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Oral History Interview

with

Stephanie Johnson

Interviewer: Kerry James Reed

Narrator: Stephanie Johnson

Location of Interview:
Llyod House 220 N Washington St, Alexandria, VA 22314

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Transcriber: J Orisha

Summary:
Stephanie Johnson shares her childhood memories, career journey, youth involvement, and reflections on Alexandria, Virginia's rapid decline of Black neighborhoods and communities.

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Stephanie Johnson [00:00:01] My name is Stephanie Johnson. I'm 66 years old. Today is March 13th, 2024. And I'm at the Llyod House.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:17] My name is Kerry James Reed. I'm 27 years of age, is the 13th of March 2024 and we are at the Llyod House. So, thank you so much, Mrs. Johnson, for agreeing to do this interview. It's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you these past few weeks. I guess I'm going to start just from the very beginning. Where were you born?

Stephanie Johnson [00:00:32] I was born here in Alexandria, Virginia, at the old Alexandria Hospital, located a few blocks away, on Duke Street. I'm also a twin.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:43] A twin?

Stephanie Johnson [00:00:43] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:44] When were you born?

Stephanie Johnson [00:00:45] November 24th, 1957.

Kerry James Reed [00:00:48] November 24th, 1957. Terrific. So, could you describe some of your earliest memories that you have?

Stephanie Johnson [00:00:55] Yes. I'm going to start with maybe around in about the age of 5. We was living at 1321 Queen Street here in Alexandria. My earliest memory is walking to the Hopkins House for the first time by myself. The Hopkins House was like an organization. If I had to kind of, like, summarize it in my mind, some type of social services for Afro-Americans in the community, let's say round about maybe 1964, 65. I remember going into the two-story building. It was a house for real. I was told that they advocated for working class people, well, working class, low blow Blacks, daycare and probably, I'm going to say probably early education if kids went to school. So yeah, that would be my first memory that can think of. My second memory [is] living on Queen Street was, a funeral that took place probably the same age round about 5, 5 and a half. And I remember getting this box stool looking in the window to watch that particular funeral procession.

Kerry James Reed [00:02:35] That's interesting. So, at 5 years old you're interested in funerals.

Stephanie Johnson [00:02:38] Yeah, I was. I know it may sound like I'm morbid, but I think that was my first experience like with death. I really didn't know what death was. I just took it as a person was just basically sleep, no movement. But I didn't have a fear of it. And I guess as I was progressing a little bit in age, I got to understand that was what it was. It was death. But you have to understand like, in my culture or Black culture at that time, for me, we were not really exposed to that genre of life. That was more so like adult. You know, you witnessed that as an adult or if it was immediately happening to you and your family in which I remember going to Georgia with my mom when my grandfather died. Me and my siblings, well the younger siblings. And it was basically the same thing. So, my fear of stepping on that stool box, or that that step to look at my grandfather was more intriguing, because now this is like my second time, being in the presence of a dead body. So, of course, for me, I had to touch, the inquisitiveness of looking because I seen something in his nose, you know? So now I'm really in tune to the physical aspect of what's going on. Now, my grandfather did not lay in state. Well, what they call lay in state in the house. My grandfather was at a funeral parlor, which was across the street from my grandmother's house. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:04:39] Interesting. So how old are you when you went out of Georgia?

Stephanie Johnson [00:04:48] I was not in school, so that had to be between 5 and a half, I remember my grandfather died like October here like the fall, but that my four younger siblings, we were not in school. We were not school age. Well, because of the way our birthday ran did not allow

us to go to school because our birthday is in November. So that rule still applies. If you did not reach, your sixth birthday by October, you had to be retained, a year behind.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:35] Interesting. So, going back t, the first funeral you witnessed when you were 5 years old, how far was that from 1321 Queen?

Stephanie Johnson [00:05:45] Round the corner.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:45] On the corner.

Stephanie Johnson [00:05:46] It was on Payne Street.

Kerry James Reed [00:05:47] On Payne Street. Was it a was it a Black funeral?

Stephanie Johnson [00:05:50] It was a Black funeral. I've always wondered why that particular family had the body to lay in state like. Like I said, I know it had to be some type of mortuary [inaudible] for funeral homes right here. I just did not have that experience at knowing where it was located and to a little later years.

Kerry James Reed [00:06:17] Okay. So, can you describe the neighborhood around 1321 Queen Street?

Stephanie Johnson [00:06:23] Yes. 1321 Queen Street is pretty much what it is today. Even though some of the redevelopments have taken place. But 1321 was a neighborhood where you know, people knew each other. People went to each other homes. My mother was a cook by trade. Okay, so you smell my mom's cooking all the way up the street, you know. And her neighbors would, they would actually come down and ask for chicken or whatever. She was cooking things greens. My mother is a Southerner. So, in that retrospect, yeah, she really was a very good cook, you know? So, it was very friendly. It was a very friendly, well knitted neighborhood. Everyone knew everyone, you know, even around the corner. And even on Payne Street. But that was where we attended church, in our community. And similarly, I go past there frequently. Anyway, like the house we lived in, which was a single-family house is now on that particular road is inclusive to the Brick. At first it was just a frame type of house. So now it's a brick type of house. You know, so, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:08:11] You mentioned that your mother was an excellent cook.

Stephanie Johnson [00:08:14] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:08:15] So during the funerals that you experienced growing up, was she the one that provided food? What were some rituals that your family practiced around funerals?

Stephanie Johnson [00:08:29] If you take me back to my early memories, I really don't have that memory because first of all, I didn't experience funerals at a young age. It was kind of like, I'm not gonna say taboo, but like, children just was not involved in that process. Not unless you kind of like snuck or it happened to just appear before you. And either you was afraid of it, or you embraced it. I was just a kid that embraced death. I just embraced it. I don't know the reason behind it. But it just was. It was just always fascinating how something is living and then the next minute, something is

dead. You know, but I must say, for my family, I mostly got the experience from my mother side, because a lot of time we would travel back to her hometown. Like, I attended my grandfather's funeral. I attended my grandmother's funeral. I think my grandma died like a year after my grandfather because I remember going away the following year, but it was just me and my mom in December. It was Christmas time. So, I didn't get to celebrate Christmas with my brothers at home, you know, I had to wait till I got back to celebrate Christmas, but it was still like the children was not a part of it. I don't know the rhyme or the reason behind it, but in my family, we just was not a part of it. Like, you could go view the body, but then after that, the saying was "children were to be seen and not heard." So, during that process, a lot of time when the adults gathered in the family room, the children were sat somewhere else. So, we didn't mingle. Well, I didn't get a chance to intermingle with aunts or whatever. But I do remember, like, after the funeral, because you got all these kin people that came in from different locations or localities. Before we left then we blend in. But still, when I look at the emotional piece of it or the makeup of it, like I didn't really see the solemness or the sadness that one may have had. You know. Emotionally, I think they shield us from that.

Kerry James Reed [00:11:32] So, you clearly had a had a keen understanding or at least, you know, fascination with death as a child. Do you remember going to any cemeteries as a child by yourself or with your parents?

Stephanie Johnson [00:11:46] No, not with my parents, but with friends. Mischievously, you know, being mischievous. Matter of fact, down the street, this, Christ Church. That was my first experience of actually being in a cemetery. And it was a grave down here, and encasement that the person was buried in. I don't know what they was doing with it, but like it had cracked before they actually repaired it. So, me being who I am, I'm lurking because I want to see what's inside of the entombment, or what we call the lining of the grave. And I would basically just literally peep. I mean, you know, try to really get a look at it. You know, but my friends there, they were like, "Come on," you know, they were spooked by all of that. And I'm like, "They're not going to bother you," you know? But I wasn't spooked by that. I don't know, it's just, you know, the more I think about it, I'm like, maybe I was a little strange, but then again, not, you know, I mean, we all have our, things that we're interested in, you know? Yeah. So, I would say that would have been my first experience, not with my parents. Didn't even know none of the people that was in the cemetery, but just reading their tombstones. And a lot of them appear to have been, like, military style type of people, or prominent whites that lived in Alexandria. You know, not that I knew them.

Kerry James Reed [00:13:45] Yeah. So, aside from the cemeteries and the funerals, where were some of your favorite aspects about your neighborhood growing up?

Stephanie Johnson [00:13:58] I remember I said I lived in two different neighborhoods? I left Queen Street. I had to be about, and all this is just hypothetically in age because now I got to go back in memory. Right? So, I moved to 720 North Patrick Street, which is now classified as, the Black Historic District of Alexandria. I went there, I was in the 2nd grade, and I still reside there now. So, my when we moved from Queen Street, which was more so single-family owners, I guess. When I moved up on Patrick Street and I'm in the Parker Gray district, dynamics has changed. And by that, we're living now closer to public housing. People that lived in public housing. I lived across from public housing. But my block, consists of maybe 10, even now, maybe 10 houses. And once again, the neighborhood, we became very close knit. Matter of fact, one of my neighbors, they were

Caucasians, the Masseys and even though segregation was still prevalent. We still got to mingle with them, even though their grandmother, she would let it be known to us who we were, but we were kind of, like, just laugh at her. Ms. Harris. When I look back at Ms. Harris she was aging. Now some of the stuff that she would say to us being Black children, it really didn't penetrate, like, you know, she would use the n***** word, like, "Get those n***** out of out of the house. Get those n****** out of the backyard." You know, but it didn't affect. I guess that's what I want to say. It didn't affect us because we still went up there. You know, it didn't matter what Ms. Harris said. We still went up there. Then too Ms. Harris passed, but we wasn't a part of that ceremony. So, I don't know culturally how they dealt with her. But yeah. Very close knit. A lot different from today. Yeah. My neighborhood is diverse. Public housing is no longer in existence. Which is very sad. But yeah, it was very engaging. That's where I got a lot of experience from, the neighborhood. Like the political piece, the political movement, rather. Got to be a part of some of that. The mule train that was located on North Henry Street. It was some kind of lumber place. They used to have train tracks and, they gathered there, or just walking with some of the community activists, protesting on equal rights, you know, housing, you know, different things like that, education. So, yeah. So, Patrick Street was really where, I would say my awareness. I got a lot of awareness from going back to death, I had a friend to die and now like I'm no older than maybe 10. So, my friend Jewel, I remember, playing with her a couple of days before she actually got sick, and then Jewel got so sick that, you know, you go look for your friend. She lived in public housing, like, a block over, and she couldn't come out, you know? I probably didn't understand, really, the depth of her sickness. So, Jewel passed, and I remember being 9 years old, dressing myself for her funeral. The church that it was located in was at Saint John's, which is a couple of blocks over from me. Did not go preparing. But wasn't afraid. You know what I'm saying? Like to see her in the casket, she just appeared to be, like, sleeping. But then that's when I became like aware enough to know, like, can this happen to me? Now I'm putting it into to me. You know, like so all my experience has been adults. But now I'm seeing my first child. Well, first friend, even across the street from me, that family had a death, which was a kid, but I was not impact because I didn't go to it. So, it did not impact. But Jewel was like an impact. And I didn't know where they buried her at until recently. I just found where she's located. And to have read her headstone. And the feeling that I got it was like I finally found you because I never knew, you know. That was something. I mean, you know, you don't go and ask the person where she buried. I mean, you know, it just never dawned on me. Even though I know her family, it just never really, dawned on me. You know, to have asked that particular question. But I'm glad that now I really know what she's located. So, I have relatives that's buried in this same location. So, when I go put flowers on them, I put flowers on her.

Kerry James Reed [00:21:31] Where she buried?

Stephanie Johnson [00:21:33] Coleman Cemetery. And that's really Fairfax, but they have Alexandria address.

Kerry James Reed [00:21:44] So when your friend Jewel died, how did your parents try to explain death to you? What did they do?

Stephanie Johnson [00:21:55] I don't really think that they really explained it to me because once again you know, culturally, I just don't know why our parents did not. And I guess it was the maturity level. That's what I'm going to attest it to. You only got invited in when they felt that you was ready, I guess, on a mental level, to deal with death, you know, because, you know, children

probably was overly emotional, but I don't even remember that part of it. Because there were children at her funeral, like her cousins. But when I think back in my in my memory, they weren't overly emotional. And I remember sitting there, but I remember coming out. My dad was waiting for me. But that was an experience I don't think he really wanted me to have by myself. But I was okay when I came out. I mean, you know, I was okay, you know? And so, I just remember my father just being solemn, you know? He wasn't chastising me or anything like that. He was just [said], "Why did you do that by yourself? And I think I just said I just wanted to say goodbye or something like that, you know, but being in church and I can actually see the possession of the funeral. And up here you just have this little girl sitting all by herself, and adults around her. But wasn't consoled by anybody. I'm talking about anybody, you know. I just felt like now, as an adult, it was just a lonely experience. Just being there, you know? Even though it was a lot of people there. Just a lonely experience. Now moving into Steele and Patrick Street, my little cousin died. Her name was Rosetta. She was a down syndrome child, but they did not call it that. In the latter part of the 60s, early part of the 70s, the children was classified as Mongoloids before they came with the new technology name, down syndrome. Now, I'm a teenager now, still was not allowed to participate in the procession. Yes, you can go view her body, but not the possession piece. So, there's still like a detachment. So, I'm early teens. So, it's still like emotionally, there's still a detachment. Once again, like my family didn't have for her like, a repass. Maybe because she was a baby when she passed at 1 year old. She had just turned 1. There was no repass. Everybody just went back or dispersed back to their homes after her funeral. It wasn't held in a church. Probably, if I had to think about it, privately. It was private. She's out in Coleman too, and that was it. You know. So, when I think back, at my aunt, it was like once again, solemn grief, solemn by myself type of thing. Moving a little older. Still a teenager. I had to be about 14 or 15 when Gail died. Gail Brandon, she was killed in a car accident coming back home. Now, that's where I connected emotionally. Still intrigued. I'm still intrigued by death. So now this is where I make my decision that I was going to go into mortuary science. Because, now I'm really in tuned to how the body is really prepared and looking for the same things that I was looking for as far my grandfather, right. This particular undertaker was very good, Philip Bill. This man can recreate you. His hands was very gifted, as you know, like, if you was that distorted, he can restore you back to your physical look. Very good Undertaker. So, I decided then, after Gail had passed, "I think this is what I want to do." Yeah, that was real intriguing. Like the stiffness. How he reconstructed certain parts of her face, you know. So yeah, that's when I decided to become a mortician.

Kerry James Reed [00:28:27] How did you go about trying to become a mortician. Did you talk to Mr. Bell?

Stephanie Johnson [00:28:33] No I didn't talk to Mr. Bell. I think it was. It was more so, Mr. Green. I didn't talk to Mr. Bell. Those two funeral homes was located, pretty much in the same area of Alexandria, Phillip Bell, it used to be Louis, he inherited that from a relative. His rental home which was on Wilkes Street on the south side. South Wilkes. Green Funeral Home is still located there today off of Franklin Street. So, both funeral homes was used. And this is just, my theory. Green, it appears that he got more business.

Kerry James Reed [00:29:36] Okay.

Stephanie Johnson [00:29:37] Why? I don't know, but. Yeah. Green used to be, to me, I think, more of the dominant funeral home that people use. Like it was like a split. That Blacks would use.

But now, my experience came [meeting] this lady named Helena Pratt, and she worked for Alexandria Mental Health. And now we kind of like jumping around, but, like, you remember I told you that Alexandria was going to, like, reconstructing itself, like housing for Blacks, jobs, so what Alexandria Mental Health did was saying, was, "Okay, how do we make it better. So, let's start with some of these kids. And let's do some programs for them to give them [and] us a better outlook in life." So, I was asked, "What would you like to do? What career would you like to have?" And mind you, I wanted so much mortuary science. And so, she connected me with a funeral home which was predominantly white. Well, was white. Murphy Funeral Home in Arlington. He had several funeral [homes]. But this particular one that I went to, was up off of Wilson Boulevard. State of the art. And you're talking about in the late 70s, his vision of what a funeral home probably should have been was already state of the art. And I, too, have frequently, went to his establishments and the state of the arts is still there. I mean, you know, he's had built around there. And when I say state of the art, I'm talking about he had a shaft for when the body come in, the elevator would bring it up or down. I mean, that's what I mean. He had the, what they call the spray. Like, before you go into, the embalming part, you know, where it disinfects you before you go in. That's what I mean by state-of-the-art type of facility. So, I went there, you know, and, a young teenager, really don't know about life, like. Yeah, you know, like men being fresh with you or anything, because those are things I never had to deal with. I didn't deal with those things in my community. You know. To be honest with you, really did not know how to associate with whites because that wasn't my world. So, you can kinda say I was gullible, you know. And went to the funeral home. We were going to set it up to where I was going to do an internship. Now I could not embalm. But I could be in the room with the embalmer, but I could not embalm. I don't even think they let you even do that now. State laws. You know, it's different laws. So, or do the reception piece due to the business side of it. And so, they only had one school which was John Tyler in Petersburg. So, I think I was in my senior year of school. Yeah. So, you know, one of the associates would talk to me about that and dah-dah-dah. Well, this particular day, you know, the young gentleman did something, not Mr. Murphy. So, we're going to make that clear. Did some that was inappropriate and touching me. And after that, I did not go back.

Kerry James Reed [00:34:50] Can't blame me for that.

Stephanie Johnson [00:34:52] Yeah. You know. And the tension was still. Even though we have integrated at that time in a lot of things, we still lived in our own world. The Black community was still in our own space, you know, just as well as whites. They still was in their own space. So, but yes, we are mingling more. Because I had white friends in school. Still, do you know. So, it wasn't really that bad racially. It wasn't really that bad. So. Yeah. Miss, Helena Pratt. So, after that didn't work out for me. I took dance lessons.

Kerry James Reed [00:35:51] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [00:35:51] And which they paid for it. And I met this teacher, Ellie Greyson, who took me to Dance Exchange under her wing. Ellie was a professional dancer. So, now I'm getting other experience. But mind you, while I'm dancing, I am a teacher assistant. So now I'm involved with kids, you know? So that was like the second type of, I guess career that kind of like this fell in my lap. Yeah. But I, you know, and I tell you all the time, I am a server. My family, we are servers to others, you know, and I guess we could thank my mother for that. You know, she served the others as well. Yeah. Maybe I shouldn't call us service because I'm not looking at it as a negative

annotation, because that's not what I'm saying. We are here. We are put here for a purpose, you know, and it is to help others.

Kerry James Reed [00:37:09] Absolutely. Briefly, before we go into your career, as a server to others, you talked about your father and mother a bit. But could you describe them for me?

Stephanie Johnson [00:37:20] My dad and my mom?

Kerry James Reed [00:37:21] Yes, please.

Stephanie Johnson [00:37:23] Oh wow. My mom. Meek, but yet strong. Humble. Very pleasant, very knowledgeable. And a lot of things for her not to have been raised in Alexandria. Knew a lot of people. For her not to be born in Alexandria. My dad. Quiet. But fierce. He was a very quiet man. Social to a good degree. My dad worked for Atlanta Research, which was up the street up off of North Washington Street. And, they say that he saved the building [when it] caught on fire. And he went in, and he saved someone. Yeah. My father was quiet, but it was certain things you just didn't tamper with.

Kerry James Reed [00:38:58] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [00:38:59] Don't mess with his wife. Don't mess with his children. And that was it. My brother Michael resembled my dad a lot. You know. But yet. What else can I say about them. I, and I know you like them you're saying. Well, she smiled because that's because I have really good memories of my parents. Mama worked in even evening time. My dad took care of us. How many men you know? And I will always honor my father for that because my mom. Had to take a job where she had to leave her children. You know, my dad went to work from, let's say, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. My mom went to work from 4 p.m. to about midnight. Okay. So even though the house was clean, the food was cooked before she left. My dad would come home, and he'd take care of his six children, you know, not really leading a life for himself. I mean, if you think about it, you know, he did not really lead a life for herself. He did not get a second job like my mom did until we were like older, like teenagers, where we could really kind of, like, fend for ourselves. Yeah. But they really work together as a unit. Like, I know people have struggles, but they made sure that their children was far removed from whatever. You know, and that's selfless to me. You know, when a person just constantly just give up themselves to their kids, you know. Yeah. He was strict. Strict meaning, you're going to do what you're supposed to do as a child.

Kerry James Reed [00:41:29] Did your mother or your father ever talk about your family history?

Stephanie Johnson [00:41:39] My dad would. But it was like my mom who really poured what we know even about my dad side. And then you got to look at the era in which they lived in. I don't think Alexandria was a glorifying place for Blacks as far as him coming up. It was hardship for his family. It was also tragedy for his family. My grandfather got hurt at his employment went home and died. My father's oldest brother was shot and killed gambling five cent, 25 cent, it wasn't worth it. I mean, you know what I'm saying? So, I think as far as my father's side, I think for him he became just numb to some things, to life. He became numb. I didn't see my dad really express his feelings until I was a woman. I mean to where I really could say, "Oh, my dad loves me." That kind of feeling. Like my mom could tell us, but my dad - I'm not going to say he was incapable, it's just I

look at the era and the time. Children in his era was not coddled the way we were coddled. And I'm just surmising, you know, nurture versus nature, you know? I can only empathize with what he may not have gotten. So, if you don't get it, you can't produce it. I mean you know what I mean. Now, remember I told you he was strict. Strict as in, "You're going to be obedient. You're going to follow the rules." That's what I mean. Not abusive. I'm talking about just discipline that he discipline us enough to where we are who we are today. I don't have no bad memories of my parents. I really thank them because they gave a lot of themselves working two and three jobs just to provide for us. You know, I see what type of parents in the community that some majority of my friends, they were not brought up with a two-parent family. They just wasn't. Public housing you couldn't have a husband living with you. I mean, most of them didn't. Why, because certain things you couldn't have. And I mean, it's different now, but you know what I'm saying? Was my parents financially wealthy enough to have purchased a home. No, they wasn't, but God provides. You know, I remember my mom telling us that she applied for public housing. They wouldn't give it to her. They told us it was over income. Over overqualified. How could you be overqualified for something. I wouldn't be a millionaire and want to go live in public housing. But I'm just saying, you know it didn't work for her.

Kerry James Reed [00:46:20] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [00:46:20] As the way it worked for my aunt, her sister but it didn't work for my mom. You know? So. You know, they struggled. That's what I mean by they struggled. She had to leave her family in order to make it work. You know, couldn't find a day job, so. But she was the head cook. And anybody to talk about Dixie [inaudible], you know, and I'm talking about of another race. They even knew her by name. And they only want her cooking. You know, so, I'm very proud of that, you know. And the same with my dad. You know, people say nice things about him. You know, so they were good people.

Kerry James Reed [00:47:20] So very briefly, can you tell me where you went to school growing up?

Stephanie Johnson [00:47:25] Yes. Charles Houston Elementary School, grades 1 through 6. Parker Gray Middle school. I only went there one year, and I tell you that reason in a minute. Seventh grade. Now here come integration is 622 plan. That means that the Blacks in our community, were now being bused to other schools. So, I went to, Minnie Howard on Braddock Road, which is down the ninth-grade center. One year. That was eighth grade. Then I came back. I went to George Washington Middle School for two years. And then from George Washington School, I went to T.C. Williams, where I graduated. And that was different. I think that for me equal rights was fine. And I'm just being honest. And yes, we as Blacks wanted equal things. We wanted the same opportunities that our white counterparts or Jews that lived in the community. We wanted the same opportunities. Minnie Howard was not a good experience. Why? Because now you have the fear. And I think for me, that's when I realized what racism was.

Kerry James Reed [00:49:32] Do you remember any particular experiences with integration that made you realize, okay, this is what racism is?

Stephanie Johnson [00:49:40] Yes. Some of these students, did not like Black kids. They verbally told you that they didn't like you. And you know that that was something that came from home.

The style of the principalships. It was different. We got discipline different from the white counterparts. You could do the same infraction, but mine would be more punitive than yours. It's the same infraction. You know. To the point where we as Blacks, the children we start resisting because we wasn't used to that. It wasn't like my parents, what they went through. We were shielded. Protected. And even though you have riots going on, we were still protected. We still didn't have, like, interaction with whites. Because our neighborhood was not white. It did not consist of whites. We had maybe a few whites that lived within the community. But not like overall, like 95% is a Black neighborhood. You know, opposed to what it is now. It's more diverse now, but you know. So, as a kid or a teenager, whichever way you want to classify, I'm like, this can't be real, you know? You heard your parents talk about it. You heard them speak about it, but they couldn't give you the experience. That was something that you had to go to yourself. You know you had to gather your own experience. So, I would say I was prepared that one year and I took that. And it's real strange how bad experience always stay present in mind.

Kerry James Reed [00:52:25] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [00:52:26] You understand what I'm saying? Like, even to this day. The two principles. Mean spirit. There were mean spirit people. Because they could not accept the fact that time was changing. And it waits for no one. You're changing in the midst of it. Or you remain bitter to the bitter end. You know. One of the principals I got to work under him and that same experience. To the point I ended up as an adult telling him what that experience was for me.

Kerry James Reed [00:53:26] So, when you were working under this principle, he was mean spirited as well?

Stephanie Johnson [00:53:30] Yeah, still, he was still mean spirited. We'll probably end up dying that way, but, when you can't accept - I'm going to sum up people, get away from the race part. People. We do the same. We breathe. We die. We breathe. We die. The same. It's the same. Same blood that run through your veins, runs through mine. You know, and I remember, like, reverting back because this particular principle used the tone with me as an adult, and essentially took me back to a place that I couldn't tell him as a child. But I told him as an adult, and I'm not talking about being belligerent either. Was able to speak definitively of what I needed him to know.

Kerry James Reed [00:54:53] Absolutely. Well, that's terrific they were able to express yourself to him, at least as an adult. That's fabulous. So besides, for your interest in the mortuary sciences, when you were a teenager, did you do any other extracurricular activities at school or anything else?

Stephanie Johnson [00:55:18] I was in drama. I did music. Matter of fact, I went to, state. I didn't win, but just being able to go to the state level.

Kerry James Reed [00:55:34] For music?

Stephanie Johnson [00:55:35] Vocal.

Kerry James Reed [00:55:39] Oh, fabulous. That was terrific. So then when you did go to dance school later on, you had some experience with the drama and the music then?

Stephanie Johnson [00:55:53] Vocal always because that was part of the church. So, you get that up out of church. Drama. I'm trying to figure out. How did I get lured to that? I always liked performing arts. So, yeah. Not that I had the actual experience with it, but I enjoyed it when I, you know, church plays or, you know, recess. But the vocal piece really came from the church, and then my mom sang a lot around the house. So, they played music. I think I could really say that my family is musical inclined. They love music. Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [00:56:48] What church did you go to?

Stephanie Johnson [00:56:51] I used to go to Mount Jezreel Baptist Church. That's on Payne Street. That's one of your older Black churches too.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:01] And that's where you start to sing?

Stephanie Johnson [00:57:05] Yeah.

[00:57:05] Okay. Yeah. Cool. Was there a choir that you joined at church?

Stephanie Johnson [00:57:10] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:12] Tell me about that, was just gospel music?

Stephanie Johnson [00:57:15] It was basically gospel. Now, you know, when you go to a Black church, the church jumps out with high emotions. Yeah. Gospel songs. Some contemporary but mainly gospel. But some. Excuse me.

Kerry James Reed [00:57:52] So once you were done with high school, and you had decided after your experience trying to be a mortuary scientist that maybe it wasn't a career path for you. What made you pivot towards the social services?

Stephanie Johnson [00:58:13] After I graduated, I knew that the government was not for me. I did not want to be nobody's secretary. So, I ran from the government real fast. I knew that, nah, this is not what I want. I don't want to sit here and type nothing for nobody. So once again, because of the movements and the activists that was in Alexandria, they were still pushing for equality in jobs. So, I started Northern Virginia College, and I was going to take juvenile corrections. Employment for a kid my age was marginalized. So, I always had resources. This particular day, I went down to the Social Security Board, but they also used to have jobs, you know. So, I would watch for jobs and. I had seen this job, and they were saying Case Aid Assistance. So, you know, I was in social services. But you had to take a test. You had to score. So, I took the test. And evidently passed. And then I was called in. So, once I was called in, I was placed at Alexandria Social Services, and there I met, a lady by the name of Jane Angrist. Jane Angrist was from Minnesota. Real nice. Caucasian lady. Very nice, very nice. Jane became a mentor of mine. And I didn't know how to drive. Jane sent me to driving school. Oh, that's how I got back in college. Jane put me back in college. Northern Virginia. And then I became a Case Aid for the city. Well, I was at social services. So, when you are under that title of Case Aid, that means that you're going to learn the whole gamut of the makeup of what social services is. So social services had the child welfare part of it. They also had the senior part, the geriatric part of it. I didn't do the finance part until later years, but then they had the finance piece of

it, component. But my two components at that time were the geriatric and the children. So, you couldn't pick say, I couldn't say, "Oh no, I don't want to do the elderly." I had to do both. It was like something like an internship. Once you, find out where you was going or what you was going to actually do, it was like, welfare to work. Then some of the ladies want public assistance. And that was also a program that they had to go through. Well, out of the seven of us, I was the only one that maintained the job. Well, I was selected, put it like that. So, having both experiences. And I had already had experience in working with kids. So, what I didn't have experience in was working with the seniors, geriatric, and a lot of times they did not send me into my own community. I was sent into other communities. And I'm not talking about low-income communities neither. I met a man named Mr. Beady, and he worked for the railroads. He was a double amputee. White man. And, the first time I met him, he was like, "Why are you doing this?" And so, I think what he was saying is like, "You're better than this. Why would you want to come help me?" And that I think for me, that's when I was beginning to learn what my purpose in being in this world, what is really [my] purpose? You know, and so I said, "I don't mind helping you." But he was adamant, you know, and I really didn't understand it then. And I got to know Mr. Beady about a week or two. I mean, that's all. We didn't have a long span relationship. And so, I kept coming back and I kept showing up until he became a little comfortable with me. So, this one particular day, I told him, "I'll see you tomorrow!" And so, he said, "Okay." And this time he said, "I'm gonna leave the door unlocked for you." So that was trust. I mean, I'm like, okay, you trust me. So, I said, "Okay." And when I got there, he was not up. He was still in the bed, so his door was cracked. And I remember going and, you know, knocking on the door, say, hey, Mr. Beady, I'm here. And Mr. Beady was dead. He had expired out. I was not afraid of that part of him being dead. I was afraid now because I called back to the office. So, I have to report that Mr. Beady is dead. So once again, I'm at a place that I'm not feeling good. Because, well, I couldn't talk to Jane. Because Jane wasn't in. But I had another supervisor, Jane, just the overseer. But the main supervisor, she [said] the directive is you can't leave. I gotta call the police. So, I'm scared now because you're talking about calling the police. I never knew that when death occurs in somebody's home, police going to show up. So, I'm panicking. I call my dad, so my dad get off his job. He comes where I'm at, you know? And so, and I'm telling my father, "I didn't do anything to this man. And when I got here, baa baa baa baa baa baa baa." You know, nobody from the agency came. Nobody came from the agency. And to be questioned by the police and his family called. I mean, you know what I'm saying? You know, I'm a young adult, but I don't, this is a world I never been in. So, you know, my dad was there, like, "Just tell them what you know, blah, blah, blah, blah," you know? And he was like, "They have to know that you didn't do anything to him or whatever." So, after that, you know, I kind of like left there saying, "Nah, they die too quick. I don't want to do this part of it." So, that's how I got elevated to work with just kids.

Kerry James Reed [01:07:43] So it's interesting because in this experience, with the death of Mr. Beady, you know, there was a lot of anxiety that you had around the calling the police and dealing with the more, formal elements, and yet, as a kid, these were some of the things that you never saw, that that was shielded from you. So, do you think that your experience as a kid with death affected your reaction with Mr. Beady?

Stephanie Johnson [01:08:12] I think so. Yeah, I think so. Because usually your experience comes from if you're knowledgeable. For me, if I'm knowledgeable in something. Yes, I would have a different reaction. But this was an area that I wasn't knowledgeable in. And then when the police came into a community, they weren't nice.

Kerry James Reed [01:08:40] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [01:08:41] I mean, they just wasn't. We didn't call any police our friend, or we didn't become friendly with them until they got Black police officers on the force.

Kerry James Reed [01:08:55] Right.

Stephanie Johnson [01:08:58] Who kind of like broke down the barriers. Now I have police friends, but I wouldn't have.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:05] When was the first time you remember seeing a Black police officer in Alexandria?

Stephanie Johnson [01:09:21] Whew! I had to have been like early teen years.

Kerry James Reed [01:09:30] But by the time you were with Mr. Beady it was still a majority white police force?

Stephanie Johnson [01:09:34] Majority white. But I knew a couple of Black police officers. It would have been nice if I would have got a Black police officer, you know. Because even still in transit, people come with their own theory or whatever. You know. We just didn't associate with police officers, right? And I knew a couple of them, young Black officers who came to the force, but I just still didn't have interaction with white police officers. I mean they never came to my home.

Kerry James Reed [01:10:29] So after the experience, Mr. Beady, you decided that working with the elderly was not for you?

Stephanie Johnson [01:10:33] Nah. They leave too soon. You don't know when they're going to check out. I mean, you know. Well, I know better now, but that was my mindset. Like, "Nah they die too fast. They don't have a good lifespan left. So no, I didn't want to." And then I had Ms. Register. She was white. She wasn't a nice white person either. You gotta look at everybody's era. I mean, I didn't understand it then, but now in talking. Now, did I like how she - she never called me by my name. She would call me Daffy. My name, not Daffy. I didn't understand where that was coming from. And no, you're probably thinking, "Oh maybe because..." No, she wasn't aging to the point that she couldn't call me by my name. That I think Daffy was a reference to something else. So, I didn't get a good experience with her. She said I stole a knife from her. A steak knife or something, I don't know. It just wasn't a good experience. So, by then, I'm like, "I don't want them."

Kerry James Reed [01:11:46] So after that, you moved into child Services?

Stephanie Johnson [01:11:48] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [01:11:48] Okay.

Stephanie Johnson [01:11:49] Social services had their own daycare center. So, I worked out of that before I went into the office.

Kerry James Reed [01:11:59] What were some difficulties you experience with the children as opposed to the elderly?

Stephanie Johnson [01:12:03] There was no difficulties. I was a natural there. That was a natural ability I had.

Kerry James Reed [01:12:09] Fabulous. So, tell me how you became involved in Dance Place?

Stephanie Johnson [01:12:18] Dance Place was through Ellie Grayson. Like I said, Ali was a professional dancer. So, Ellie gave me private lessons, which still came up under Halina Pratt. It was a couple of us that danced under Ellie. I was the only one that stayed. What I had learned about dance was that it allowed me to go inward to bring out who I really was. To me that's an emotional piece that you give to yourself, you know. No right or wrong. You're giving up yourself. You know, and a lot of times the pieces that we did was more spiritual. You remember I told you culturally that's the place where Blacks, when religiously when they're serving God, some have the ability to get on a spiritual level. And so, once I found out that I could get on a spiritual level. That was an experience that I really enjoyed.

Kerry James Reed [01:14:08] Yeah absolutely. You mentioned these dance pieces that you all would put on. What sort of dance were they?

Stephanie Johnson [01:14:29] Some of the techniques that you use, they derive from other dancers, like, Katherine Dunham. A lot of the Dunham technique, you know, she was the dancer who came away from the constriction of, you know, dance is not just straight. Dance can be whatever. It's all over. It's movement. So, I enjoyed, the isolation. It's a lot of terminology that come with dance. But it's a way of expressing you. Or through song you express whatever that is. So, when Ellie taught me, and I was learning from Ellie, then I told you the mental health piece, Ms. Pratt. So, because they was paying for me to go to Dance Place, I had to bring it back into the community. Like I couldn't get paid for it. I learned it. I come to teach you. Let me clarify a little bit, Halina Pratt, it was a grant for mental health, but it was also a program that I was in. It was called Youth Alternative Coalition. And a guy by the name of Randy Stevens. Leroy Baker and George Williams. Ellie Grayson, Pam Dunmore, Gwen Fairmont Moses. All these people worked under that. But you had people who were professional in the drama piece. Ellie and Pam was the professional in the dance piece. And the three guys I named; they were like the overseer. So, Randy would gather up all these kids. Like he would go to neighborhood like you had Uptown, Southside, Del Rey. Each part. So, what they would do would get kids. You had kids that were talented in singing. You had kids that were musically inclined, you know. So, what they did was they went into the community. They find these non-talent or talented kids. And we would do these productions. We would be down Tavern Square where we would do these different productions. Drama, dance, music. So that's how that umbrella actually came about. So, once you learn it or once I had learned the techniques, they said, "Okay, Stephanie, you're going to teach," say it was some it was some younger kids under me. "So, you have to teach them what you learned in Dance Place. Up to me, that was fast change. Why? Because I'm constantly practicing. This was really a practice for me. Not that I went anywhere with Dance Place. This was just where I got, what I call formal training.

Kerry James Reed [01:18:28] What was it like to teach the kids in the community how to dance?

Stephanie Johnson [01:18:31] Oh my gosh. I ran a program for like - matter of fact, that program ceased maybe 10 years ago. I ran it out of Alexandria Parks and Recreation. Very lucrative dance group too. It was an honor because, it was like, I didn't give my torch. I didn't pass it, but I lit other people's torches. You know. Can't give your torch away. You can only light others. And the girls that I taught, and I taught many kids, but the ones that I'm still close to is like maybe 25 of us. They still stay in contact with me. They now have children. But most importantly, all these girls have these degrees because that's what I pushed. I took them out of a place, what was so freely given to me, I gave back. And I pushed education to them.

Kerry James Reed [01:19:55] That's fabulous. You mentioned that while you were instructing at Dance Place, you were working for Parks and Rec.

Stephanie Johnson [01:20:04] Parks and Rec. Okay. I'm like my parents. Two jobs. Alexandria public school system. And I taught kids out of Alexandria public school system as well. Matter of fact, formerly, and they still use this now in the middle school level, started a girls' and boys' group. Well, what we call children who are at risk.

Kerry James Reed [01:20:37] When did you start that program?

Stephanie Johnson [01:20:43] Yeah. Okay. You are making me go too far back [laughs]. That was at Hammond Middle School, and at the time.

[01:20:52] Sparks Brown was the principal, so imma say that had to be over maybe ten years ago. And what we was finding out that a lot of kids there was having behavioral problems. Wasn't because academically they didn't know what they was doing. They were just bored. And then some of them did have issues that they was dealing with coming out of homes. And I sat down with Keisha Bogan, that's who it was [the principal]. Sat down and said, "Hey, why don't we start these groups with these kids? Why don't we da-da-da-da-da?" So, even though I was security, they allowed me to help troublesome kids. So, I still took what I knew at services. Everything that I knew at social services, the intervention, how to get to kids. I just took all of that collectively, and I just start distributing that. And that's how I end up getting some of the dance girls, they came out Hammond Middle school that I worked out of. And not only did I teach them the dance part, I taught them how to become young ladies. You know, how to take care of self, how to how to respect yourself enough that you don't let people do certain things with guys, you know, just teaching them, giving them life experience. Why? Because of their parents were detached. I mean, you know, because you're a parent don't mean you're a parent.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:42] Yeah. So, you mentioned to me earlier that, you know, calling yourself a server. You can really see it is very impressive. It seems like you've dedicated your entire career -.

Stephanie Johnson [01:22:56] To people.

Kerry James Reed [01:22:57] to others.

Stephanie Johnson [01:22:59] And even with my mom before she passed 6 years ago. These kids would come. We would just bring people home in groves, you know? I don't know. It's just who we were.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:17] So was that a value that your parents tried to instill in you and your siblings?

Stephanie Johnson [01:23:21] I think so, yeah, because we're all servers. I mean, I know people who're saying, "Why does she call themselves servers?" The whole household. We were servers. We served others We helped ourselves too, our family, but all of our careers have been careers [in] helping field.

Kerry James Reed [01:23:57] Fabulous. But recently you told me that you went back to school yourself?

Stephanie Johnson [01:24:02] Oh, yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:24:04] That's for yourself.

Stephanie Johnson [01:24:05] Yeah, yeah, that's for myself. Yeah. And I'm enjoying that because, well, it's local history. Alexandria history. And I remember telling you, I walk past this Llyod House all my life, never been inside the Llyod House.

Kerry James Reed [01:24:30] What has it been like to study local history?

Stephanie Johnson [01:24:34] Oh, wow. Very intriguing. Not only the Black history part of, but just the history of Alexandria, period. You know. Very intriguing. And each period is an era within a period. But it's sad that we have not really progressed to whereas everyone is really equal. That's the saddest part.

Kerry James Reed [01:25:22] Yeah. So, you mentioned to me, you know, studying the different eras in Alexandria, local history. And one of the things you mentioned was that during the, you know, the 70s when the city was experiencing urban renewal and things like that. You witnessed all that. So, I was curious about how you've seen gentrification impacts throughout your life. I guess we'll start with that.

Stephanie Johnson [01:25:47] Yeah. That's real sad, the gentrification part, because I know from a financial standpoint. You know this city has to move on with whatever, but you just don't disband a group of people. How did you wipe out a group of people to basically nonexistence? Do you not know how much money you have to make to live in the city of Alexandria? And that's two parts. Male, female. I mean, well, you know, whatever significant other. Over $300,000. You can't live here. But you wiping out a group of people? Blood, sweat and tears. Is worth it?

Kerry James Reed [01:26:59] So I know that, you know, growing up Parker Gray would have been called uptown.

Stephanie Johnson [01:27:05] Yes. We was uptown.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:07] So, besides, for the name change, what other physical changes have you seen?

Stephanie Johnson [01:27:13] Housing. Well, the public housing. Especially non-existent. We have maybe on my block, well my area in the Parker Gray district only two sets of the original. Which they should be like in the 90s or 100. They might those houses might be over 100 now, but yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:27:53] Imagining the disruption of the community that that has accompany gentrification and Parker Gray, can you speak to what it has been like to watch that disruption?

Stephanie Johnson [01:28:09] To watch it is like sad because you have newcomers. And I don't even think they're Alexandrians for real. They're not kind people. I mean, they not, you know, you came into where I've been all my life. And to turn your head when you see another human being because you afraid to speak? Come on. That's the turn of the century. We shouldn't have all these hang ups. You came into a community. Did you want us to bow down to you? And you want to think that we're to you [are] like ghosts. We're non-existent. No. No. And I told you, my block is diverse. I love my French neighbors. They've been there for, I know, 30 years. Because when she came there, she was a younger woman. So, when they're, like, for 30 years, a homeowner now for 30 years. Get along fine. Never debate. Never. But French people are different. I'm just telling you that. Their perception is just totally different. You know, then on the other side of me, they're Caucasians, then next to that, they're Asians, then the next house they're the originals like I am. We're the only two original people on that block. And we're Afro-American. And the rest of them, is others.

Kerry James Reed [01:30:25] Was there a point where it stopped feeling like the neighborhood, the group that you grew up in?

Stephanie Johnson [01:30:30] It's not a neighborhood anymore. It's not a neighborhood. The only one, like I said, that I could truly say that I have a relationship with is, is my French neighbors. We look out for each other, you know, get invited to whatever you have in your yard. You know, I mean, you know what I'm saying? Like. I just don't understand how I do it make it so easy for you just to turn your head from a human being? And it shouldn't be based upon my color. It shouldn't even be based upon my color. That you can't look a man in his eyes. What are you hiding? Because I ain't getting in hide. What are you hiding? Who you are? And I'm talking about the whole entire block. Then at the other at the end I have, Ethiopian. Then the brick house I don't know who lived there up the further end of Patrick. And then it's another Black family. Well, they've been there a long time too. He was raised on that block, but I don't really get to see him. But the two original I'm talking about like who have been there since the transition, it's only two of us. But three of us, but like I said, the other guy, he's much younger than what I am. I mean everything. The public housing has changed. I mean, the new development. You just don't know who's in your community anymore. You can't even call it a community. I don't even know what to call it now. I mean, I don't know what you would call it. It just no longer there since. It's no longer of not belonging. And it's sad. Every day I walk out my door and I feel like, where do I really belong? Where? Where do I fit as a middle-aged woman now? Where do I fit in all this? Because really, I don't.

Kerry James Reed [01:33:06] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [01:33:07] And it's not because I don't want to fit. These newcomers are not allowing you to fit.

Kerry James Reed [01:33:15] Yeah. Well, that's a crying shame.

Stephanie Johnson [01:33:22] It is. I'm not going to call it a person name, but I was campaigning for the upcoming election of mayor. And I'm talking about walking [the] community. I'm talking about the community from Columbus Street to Patrick Street. I can tell you how many white people slammed doors in my face. Rude. No, just physically rude. And you know what I did? I maintained my composure because what I will not do is belittle myself to your standards.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:11] Absolutely. When did you campaign?

Stephanie Johnson [01:34:18] About a month ago.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:20] Okay, terrific. You seem like you've always been rather politically active.

Stephanie Johnson [01:34:26] Yes.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:29] Okay. Terrific. Well, thank you for all you do. So, we've been talking for about an hour and a half now. It's been absolutely fabulous. Do you mind if we move on to Douglass?

Stephanie Johnson [01:34:44] Yes. We can.

Kerry James Reed [01:34:45] Terrific. So, you mentioned earlier that you had family in Coleman growing up. Did you know that you had family in Douglass when you were growing up?

Stephanie Johnson [01:34:54] No. Douglass was unattractive. If I had to think in memory, just a cemetery I never paid attention to. Maybe it's the size. Maybe it's the makeup. There was nothing too attractive.

Kerry James Reed [01:35:20] Do you remember the first time you saw it?

Stephanie Johnson [01:35:23] Yeah. Teenager. But then you have to realize it was a big building. They kind of like, blocked it anyway, but it's now townhomes. So, you really didn't get to see Douglass the way you can see it now, because it was a building, some kind of, you know, it was like an [inaudible]. And the way that the building face, it was like, this was the front of the building, and this is Douglass. So, it overshadowed the actual cemetery of Douglass. So, no, I ran up and down of just about everything up in it. I think there's like 13 cemeteries within one locality. Douglass, I just never really paid attention to, and like I say, I think more so [because] of the look of it.

Kerry James Reed [01:36:53] When did you find out that you had family members buried there?

Stephanie Johnson [01:36:56] Almost 6 years ago, my brother Michael. Remember I told you that my mom, she was not from Alexandria, but she knew a lot of Alexandria history.

Kerry James Reed [01:37:08] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [01:37:12] So it was after my mom died, and I guess, I don't even know what made my brother go there, but I guess he was trying to find solitude or whatever he might have been seeking at that time. So, when he went, he found a couple of our relatives and then he went again. This time is flooded and couldn't see anything. And so, he just became an advocate, like saying this is not right. And I think that's more so of what our teaching was like. It's not right, you know, like, this just need some attention. And, so, yeah, that's how I got involved with Douglass through my brother.

Kerry James Reed [01:38:19] What did it feel like to know that you had family members buried Douglass that you weren't aware of?

Stephanie Johnson [01:38:26] For me, I think I was elated. And by that, I mean like a piece of the puzzle for my life is now coming together. It took all these many years to figure out where these Johnsons are. Remember I told you like. For Blacks, cemeteries were like a taboo. We didn't hang in cemeteries. I mean they tell you, "Let the dead be the dead." So, I don't have fond memories of hanging in nobody cemetery.

Kerry James Reed [01:39:12] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [01:39:13] Not like that. Like playing around. Running through it? Yes, but not actually looking for loved ones, anything like that. As an adult, I learned myself to go and pay homage to them. But I didn't know where my great-grandmother was. I didn't know where my grandmother was, my father's mother. I didn't know where my father's dad was buried. I knew [where] some of my great-uncles and aunts were buried because I was a part of the funeral ritual. It's like coming full circle in life at the age of 66, you know. Yeah. It's like finally finding them. Ancestors before me.

Kerry James Reed [01:40:25] How does it affect your relationship with your ancestors to know where they're buried? Like in your mind when you were to think of your great-grandmother before and after, you know where she's interred?

Stephanie Johnson [01:40:41] Before, it was just always, you know, you always wonder. Well, I did. I always wondered, "Well, where are they?" It's like, you know something is missing in your life, but you just can't really pinpoint what it really is. Because you never had the experience of it. I had an experience of some of the siblings, which would be my great-uncles and aunts. I think for me, like, why wasn't we told like? Like my grandfather's siblings. Like, why didn't you ever talk about him? I will never forget my siblings. They will always be a part of who I am. Was families so distant back in those days? Like I just feel like it's just different. Like my great aunt never talked about my grandfather. I never heard my great uncles talk about their siblings. Never. My dad used to talk about his mom. So that's why I like I know some of his people. But that's a story in itself too. So, I don't know like closeness.

Kerry James Reed [01:42:59] Yeah. When your dad would talk about his mom, what would he say about that?

Stephanie Johnson [01:43:05] She was the first African American woman to work at the Pentagon. But she started at the Torpedo Factory and then the Pentagon. How she would cook. Sounded like she was very protective of her sons. I'll be honest with you. I didn't get a sense of really family connection. Not like it is for me and my siblings. Like my brothers are my world. And I know I'm theirs. I don't get that same connection. From my father's people. They're kind of like just went on with life. Not that they didn't associate with each other. I never really heard them talk about it. Now we have a cousin that's 90 some years old. Now when I get around her, she'll tell me about my dad. She's like a walking history book. Like she tells everything. Well, majority of everything. But then there's some things that they won't tell you. I don't understand the secrecy. Like, her and her friend who's just at the new [inaudible] down here. And I've heard them tell me because I sat with them, "Oh there's some stuff we're going to take to our grave." And in my mind, I'm like, why? Why take it to the grave? Because the grave don't speak.

Kerry James Reed [01:45:33] Your brother Mike talks about the trauma that he believes that older generations of Black Americans have experienced. Would you say that is the reason for their silence regarding their family?

Stephanie Johnson [01:45:49] Yeah, but the story gotta be told. Well. Yeah, I guess it kind of like, does make sense because I just said to you, I feel like, I shouldn't say that they're really distant. It's some things that they just not going to talk about. You can't get them to talk about. And. Yes. Studying psychology, you know, understanding people. When people hurt you, right, suppression comes. Remember I told you about funerals? Like in the Black culture, you know, we have a lot of folklore things that has been passed down to us. To me, in order for us to know where we're going, Blacks, we got to know where we've been. And yes, history hurts. It does. History hurts. Not only for Blacks. History. Tell me, what's so beautiful about history? Well, it is some things that's beautiful about it that people get to experience it. People get to tell it. But haven't always been kind to nobody. Everybody got something in their closet.

Kerry James Reed [01:47:41] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [01:47:45] Good. Bad, ugly, and different. We still cannot ignore it. Because you remember I told you, it's the piece of me that feels like a part of my life something was missing.

Kerry James Reed [01:48:07] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [01:48:07] And now, reconnecting with ancestors that I didn't know. Is closing. It's fitting. It's beginning to fit. I no longer have to wonder who they are, where they are. Because history tells me, the era tells me how you was living. They just came out of slavery. So, I don't expect for them to have been millionaires. Just had some that was just a little bit more gifted entrepreneurs then others. My Uncle Henry didn't believe in banks but had money. Because of his mentality didn't allow him to grow economically. I don't think he ever probably wanted to be a homeowner because he probably couldn't have envisioned himself being a homeowner. His sister had a home. His brother had a home. And I don't think they had as much as he did. I just think that he didn't want that for himself.

Kerry James Reed [01:49:45] Yeah. Could you briefly list all of your family members that are interred at Douglass?

Stephanie Johnson [01:50:04] My father's grandfather Warner. Ellen which would be, my great grandmother, my father's grandmother. Those are the only two that I think I can rattle off. My brothers, they know it a little bit better than I do.

Kerry James Reed [01:50:46] That's okay. So, when did you join The Douglass Advisory Group Hmhm the Douglass Advisory Group. What are you doing?

Stephanie Johnson [01:51:10] Almost three years.

Kerry James Reed [01:51:14] What were your expectations going in?

Stephanie Johnson [01:51:17] I really didn't have any expectations. I think I was just moved by the fact that my relatives were found. They've been lost for many years. I think I was just basking in that. Well, I did have expectations. My expectation was, they need to do something with this. This graveyard is deplorable. And it took research to figure out who it really belongs to. How are we going to move forward in getting it at least presentable? So first, was it a big expectation. No, because, you know, sometimes you have to take small steps to get to the bigger or brighter side. But, yeah, I really didn't have no major expectation. I just wanted it to come up to standards. Come up to par.

Kerry James Reed [01:52:40] Absolutely.

Stephanie Johnson [01:52:41] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [01:52:45] So what is your experience been as a member of the DAG, advocating for the restoration or preservation of Douglass Cemetery?

Stephanie Johnson [01:53:02] I'm very well pleased in my experience of it. You have Alexandria archeologists working on it. You have other organizations within the city that came in to join. You have the community, not only Afro-Americans, but the people who live on that property who also was negotiating with us, you know? So thus far it's a good experience.

Kerry James Reed [01:53:43] How do you describe the Douglass initiative to people who aren't involved with it?

Stephanie Johnson [01:53:55] Well, first I tell them the story of how it became about, the founder, you know, and, why it was an issue, you know, for him [Michael Johnson] to band together with other agencies to pull this together. And that is a historic site that has been overlooked for many years. Neglected, really, by all of us is. It's not just one finger, but I never knew that was a Black cemetery. I mean, I just didn't, because I already knew that Penny Hill was not Black. The only one that I knew belonged to Black people was Bethel. And we didn't call that Bethel during our days growing up. That was the Porterfield.

Kerry James Reed [01:55:03] Porterfield.

Stephanie Johnson [01:55:03] Porterfield. You know what that is?

Kerry James Reed [01:55:05] No, I haven't heard that before.

Stephanie Johnson [01:55:10] That's where Blacks or people. Well, I'm gonna say Blacks because I can't speak for other races back then because we didn't have like Hispanics and Ethiopian, we didn't have all that in our community at that time, right? That was a place suburbia for people like poverty stricken.

Kerry James Reed [01:55:45] Okay. What was it like to see the archeologist working at Douglass?

Stephanie Johnson [01:55:55] Oh, man. Like, when they opened up the grounds, I mean that captivated me. From the mortuary science piece. Because I wanted to make sure, you know, what did you find? Did you find broken caskets? Just what was mainly found, if anything, you know. But it wasn't. They didn't find anything. And then the questions like, if you find something, what would you do with it? And you know, as far as their job and what they was looking for. And if they did find things, they will return it back to the Earth. You know, like they don't take it. They have to be buried. And just them in their filed. The knowledge and the enthusiasm that they had behind it, you know, like they was rendering a service, or they were speaking to that particular job and that was at hand. Yeah. So, I was intrigued by that.

Kerry James Reed [01:57:32] Yeah, absolutely. When was the last time you visited Douglass?

Stephanie Johnson [01:57:44] When they dug it up. Last month.

Kerry James Reed [01:57:48] Last month.

Stephanie Johnson [01:57:50] Yeah. Last month.

Kerry James Reed [01:57:52] Can you describe that process of going to that last month. Like step by step like visually, you know, physically, emotionally so on and so forth.

Stephanie Johnson [01:58:05] Visually. They had sectioned off certain parts of the cemetery. The archeologists, they were in the trenches digging. Then you had one that was like the spokesperson. He was given us like the actual what they're doing. Like, okay, this part right here, say, the sidewalk was involved. It was a tree involved. They did a tree removal. What they was looking for and what they were looking for was the drain. And they had to see how old the pipes were. And it was an old pipe. So, everything that their projection was, they basically found. And then we moved over to the next section, and each section was doing something a little different. And then, you know, they would, shake the soil to make sure that no artifacts was in there. But the main thing that I think interests me was walking around looking at the headstones, looking at the dates, looking at ages. And just really, it's like peace. Even though the archeologists were out there, and they was digging and everything, it was just, a calmness. It was just peaceful. You know, they're finally getting their due. I don't know everybody who's out there. I don't even know emotionally. I don't even know my people, but it gave me a sense of, I'm honoring you. I'm giving back something to you which is

making sure that your burial place is going to remain peaceful for you. And that one day you see a regiment of whatever floating down Wilkes Street, you know, so it just brought a sense of peace. Because now you can actually see the work.

Kerry James Reed [02:01:05] That was beautifully described. We were talking for about two hours now, Mrs. Johnson. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Stephanie Johnson [02:01:12] Gosh, it didn't seem that long.

Kerry James Reed [02:01:13] Yeah, I know, it always flies by. But, before we move on to our closing remarks, is there anything we haven't talked about today that you would like to mention?

Stephanie Johnson [02:01:25] I don't think so.

Kerry James Reed [02:01:27] That's perfect. That means I did a good job.

Stephanie Johnson [02:01:28] Yeah. Right.

Kerry James Reed [02:01:30] Fabulous. So, what are your hopes for Douglass and the Douglass Advisory Group moving forward?

Stephanie Johnson [02:01:43] The day when we all could just go and visit our loved ones to honor them. To put flowers on their graves. To know that, you know, someone took a stand to say that this is not right. They say it's all Blacks. But I mean, do we really know? Do we really know who's really out there? You know, but it's just the humane thing to do. And that's for any cemetery. Black. White. Pink. Blue. Yeah, that's the decent thing to do. You know, no cemeteries should have gotten to that point. And that not blaming anyone either, because, just finding out that the city really didn't own that cemetery. So that was a good thing too, you know, to know that the city that I live in, the city I pay my taxes in, was not the owner of that.

Kerry James Reed [02:03:06] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [02:03:07] And they did. They too, did the best they could for us trying to keep up the maintenance of it, you know, whatever they did. But yeah, just the day that we could just pay homage to everybody that's out there. You know that they are really at peace, even though they've been there 100 something years.

Kerry James Reed [02:03:32] How would you like to see the city treat Black history in Alexandria moving forward?

Stephanie Johnson [02:03:40] I don't like the word tolerance. I don't like that word. Because I tolerated something don't mean I really respect you. I really feel that the city has to be inclusive to the Blacks that were here first. Because you are an African. You are not Black American in Alexandria. I don't know why Blacks are overlooked. We can't be replaced. And you can't overlook who we were in this city. And if you do try to overlook us, then shame on you. You know, I personally don't like to get into race because we all was made by the same creator. You bleed like I bleed. You hurt like I hurt. Only difference is my skin tone. That's the only difference. Does it make

me lesser than? Or better than? And neither do you. You know, I just wish that Alexandria would have paid a little bit more attention, and it's never too late.

Kerry James Reed [02:05:25] Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [02:05:26] It's never too late. You can rectify it at any moment. Anytime. But what you have done is you came into our community, Black community, and you destroyed us. You did. Well, they did. And I'm for inclusions. But are you really faring what you're doing because guess what? When I go into certain communities, their community is still the same. You didn't go in there and you didn't uproot them.

Kerry James Reed [02:06:07] Yeah. Yeah.

Stephanie Johnson [02:06:10] You didn't take anything from them. And it doesn't matter. Public housing still pay taxes just like everybody else. When they go to the store and buy their food, they will charge taxes. You go out buying clothes, you still paying taxes. It doesn't matter how much or how big, how little the taxes are. We all are abiding citizens, you know. And why would you want a town that's not inclusive? Why would you want a town that's not diverse? Why? You're going to have a portion of people that's not in your community anymore. Come on Alexandria. You knew better. And you can't replace the Blacks that came from this city with *African*-Americans or Africans. They don't [say] African American. They call themselves Africans. And I'm talking about all parts of Africa, who as well, are very diverse in their color. They weren't born here. But yet you're catering more to that section, but yet you forgot your Blacks in Alexandria. They can never replace [us]because their blood, sweat and tears is not in this city. It's not. And I'm not being racist because I'm not racist. I'm just stating a fact. You didn't disband the Jews that lived here. You didn't disband the Asians that live here. You gave to the Latinos. They not from here neither. But you disband your Blacks. They came from Alexandria. That's where I have the problem.

Kerry James Reed [02:08:35] Yeah, absolutely. And then lastly, if you could hold onto one memory forever, what would it be?

Stephanie Johnson [02:08:48] My parents.

Kerry James Reed [02:08:52] Anything in particular about your parents? The food your mother would cook?

Stephanie Johnson [02:08:56] Yeah.

Kerry James Reed [02:08:57] That I must say, I have interviewed several members of your family. Spoken to Mike and everybody else. Your mother's cooking is legendary. It's amazing at this point.

Stephanie Johnson [02:09:06] Yeah. It was. My mom cooked for a lot of people. My mom fed a lot of people. Yeah. If I can have my mom's cooking, I wouldn't even patronize restaurant. Restaurants don't even cook on a level like my mom. You know, just the house, my dad walking around, in his boxer shorts and T-shirt and smoking his cigars. My mom cooking, cleaning, singing, you know, just the unit of our family. You know, if I could have that for the rest of my life, that's it.

Kerry James Reed [02:10:02] That's beautiful. Well, thank you so much, Mrs. Johnson. This has been an absolute pleasure talking with you today. Thank you so much.