was it like leaving? I know you wanted to leave Alexandria, but when you actually left, what, what was that actually like?

Judy Belk [01:29:42] Well, a totally different experience from, you know, my kids' experience. You know, you get to visit the colleges and all of that. I didn't get to visit. I'd been on college campuses before, but. My parents drove me. And I remember at one point, just like wanting them to leave. Please go. Please go. And then my father—

then they finally left and left me $20 and, with instructions not to go into Chicago, and, and then seeing them leave, I just I remember getting kind of choked up thinking, "Oh my God, I'm here by myself." But it was a great experience. It's probably one of the more important decisions I made.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:30:39] How come?

Judy Belk [01:30:41] I had never been, I mean, I'd been to—I'd gone with a family friend to Cleveland. But other than that, I, I'd never been anywhere. And so, just the fact that I was right outside of Chicago with students from all over the world and the country, and a dorm room where I, you know, I was still when I left, I was sharing a room with, you know, two sisters. And so a room where I only had to share with one other person. And, you know, I was, I loved learning. This is great. So it was a great experience.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:31:47] And you were still coming back to Alexandria, right? In the summers?

Judy Belk [01:31:49] I was coming back to Alexandria in the summers. For the first two summers—well, I, in high school, I started working with the Parks and Rec[reation] Department, and some of those were, like, the best jobs, and, and I was a Rec leader during the summer. My first assignment was at Robert E Lee. Then I went to Del Ray. And then I think I came back the first year, maybe the first two years I came back because again, they were good jobs. And then, and then found, you know, other internships or whatever, my last [coughs], my last two years, I think.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:32:50] What was that like coming back to Alexandria as you were transitioning into this new chapter?

Judy Belk [01:32:59] Well, I thought I knew more than I did. I was, you know very sophisticated. I think, kind of, for, you know, for my family, a little radical. I came back with a lar—, my afro was bigger. You know, I remember, you know, coming home, you know, with an army jacket and, you know, jeans and intentionally, you know, looking as hip-ish as I could or, you know, I discovered, you know, things that, you know, were fascinating to me. Black power. You know, this protest, the whole Watergate thing was happening. South Africa. I was really discovering that, 'cause Northwestern was a sanctuary for folks who were fleeing or thrown out of South Africa. I was discovering, you know, Black theater, reading a lot of Black literature that I hadn't had the opportunity. And, and so, you know, part of it was what you hope, you know, the collegiate experience would provide anyone.

Judy Belk [01:34:44] But, what was really interesting was that I still had left thinking that, that Alexandria was, that I was from NORTHERN [emphasis] Virginia. And that, was a big distinction in my mind between what was happening out of the part of the state. I was "northern Virginia, northern Virginia." And, and how I, how people experienced me when I said it. "You're from the South!" And I remember, you know, Rog[er], when we started dating, I said, "I'm I'm really --" You have to understand, though, I, because I wanted, I didn't want to be viewed as, you know, a southern bumpkin or whatever. And I'm saying, no, I'm really from NORTHERN [emphasis] Virginia, right outside of D.C. And, Rog[er] said, "Well, I've heard of West Virginia, but what's 'NORTHERN Virginia'?" So, I think I came back with eyes open that, you know, that's probably when I started just being a little bit more curious about Alexandria's past. And during this time, as I was coming back, was when the city, you know, had really started aggressively positioning itself, branding itself as, "Old Town." And with that, started massive displacement of the African American community in the center of Alexandria and seeing the changes of people being pushed out, moving, you know, to Maryland and others.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:36:47] Is there any specific displacement you think of? Any area of Old Town?

Judy Belk [01:36:53] Yeah, all of it. I mean, yeah [laughs].

Francesco De Salvatore [01:36:54] All of it, yeah.

Judy Belk [01:36:56] All of a sudden, you know, you come, you know, and then, and then folks who then knew the area started making assumptions that, you know, you must be rich because you're from Alexandria, which you know, had if people knew it, they, they viewed it more as George, as a Georgetown-ish. And I'm thinking, oh, that's not my experience at all.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:37:22] Yeah. Wow. And you mentioned Roger—that's your husband, right?

Judy Belk [01:37:28] Uh huh.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:37:30] How'd the two of you meet?

Judy Belk [01:37:32] Well, he, he went also, he also went to Northwestern. And he's from Cincinnati and he, he's a biomedical engineer major. Him and his roommate,

who was Black, were the first two Blacks, biomedical engineer graduates of Northwestern's School of Engineering.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:37:58] So, yeah, could you say more about meeting your husband?

Judy Belk [01:38:01] Yeah, my husband—love of my life—Roger Allen Peeks. He was born in October. October 3rd, 1952, in Cincinnati to Mamie and Roger Peeks. And, we met at Northwestern. I almost didn't date him because he was, as we often referred to the science and math and engineering folks as "tech weenies." He was a biomedical major. And I was, I majored in radio, television and film in the School of Communications. And finally, when he, was insistent, I said, to see if this could work, we needed to take a film course. So, he had to do an arts credit for his degree. And so he chose to take the film course. So we went, we took a film course on film noir and he got an A and I got a B, so [chuckles]. And he was pretty cute. And he -- it's interesting -- the Alexandria story is, we met, you know, we were 19, or started dating when we were 19 or 20. When I brought him home for the first time and I told my mom I thought I was pretty serious about him, and she was skeptical. And, what she didn't know was that Roger was the Bid Whist champion of Northwestern. Bid Whist is a, it's often referred to as the ghetto version of Bridge [card game].

Francesco De Salvatore [01:40:25] Okay.

Judy Belk [01:40:27] My mom was a huge Bid Whist player. Bid Whist was a major, major area - major card game that was played by my family and the other Blacks in Alexandria. My mom was one of the best. So, she and Rog[er] one night sat down at the Bid Whist table and they didn't get up for many, many hours because they kept winning. And so I remember her saying, "I think he's a keeper."

Francesco De Salvatore [01:41:13] That's funny.

Judy Belk [01:41:13] And, and Roger was responsible in many ways for getting me out to California. He graduated a year ahead of me and went to medical school at Stanford. And, taking my mother's advising, "If you're going to follow him, at least have a job." And I did get a job. At the last minute, I got a job working for CBS Radio in San Francisco. And that's how I came out to California.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:41:52] And how long did you live in California?

Judy Belk [01:41:54] I've lived in California--

Francesco De Salvatore [01:41:56] Or, sorry, how long did you live in San Francisco?

Judy Belk [01:42:00] Well, I lived in Northern California until 2005. And from 2005 to present, I've been in Los Angeles. But I view Oakland, especially, as my adopted home. My California home. Alexandria's my hometown. "Home, home." But, when I first came out to California, because Rog[er] was at Stanford, lived on the peninsula. He was doing his internship and residency and, and then I moved and took an apartment in Oakland. And, then moved back to the peninsula to take a job with the city of Sunnyvale. We came back to Alexandria to get married in 1979. So we've been married 45 years. And, he's, he opened up a practice in Oakland. He's an internist. And then took, when we got to California, and, I mean, we went to move to Los Angeles in 2005 when he took a position in Los Angeles, first at the Charles Drew Medical Center and for the last 18 years or so, working at Valley Community Health Clinic.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:43:55] Why was Oakland home or what made it home for you?

Judy Belk [01:44:03] It is where a significant number of, large percentage of, African Americans live. So I felt very, very comfortable there. It's where, you know, Rog[er] opened his practice, it's where we bought our first, not our first home, but our, our second home. And that's where, you know, we just decided to put down roots and raise, raise our kids. Progressive community with large, supportive African American community. And that's where I thought we were going to stay until Rog[er] decided that he really wanted to try to just save Charles Drew Hospital, which at the time, was, it's an important institution in the African American community in Los Angeles, and he thought it was worth giving it a try.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:45:21] It seems like light years away from Alexandria.

Judy Belk [01:45:25] Yes. Yeah. Yeah, I've spent my entire professional career in California.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:45:34] And, what did you end up doing? Could you talk more about the work you do?

Judy Belk [01:45:39] I, most of my career has been in the field of philanthropy. Early, early in my career, I worked in city and local government for the City of

Sunnyvale, which is on the peninsula. A city about the same size as Alexandria, actually, near San Jose. And, went into and then worked for the Association of Bay Area Governments and then worked for, went into corporate philanthropy, working for what is now Target Corporation and was there for 5 years and worked for 10 years for the, for Levi Strauss Company, where I ran their foundation and their global giving program as vice president of public affairs. Then, worked for the Rockefeller family and launching Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Again, working to help high net worth individuals and donors with their philanthropy. And then ended my formal career 'cause I think I'm still, dabbling, but, retired as president and CEO of the California Wellness Foundation, which is one of the largest philanthropic foundations in California.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:47:30] How do you think all your prior experiences informed your work? From The Fort to Seminary to—

Judy Belk [01:47:39] Well, you know, I think, you know, I was a beneficiary of philanthropy. I didn't know it was philanthropy at the time, but we talked about the involvement of the Jewish philanthropists and underwriting the court case. My college degree was, in part, with the generosity of philanthropists at Northwestern. But even my love of the arts, I remember at Minnie Howard when I had the opportunity, the very first live performance. I think I was in fifth or sixth grade. A, a wealthy donor provided tickets for us to see the opera, "Carmen" at the National Theater. And I was just in awe. It was the first time that I'd seen a live performance. And I've been hooked on theater and, and the arts ever since. But that opportunity came as a result of a donor really believing that every child should have that opportunity, so. So, I would say philanthropy, my first experience of benefiting, being a beneficiary of philanthropy, played a huge part.

Judy Belk [01:49:31] I think both my fight for justice has a lot to do with the injustice that I experienced in Alexandria. In terms of, you know, not being, having access to schools. I remember my parents debating, should they try to vote, even though they knew the poll tax was a barrier? You know, even my son and daughter-in-law could not have been married during the first 16 years of my life in Alexandria. The *Loving [v. Virginia Supreme Court]* decision, which was based on a biracial couple, in, in Virginia, and, you know that, their, their right to love and happiness and being married was again upheld by, you know, the Supreme Court. Not having access to water. You know, the basic necessity in life. And it wasn't that there wasn't clean water and infrastructure available. The city just chose not to.

Judy Belk [01:51:25] Having a better understanding about land, and while in many ways my family was fortunate that, thanks to my grandmother, Ada, we were able to stay, hold on to land, the land that, you know, now it's again in the hands of our family. Because, my sister Kay recently repurchased the family house in Woods Place. All of that was a result of land, of us holding on to land in spite of the city's attempt to take it away through eminent domain. But the displacement, I mean, Alexandria is, it's a great city to visit now, and it's, I'm amazed at the number of "Black Lives Matter" signs. But, within a few hundred feet of where we are, it was a bustling African American community, and they have been misplaced. Because of decisions that the city has made you know, neighborhoods and families have been displaced, and not so much because they wanted to. Because they just could not afford and every attempt was to move them out. You know, with the projects. I mean, I think there are a few that are still left in terms of affordable housing.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:53:12] We, just to go back, I know you want to mention your siblings' names and their birth dates. Do you mind saying their names?

Judy Belk [01:53:21] Sure. I am one of six children. I'm number 2. Vickie Lynn Belk was born in 1951. Next came me. And then my brother, Lonnie George Belk, Jr. He was born in 1956 and he's often referred to as "Ricky." Funny story about that. Then, Kay Denise Belk was born in 1957. Aprile Belk was born in 1959. And, our baby of the family, Granada Belk was born in 1961.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:54:09] Great, great. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want to mention?

Judy Belk [01:54:16] Oakland Church.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:54:18] Oh, right, right, right. Oakland Church. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I totally forgot.

Judy Belk [01:54:23] And just my great grandfather, John Wesley Casey.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:54:26] Yeah. So, can you talk more about your connection with Oakland?

Judy Belk [01:54:28] Yeah, and I, and great grandfather. I just, and I think all of this is more of, of his life and his contributions. I'm sure my, in my aunt's oral history. But, this is why I heard that it was a big partnership when John Wesley Casey married Ada Adams. The Adams family goes back generations. And one of the reasons they

were so prominent is, they had longer tenure as being freed, going back to George Adams. But, they married, and I think she had property. And John Wesley Casey was a prominent activist and leader in the African American community. There's, actually, he's on the monument in the African American cemetery. What I've always known was that he was one of the founders of the first colored school. And, and he was one of the founders of our family church, Oakland Baptist Church, which was founded in 1892 and is, you know, viewed as a real landmark in Seminary and I always kind of viewed as our kind of community center. I'm not particularly religious, but as in with most cases, Oakland Baptist Church served as an important gathering place, a place of, of both civic engagement. It was also the place that arranged trips to, to outside of Virginia where there weren't always, you know, there were segregated pools and parks, and there were places in Maryland and other parts and the church would arrange that. It was where you saw Black folks, one of the rare places where you saw Black folks in charge. Dressed up in their suits, and it was where social activities happened, and that it was the one place on Sunday, you know, you saw everyone in the community gather.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:57:53] Are there any specific memories from Oakland that come to mind, like any special events?

Judy Belk [01:57:56] Oh, when I was baptized. And, and it was pretty typical that, you know, when you were about 7 or 8 or 9, you were baptized on Christmas morning. So Vickie and I were baptized. I didn't quite want to be baptized, so I brought Reverend Mills, who was one of the ministers, underwater with me. So I've been told about that. It's, you know, it's a place where, you know I have both great memories, joyous memories. Miss Elizabeth Douglas, who for generations, you know, taught, I think she taught my mother in Sunday school. She taught me in Sunday school and we put on Easter plays, Christmas plays. Learned how to, my first attempt at public speaking. It's where I was married 45 years ago. But it was also 45 years ago, you know, 3 weeks later, that I came back to the church and buried Vickie who, you know, was the maid of honor at my wedding and was, you know, murdered, unfortunately, shortly after that. So, funerals. It's where my mom's funeral was, my father's funeral. My grandmother's funeral. So, it's an important institution in terms of history and it, too, an example of land. Land ownership by the Black community. And land being donated by the Black community to erect a church. Lots of commercialization around it. And, again, a place where the city, where the community fought to hold on to that because, it too, was threatened when, when T.C. Williams [High School] was built. And, I mean, I'm so glad, to see that, you know, change happens and, slowly [chuckles], but the fact we're doing this interview? I mean, I think 30 years ago, you know, when I tried to get information about what had

happened at Minnie Howard and my life, at least the office of the school district was not so interested in revisiting that. You know, we haven't talked about it, but the reparations fund established by the Virginia Theological Seminary coming to grips with its history. Acknowledging that that facility was built with slave labor and that they mistreated my elders and many more during the Jim Crow era. Now, maybe based on the cash that they're giving, I could buy you a cup of coffee one day. But they did provide us a gift in terms of documenting, through the use of professional genealogists, our family history and trying to keep the community together.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:01:57] Yeah.

Judy Belk [02:01:57] I think we're probably--

Francesco De Salvatore [02:02:01] Yeah. Yeah, I have one last question. It is to close things out. Is there a memory, if you could, that you would hold on, hold on to forever? What's one memory that you would hold on to?

Judy Belk [02:02:24] I think for me, they're painful memories. But the one pleasant, joyous was the day we moved into the house on Woods Place. It represented so much in terms of, in big and small ways of, of a new beginning. Of possibilities. Of community. Collective action. The power of the community. The newness of the house, the newness of, of my life kind of beginning, you know, as, as a 13 year old. And, and it was, it was really a, an amazing community effort. And it was a community, amazing community story.

Francesco De Salvatore [02:03:36] Well, Judy, thanks so much for speaking with me today. I appreciate it.

Judy Belk [02:03:41] Thank you. And I, you know, the only thing I would want to say, because, in many ways we're telling history. I don't know who will be listening to this long after I'm gone. But, if they're relatives, maybe my granddaughter Ada. That she is, she's, you know, part of a long line of, of strong African American women and men who've worked hard to get her to, to where she and others are. So. So the story continues. And I'm grateful that the city is providing the opportunity for me to tell my story. And, and to do it in an honest, transparent way. So thank you.